Mobilizing Labour for the Global Coffee Market

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to the chiefs and others of high rank or other persons (*ngawula*), are now abolished. (Bulletin of Acts, Orders and Decrees for the Dutch East Indies 1870: 122, art. 1)

The reorganization of the colonial administration now set in motion may have entailed an increase in European staff at public offices in the district towns, but they certainly no more than doubled in number. The new civil service apparatus in the Regencies comprised a total of 38 Europeans. As before, the lower ranks were reserved for native officials, who may have had little training and education but who also had to be content with a low wage. The government kept a detailed record of how much money the reorganization cost and how much it generated.

In a final report on his assignment submitted to the Governor-General in August 1871, Van Rees did not fail to praise the man who had been his most important adviser and source of information, Karel Holle. Impressed by Holle’s intimate familiarity with the Priangan and its people, the Governor-General even wanted to appoint him as Resident (Janssen 1888: 25). This was no small honour for the now independent tea planter who had started his career in 1846 as a young clerk at the residency office when it was still located in Cianjur. However, Holle rejected the offer, but did allow Mijer to appoint him as honorary adviser for native affairs. As we shall see Holle, proclaimed ‘friend and benefactor of the Sundanese people’, played an important role in helping to bring about radical social changes from the hill estate he ran near Garut. Before examining this in greater detail, I shall first deal with the measures taken in parallel with the abolition of the Priangan system to alleviate the burden imposed by the forced cultivation of coffee.

**A turn for the better?**

The real crisis, as I argued in the previous chapter, was not caused first and foremost by the modality of governance that had been practised for so long. The system of forced cultivation ultimately foundered not because the regents were given responsibility for collecting the tribute, but because of the perpetual drive to increase the volume of coffee and the abysmally low payment received by those who produced it. Despite this draconic policy around the middle of the nineteenth century the government was unable to maintain the high level of coffee production in the Priangan, let alone push it up any further. The report on the inquiry set up to investigate the causes of the stagnation, which was included in the Colonial Report
for 1872, announced a radical change in how production was organized. The basic intention was to reduce the burden on the population as much as possible without losing sight of the importance of the cultivation and delivery of coffee for the sake of the treasury in the metropolis. For Mijer, it was unthinkable to abandon this overriding Dutch interest and many others agreed. This proviso of course reduced the room for manoeuvre in seeking a new method of colonial taxation that was less burdensome for the people while remaining profitable for the state coffers. The task of making this transition was assigned to three experts: Holle the tea planter, agricultural specialist Karel Wessel van Gorkom and D. Ples, Assistant Resident for Bandung. The first two were known critics of government control over the cultivation of coffee. As a man with practical experience, Holle had already outlined the conditions that had to be filled for a new approach to succeed.

The regulation the experts proposed intended first of all to increase the price for delivering the coffee, initially to ten guilders per pikul and a year later to thirteen guilders, the same as the rate paid to planters elsewhere on Java. They wanted to create a system of cultivation that would guarantee a tribute that was easy to collect, while also giving the people of the Priangan a source of sustenance and prosperity. The idea was that the planters should be paid a daily rate for their labour that was at least as high as what they earned from growing their own food crops. A radical measure was to relocate the cultivation of coffee away from the large, far-off gardens to land closer to the peasants’ settlements. This essentially signified a return to the manner of planting coffee that had been employed in the very beginning: on small plots in the immediate vicinity of the villages. It also put a stop to the mass mobilization of labour. Strict compliance with the instruction that only those segments of the population obliged to grow coffee could be mobilized to do so meant essentially that the tribute applied only to landowners. As before, village chiefs and the clergy were exempt, even if they owned land. A further measure to alleviate the workload was reducing the number of additional trees that had to be planted each year to a maximum of 50. This was a belated acknowledgement that the norm of 1,000 trees a year established a century previously was far beyond the capacity of the planters. Lastly, the planters could choose themselves to which warehouse they delivered their harvest. By building local warehouses at many more places than before, from where the coffee could be forwarded to the main warehouses, the time and effort required to transport the beans could be reduced to a more acceptable level.

The package of measures designated as the new Priangan regulation (for coffee cultivation) came into force in 1872 and was extended three years later
to apply to all regions on Java where coffee was produced for the government. It was no longer permitted to plant coffee trees further than twelve poles from the homes of the planters without official authorization. The limit was first set at four poles, the maximum distance that the workforce could cover from home and back in a day in mountainous terrain, but this instruction was rescinded when it became clear that it would mean abandoning most of the gardens. The problem was also finding sufficient unused land to grow coffee close to the *kampung*. Where it was found, using it for coffee meant that the villagers had no reserve for growing food in the future. They lost what they had always had – the right to own and cultivate land that they had used off and on for a variety of purposes. What happened to the large plantations far from the settlements? A fair number of them, known as *merdika* gardens, were rented to local people with enough resources of their own to tend to the trees, pick the berries and deliver the beans to the warehouses at their own risk and expense and for the price set by the government.

When he stepped down from office in mid-1874, Resident Van der Moore concluded that the reorganization had been a great success. There had been no resistance from the regents, the lower chiefs received a decent reimbursement for the functions in which they had been consolidated and had strengthened their position, while the lower clergy had accepted their exclusion from worldly authority. The revival of peasant economic activity and trade showed how much progress had been made in general terms. He was also very satisfied with the prospects for coffee cultivation. The favourable effects of the new measures, documented in the Colonial Reports of the 1870s with the usual optimistic tone, proved however to be only a short-lived revival that lasted less than a decade and were by no means introduced with so few problems. As early as 1874, the Director of the Civil Service had to send around a circular letter warning against the tendency to reverse the meaning of the term ‘voluntary’. Little came of effective monitoring by the government. Relocating the cultivation of coffee to small, widely dispersed plots of land made it almost impossible for the officials who were given full charge of the task of inspection to determine whether households were actually fulfilling their obligations. Now they no longer received a commission for the quantity of coffee delivered to the warehouses, which meant that they had no incentive to perform the services required of them. Moreover, the government’s administration was still very unreliable. In short, the relocation from the far-off gardens to the villages did not bring the expected success.

It is not possible to determine the size of the harvest from the quantities that found their way to the government’s warehouses through the official channels. Van Gorkom estimated that around half of the coffee produced
was sold off at a higher price on the black market and was never recorded in the official figures (1880a: 76). As before, smuggling was the order of the day and, now that the planters could deliver the beans where they wanted to, it was not possible to prove that they were trying to evade the obligation to deliver only to the government’s warehouses. Theft also eroded the monopoly that the government demanded. One official who documented the many kinds of illicit practices included in his account a taste for coffee, which had become popular among the native population. In his view permitting the peasants to drink coffee as happened in some districts was a misplaced act of kindness as they had no real need to do so. He proposed conducting house searches to restrict this clandestine consumption (Esche 1891: 189). Policing was actually practised in several residencies.

In Cirebon the people were not allowed to drink coffee. To lend this measure some force, after a harvest peasants’ houses were searched for beans that might have been withheld from delivery to the warehouses. For a number of years the people of the Kuningan regency had to hand in all their kettles to the government. (Baardewijk 1994: 165-6)

Another colonial official reported that the peasants drank an infusion of coffee leaves, as they were not permitted to use the beans (Casembroot 1887: 21). We have already seen how, in the early 1820s, Resident Van der Capellen tried to maintain control over the transport of coffee with checkpoints, mobile patrols and spies. In his report, Van Rees spoke of security guards in the gardens to ensure that the planters did their work dutifully and did not slip off to drink coffee somewhere unseen. Such references created the impression that surveillance was successful, but the manpower deployed was insufficient to make it effective and, more importantly, the guards were themselves involved in fraudulent transactions. The coffee brought in twice as much on the open market than the price that the government was willing to pay. As Van Gorkom noted, this meant a potential profit of 100 per cent was disappearing into the state’s coffers. According to this expert of long standing, it explained the disappointing results of what had been propagated as a crop benefiting the peasantry first and for all.

The Priangan regulation has no soul; that soul is a reasonable price to pay for the coffee. The Priangan regulation is strictly speaking not a regulation at all, as it prescribes everything conditionally; in all its parts, there is room for manoeuvre. The core idea remains the same throughout: more trees, more profits for the state. (Van Gorkom 1880a: 75)
From the very start, the new Priangan regulation was founded rather precariously on two ideas: on the one hand, it had to assure the peasantry more freedom and more benefits from the cultivation of coffee while, on the other hand, the profits had to benefit the state coffers as much as possible. This formula clearly shows the incompatibility of the regulation’s double objective: encouraging free cultivation but delivering coffee at officially fixed, low prices. Furthermore, the authorities were accustomed to a system in which all initiative came from higher up and all willingness to please from below.

A substantial and persistent fall in the volume of coffee delivered in the second half of the 1880s resulted in a new survey, the findings of which, together with a detailed summary of errors and problems, were included in the Colonial Report for 1891. One remedy that was considered was whether increasing the price to 20 guilders per pikul would raise the planters’ income to 20 cents a day. The conclusion that this would not occur was accompanied by the comment that, during the more productive years of 1879–83, households earned three-and-a-half cents a day or less. In light of this discouraging observation, the verdict that abolition of forced cultivation was inevitable came as no surprise. The Resident of the Priangan Regencies, however, rejected the proposal, submitted as a separate recommendation, to replace the forced cultivation of coffee for the government by a state-regulated system based on free labour. He expressed his objections in the following words.

With the system of free coffee cultivation practised by the natives, each planter works at his own expense and owns his own coffee garden. In the case of state enterprises, the natives will have to come and work for as wage labourers, with the consequence that the class of peasant farmers and garden-owners will be reduced to one of wage labourers and proletarians, living from day to day. It can never be the intention of a Government to turn the peasant cultivators into a class of proletarians, such as now exists in Europe on a large scale, and with which we have had the most miserable of experiences.40

One consequence of this policy reappraisal was that, in 1894, a scientific adviser for coffee cultivation was appointed, in the hope that his expertise would inject new élan into the production of the crop. However, Dr W. Burck

was an expert in agronomic, rather than social and economic matters and his recommendations proved unworkable and unwelcome. He clashed with high-ranking colonial officials, took sick leave, and was then no longer considered eligible to resume his duties. In 1903 he was granted an honourable discharge and his post remained unfilled. He had tried in vain to wrest the management of coffee cultivation free from the interference of the regional bureaucracy. After he had left, however, a new Department of Agriculture was set up, whose responsibilities included coffee cultivation. This expressed the gradual shift from what had always been the task of the regular bureaucracy towards technical specialists. A wide range of modern-age ‘experts’ made their entrance, including surveyors to draw up land cadastres, consultants to advise on how to grow various crops, and engineers to supervise public works. They were operating from new official agencies and their arrival resulted in restriction of the room for manoeuvre that members of the civil service were equipped with or appropriated for themselves.

As Van Gorkom concluded in a retrospect (1918: 246), government-controlled coffee cultivation eventually went out with a whimper. The financial profit for the government, 50 million guilders in 1870, had shrunk to 11-12 million by 1890 and, when the system was abolished, to only a few hundred thousand guilders a year. The Minister for the Colonies finalized the decision in a bill in 1915. During the debate in parliament, he identified the opposition of the peasantry as the reason for the demise of the system, but admitted that this had partly been caused by neglect and errors on the part of the government. One member of parliament identified the cause more precisely as the fact that native planters were never paid more than 15 guilders per pikul, while the market price was three or even four times this amount. In his view, the system had failed because of the greed that had prevailed until the very end (De opheffing der gouvernements-koffiecultuur 1915: 302). Most commentators, however, did not lay the blame in the first instance with the colonial government, but sought the cause of the fiasco in the adverse behaviour of the coffee growers. At the start of the twentieth century, the Resident of the Priangan Regencies wrote that the people harboured a genuine hatred of growing coffee. Some high-ranking colonial officials advocated a return to the traditional hard-line policy. The Director of Finance, for example, called in a memorandum for the coercion of the native population to be maintained, restating a well-worn maxim: ‘as much coffee as possible for as little money as possible’. Although neither the Governor-General nor the Minister for the Colonies explicitly distanced themselves from this official counsel, there was little political support for a return to the old regime (Proceedings of the States-General 1914-15: 775).
Van Gorkom believed that the native population did not refuse to grow coffee of their own free will from some irrational aversion, but because they were insufficiently led by economic incentives. They were driven by simple needs that could be satisfied without having to produce commodities for sale on the market. He therefore considered the exercise of force – including the ‘soft’ form of coercion concealed behind the mask of persuasion and encouragement – counterproductive.

This standpoint went by no means far enough for scientific adviser Dr Burck. He wished to see genuine consequences linked to the principle of forced cultivation. ‘All forced labour must of necessity be properly organized so as to achieve the desired results,’ he stated, succinctly. Leaving it up to the free will of the growers, to give them the space to decide for themselves, would erode the whole concept of self-driven peasant cultivation and defy the ambition of leading them towards progress and development. Burck agreed with Van Gorkom that the inability of the planters to act economically was the cause of the failure of free cultivation. They displayed typical ‘slash-and-burn’ behaviour, giving their immediate needs priority over longer-term efforts that would eventually bring in more profit. He argued that the same applied to food cultivation.

If officials and chiefs are not strongly reminded on every monthly departmental reporting day, at every district, sub-district and desa meeting, to tend to their sawahs on time, to sow their seeds and to plant and weed the padi and secondary crops at the right moment, to make sure that the water supply is regulated correctly, etc., etc.; if all this is left to the growers themselves, the sawah cultivation would come to nothing, time and time again. If coffee cultivation is to become truly peasant cultivation, and that I have never doubted for a single moment, it will only happen if it is under the same management and control as sawah cultivation and that of secondary crops, no more and no less. (Burck 1897: 86)

By the beginning of the twentieth century, the colonial administration had finally penetrated to the base of the peasant economy and could now resolutely continue to practise its noble development mission.

**Impact of the reforms on the peasantry**

The reforms brought the isolation of the Priangan since the early-colonial era to an end. From the middle of the nineteenth century, the ban on