Mobilizing Labour for the Global Coffee Market

Breman, Jan

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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
outsiders settling in the region or even passing through the Sunda highlands without the written permission of the authorities was no longer imposed with the same strictness as before. After 1853, Europeans were allowed to live in the main settlements in the regencies, as long as they did nothing that violated the rules of the Priangan system. The Chinese, who along with other Asians from outside the region continued to be banned from the residency, were granted a little more freedom of movement some ten years later. They were not, however, given rights to settle until after the administrative reorganization. The reform represented a change of economic policy. Arab and Chinese merchants not only took up residence in the main centres but also hung around the coffee warehouses, officially to sell all kinds of wares to the peasants who came to deliver their loads, but in reality to buy coffee from them at prices higher than the government’s rate. The increase in the number of delivery depots made it difficult to prevent these illegal transactions. The presence of outsiders was no longer seen as obstructive and harmful but as encouraging the expansion of economic activity. The abolition of the pass system also helped increase mobility in the opposite direction: inhabitants of the Priangan would leave to seek a better life in Batavia or the Ommelanden, the lands surrounding the colonial capital. One consequence of this increasing contact with the outside world was the introduction of many new consumption goods. The landed gentry and native officials were the first to surrender to these temptations, which led to a change in their lifestyles. A few decades later, European products also proved to have found their way into the lives of the common village people (Economie van de desa, residentie Preanger Regentschappen IXa, OMW 1907: 81-2). By the start of the twentieth century, the Priangan could no longer be seen as an enclave where social life had been stifled. If the colonial ideology of limited needs had ever been based in reality, it certainly no longer reflected the economic behaviour of the population. To what extent can these dynamics be attributed to developments that occurred in the final quarter of the nineteenth century?

The first question that arises here is whether requisitioning more and more labour for forced cultivation was accompanied by radical redistribution of land ownership. The 1839 instruction decreeing that from then on all households would have to take part in producing and delivering coffee was intended to deprive peasant-owners of the possibility of binding the landless to them and utilizing their labour power as sharecroppers or farm servants. The landowning class would now themselves be obliged to perform the coolie labour that they were accustomed to allocating to their ‘dependants’. In a more general sense, this perspective resonated in
the criticism that Van den Bosch, as architect of the cultivation system, had disrupted the structure of native society (Van Soest II, 1869: 127). In Chapter VII, I argued that there is no empirical evidence to support this view in the case of coffee cultivation in the Priangan Regencies. The repeated attempts in the first half of the nineteenth century to distribute the burden of cultivation obligations more widely did not lead to any levelling down of landownership. It seems justified to assume that very little came of the relentless attempts – already undertaken in the VOC era and continued even more resolutely by the directorate of the early-colonial state – to bring about radical change in the class structure of peasant society in the Priangan. Lastly Van Rees, who completed his report in 1867, noted that there was a class of well-off resident-landowners in the villages made up largely of the former cacahs, the heads of the composite households. It is not impossible – and even reasonable to assume – that more and more households were indeed involved in planting and picking coffee – including women and children – but there was still a difference in the level of taxes paid by the less and the better-off among them.

How was agricultural land distributed at the time of the administrative reorganization and the period that followed? During his village survey in 1856, Kinder de Camarecq established that Sembir had a total of 61 households and 73 bahu of sawah fields. Of these sawahs, 26 bahu were owned by 17 peasant households. These were the heads of cacah households, but they were by far outnumbered by the 44 households of shareholders and farm servants. It had been impossible for many generations to expand the land under cultivation. Two-thirds of the total cultivated area was in the hands of higher or lower landed gentry: 31 bahu as apanage (lungguh), while 16 bahu belonged to members of the lower gentry living in the village who employed peasants to tend to their fields in exchange for a share of the harvest, as with the apanage. The fact that Sembir was not far from the district’s main settlement may be one reason for the extremely unequal distribution of land in the locality. But even taking this into account, there is no way to ascertain that this situation had existed since time immemorial. Throughout the whole Priangan region, the landed gentry had managed to lay claim to a very large share of the land used to grow food. Another dimension of the aristocratic claim on landownership was the possession of expansive areas of wilderness by the regents, which they used for hunting. The plain along the Citarum river, for example, was the exclusive hunting ground of the regents of

41 1 bahu = approximately 0.7 hectares.
Bandung, where renowned stag-hunting parties took place (De Roo de la Faille 1895: 48). De Wilde noted as early as 1830 that these lands were held in reserve so as to deny the peasants access to them. The chiefs gradually abandoned their feudal pastimes and started to clear the land for more productive purposes. They used their ancestral heritage as a pretext to disguise the fact that they had, over time, appropriated fields that peasants themselves had owned. The latter cultivated land on the basis of their explicit right to lay out sawah fields on waste land that did not belong to anyone else.

The fact that the landed gentry were accustomed to appropriating land that originally belonged to the peasants came to light during the survey of the rights of the common people to agrarian property. The official responsible for conducting the survey among the peasants in the Priangan highlands emphasized that they were unresponsive in answering questions for fear of the chiefs. Directly below the upper layer of aristocratic landowners, a class of wealthy peasants evolved. The core was formed by former rahayat who, as the heads of composite peasant households, had been incorporated into the direct entourage of the regent families. When the higher-ranking chiefs lost their position as intermediaries between the colonial government and the peasantry, they became more independent and, as free agents, developed into a local elite of well-established landowners. The changes in the system of taxation that were an important part of the reorganization in the Priangan meant that the peasants were no longer obliged to surrender a fifth share of their paddy harvest. From 1871 this tribute, which was destined for the chiefs and the clergy, was replaced by the land rent, which had to be paid to the government in cash and was provisionally set at $3/20$ of the estimated revenue of the padi yield. For the peasant cultivators this meant a substantial decrease in their tax burden. The immediate consequence was a rise in the market value of cultivable land, so that the price of both irrigated and non-irrigated fields rose sharply in the final quarter of the nineteenth century. The commercialization of food agriculture had been given a powerful boost with the change of regime, which was reflected in the advent of usury in the village economy. The transactions of money lenders reinforced the ongoing trend of concentration of ownership of agricultural resources. The former owners continued to till the fields, but now as tenants or sharecroppers (De Wolff van Westerrode 1904). Above the common peasant class there now arose a new layer of mercantile entrepreneurs who generated income by using the labour power of others. Landlordism was characterized not by:
... large-scale holdings but collections of very widely distributed plots of land all with the same owner, each of which was managed as a petty enterprise, and which were only distinguished from the property of small-scale owners by the size of their landed assets. (Kern 1908)

These large-scale landowners embodied the mercantile capitalism that was also emerging elsewhere on Java. What happened to the apanage fields that the chiefs had appropriated? Strangely enough, Van Rees failed to make any arrangements relating to these domains after the transfer. It can be assumed that this was not from carelessness but for fear that eroding this vested interest might cause the landed gentry to resist the loss of their authority. The colonial bureaucracy displayed a striking lack of interest in investigating what happened to the former cultivated area held as apanage land. Frequently the descendants of the gentry enjoyed the usufruct of the fields, while sometimes they retained their apanage status and were used by the newly appointed village heads. In other cases, rights of ownership passed to the panukang who had tended the fields as sharecroppers in the lord’s service. What certainly did not occur was that the landed gentry converted the land that they had held as sawah kaprabon into large-scale agricultural estates. Their landlordism was not production-oriented but remained mercantile in character.

During the period that the Priangan regime lasted, peasants with little land of their own suffered from generation to generation under the burden of their obligation to utilize their labour power primarily to cultivate coffee. Their tributary duties were so heavy that many were forced to get rid of their paddy fields, often paying the ‘buyer’ to relieve them of the extra work attached to their property. Right up to the abolition of the Priangan system, they continued to use the strategy employed by their forebears in the VOC period, to flee to other areas to evade the repressive claims on their productive capacity. But the administrative reorganization put an end to this tried and tested form of resistance to the heavy tribute for good. The cultivation ordinance announced in 1870 abolished the traditional right to cultivate the village waste land. The importance of this traditional custom was that it strengthened the negotiating position of the land-poor against both the landowning class in their own localities and supra-local lords. Clearing this land required no small effort. Preparing a dry field in the vicinity of the village for cultivation – often with no tools or draught animals and, above all, no assured supply of food while opening up the land – was an extremely difficult undertaking right from the start. Yet it was due to these efforts that the area of cultivated land expanded from generation to
generation. I will return to the impact of the ban now proclaimed on free access to waste land around the village and the considerations underlying it in the last part of this chapter. Suffice to say at this point that cutting them off from access to agricultural resources denied the landless underclass the opportunity of upward social mobility by taking possession of land not yet used by others and preparing it for cultivation.

How large was the landless agrarian population in the Priangan Regencies around the time of the administrative reorganization? Of the 108,816 households that lived from agriculture in 1860, a third possessed no paddy fields (Enklaar 1871: 134). Scheltema concluded a discussion of the progressive concentration of property at the top of the agrarian hierarchy as follows.

... alongside the older form of feudal-aristocratic landownership, a new form of large-scale ownership emerged in the second half of the nineteenth century as the result of what is seen through Western eyes as usury, primarily by a class of hajis and other wealthy members of the population. (1927-28: 305)

In the light of this conclusion, it should come as no surprise that an increasing number of land-poor households were forced into a landless existence. From petty owners they became sharecroppers or agricultural labourers. Accumulation of landownership at one end of the social spectrum and a process of proletarianization at the other end determined the character of the peasant economy after the administrative reform. De Wolff van Westerrode reported in 1904 that the class of agricultural labourers were employed by their masters as attached farm servants. They lived in his household and, besides their food, they received a share of the paddy harvest. In the lower echelons of the village economy, the break with the past was less marked than seemed to have been the case at the top. The introduction of the village system now also in the Priangan contributed to this by exposing the tension between the forces of continuity and discontinuity.

Establishment of the village system

The decision by the colonial government to take over the governance and collection of taxes in the Priangan itself brought with it the necessity – as had already occurred elsewhere on Java – to designate the village as the basic unit for exercising authority. As I described in an earlier publication, the renowned village community on Java was not an age-old institution