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## Prologue: The need for forced labour

The cultivation of coffee on Java for the world market started in the early years of the eighteenth century. This study examines colonialism and its impact on the social structure of the main coffee producing area in Southeast Asia. The advent of Dutch domination considerably contributed to the expansion of the world economy, a process of long duration. The *Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie* (VOC; Dutch East India Company) sought colonial commodities in various parts of the Indonesian archipelago. The coffee plant, imported from southern India, proved to thrive in the highlands surrounding the colonial headquarters in Batavia and the VOC's agents encouraged cultivation of this exogenous crop. At first, they bought the harvest from peasant growers, but what started as a regular commercial transaction soon evolved into the compulsory cultivation and delivery of coffee at a price far below the market value. Rising demand for this new consumer good in the Atlantic world led to pressure on the growers to supply more and more beans. This required the VOC to extend its control deep into the hinterland. In the Sundanese region of West Java known as the Priangan lands, the VOC did not achieve this by building up its own machinery of governance. It remained at a distance, installing indigenous chiefs and binding the peasantry in servitude to them. This system of indirect rule, imposed through regents and the lower ranks of the Sundanese aristocracy, kept management costs down. The same mode of cheap exploitation continued after the fall of the VOC and the emergence of the early-colonial state in a regime that lasted far into the nineteenth century.

The history of colonial rule on Java has focused mainly on the coastal areas and the lowlands and much less on the more inaccessible hilly and mountainous country in the deeper hinterland, far out of sight of Batavia. The sparse population living in tiny, scattered settlements and engaged in shifting cultivation gave these regions the characteristics of a frontier zone, a type of colonization which was strengthened by the arrival of newcomers from elsewhere who opened up the wilderness, either on their own initiative or at the behest of the gentry. Labour was a scarce commodity which the VOC and later the early-colonial state tried to appropriate it by imposing restrictions on the mobility of the peasants. Coffee growing was a lucrative business that relied on forced cultivation. The cooperation of the native aristocracy was indispensable in requisitioning both land and labour. Such total control of these factors

of production was given a veneer of justification with the erroneous argument that it simply represented a continuation of obligations that had been imposed on the population since time immemorial. Coffee cultivation played a major role in the regime of exploitation, yet it has received scant attention in colonial historiography.

This book aims to offer more than the past history of a neglected region, the Priangan highlands, of a system of indirect governance that had already been replaced in other parts of Java in the early nineteenth century by making the village community the cornerstone of colonial management. The cultivation of coffee for the expanding world market was based on unfree labour, a mode of employment that was first applied in the Priangan highlands and remained pivotal when it was made the organizing principle of what became known as the *cultuurstelsel* (cultivation system) in 1830. The aim of my study is to establish how labour and land were mobilized, why forced cultivation became the mode of surplus extraction and what impact this brutal system of taxation had on the economy and society.

My account is based on the study of a large quantity of records and secondary sources. I have read through a large number of archives deposited in both The Hague (National Archives) and Jakarta (Arsip Nasional) but only those I have referred to are included in the bibliography. The Dutch edition (2010) has more references and quotations but I did not want to overload this English edition with too many details of archives only accessible in Dutch. I was shown the way to these old sources, mostly handwritten, by existing compilations of archives, not least that of Frederik de Haan, who was given the assignment in 1900 to 'conduct a historical study of the development, impact and consequences of the system established by the VOC regarding the Priangan Regencies'. He continued his work after being appointed conservator of the colonial archives in 1905. De Haan did not restrict his task to that of archivist but – as his original assignment required – went a step further and, after many years of identifying, collecting and cataloguing his sources, published his research findings in eight parts (1910-12). His work, *De Preanger Regentschappen onder Nederlands bestuur tot 1811* (The Priangan Regencies under Dutch Rule until 1811), was presented in four volumes totalling around 2,500 pages. I refer to this study frequently, especially in the first half of this book. For the later chapters, I was able to draw on another compilation, *Bijdragen tot de kennis van het landelijk stelsel op Java* (Contributions to the History of the Land Rent System) by Salomon van Deventer. Van Deventer was an official in the colonial administration on Java when he was given the assignment,

while on leave in the Netherlands in 1863, to collect and catalogue official documents relating to the introduction of the land rent and cultivation system. The first volume of his study, published in 1865, described the origin of the system. Parts 2 and 3, which appeared a year later, examined the working of the system from 1819 to 1836 and after 1836, respectively. The last part is incomplete because the resignation of Minister for the Colonies Fransen van der Putte, a declared opponent of the cultivation system, prevented Van Deventer from finishing his work of documentation and the publication of his findings. In the final part of this study, I draw on a third source, *Algemeen Verslag der Uitkomsten van het Onderzoek betreffende de Koffijkultuur in Java* (Account of the investigations concerning coffee cultivation in Java), a report submitted in 1868 which was included in the parliamentary papers for 1870-71.

The abolition of the Priangan system in 1870 marked a turning point. Administrative reform led to native chiefs in the region being stripped of the power they had enjoyed until then, while the cultivation of coffee was organized along different lines. Government commissioner Otto van Rees reported in 1867 on the how and why of the change in governance. Until the end of colonial rule, only a small number of insiders who were interested in the history of coffee cultivation and how it was managed were granted access to his findings and recommendations, while they remained closed to the wider public. The report, which disappeared into the archives, is an important document because it offers insight into the debate pursued within a small circle of policy-makers. These deliberations addressed the streamlining of a regime founded on exploitation and oppression but which was presented to the outside world as something else, as introducing good governance and imposing an economic discipline that the peasantry was supposed to have sadly lacked.

The colonial policy pursued from the metropolis in Europe and its social impact on the native population has been a recurring topic of study. That also, and especially, applies to the *cultuurstelsel*. Its introduction by the early-colonial state was immediately accompanied by assessments for and against the system and that debate never flagged. No matter how different opinions are, they all acknowledge that the forced cultivation of crops for the world market found its rationale in the objective to generate the highest possible surplus, appropriated as profit by the metropolis. Much more disputed than the drain of wealth from the colonized economy is the question whether the heavy taxation on the native population improved their welfare – in other words whether it boosted not only growth but also development – or held the peasantry strangled in poverty, and thus

resulted in stagnation or even underdevelopment. In the Epilogue to this volume I position myself in this debate by rejecting the views of recent and reputed colonial historians who argue that the onerous system of forced cultivation, intentionally or unintentionally, also opened up new channels of progress for the peasantry. In contrast to these authors, I have highlighted in my findings the *faits et gestes* with which the Priangan producers, predominantly hailing from land-poor and landless underclasses, continued to resist for a century and a half the coercive coffee regime to which they were exposed. My conclusion is that their sustained unwillingness to act in compliance with what the colonial authorities ordered them to do was of decisive importance in the ultimate decline and fall of the cultivation system.

Before moving on to my account, I would like to take a few words to explain why this study, which spans a period of 40 years, has taken so long to complete. The first steps were taken shortly after the mid-1970s. The initiative had its origins in the Comparative Asian Studies Programme (CASP), a research unit set up within the Comparative Sociology Department at Erasmus University in Rotterdam. Under a cooperation agreement with the Socio-Economic Department at Bogor Agricultural University in Indonesia, staff from Rotterdam were seconded to Bogor on long-term teaching assignments. Our shared research interest focused on the longitudinal study of change processes in rural Java. Under the agreement, the Rotterdam group would begin by documenting the historical sources available in archives and libraries on the Cimanuk River basin, which descends from the Priangan highlands to the coastal plain of Cirebon. It was to become a substantial operation, both in terms of manpower and time.

I devoted myself initially to studying the peasant economy and society close to the north coast, the region to the east of Cirebon. The research resulted in a series of publications under the auspices of the CASP and a monograph entitled *Control of Land and Labour in Colonial Java* (1983). I later conducted anthropological fieldwork in the same area, first alone and then with Gunawan Wiradi, one of our Indonesian counterparts. We reported the results of our village study, started at the end of the twentieth century and completed in the years that followed, in *Good Times and Bad Times in Rural Java* (2002). Jacques van Doorn and Wim Hendrix began researching the impact of coffee cultivation in the Priangan highlands long before the cultivation system was introduced. Wim Hendrix was the team member responsible for accessing the colonial archives. He described his findings in great detail in an unremitting flow of internal

working papers, adding his own critical comments. He also built up a collection of the sourced material, arranged by theme, which took on the dimensions of a small library. One of the historical documents he came across while gathering this source material was the report drawn up by Otto van Rees in 1867 to bring the Priangan system to an end. In an interim CASP publication, *The Emergence of a Dependent Economy* (1983), Van Doorn and Hendrix summarized developments at the halfway stage of the project and outlined the contours of the late-colonial era that was to be studied to complete the research project. The Van Rees report led to a major change in the colonial administration of West Java. The library of the University of Amsterdam has made the document, transcribed and annotated by Emile Schwidder, available online (Rapport van Rees UvA-DARE). The original Dutch edition of this book – *Koloniaal profijt van onvrije arbeid; het Preanger stelsel van gedwongen arbeid op Java, 1720-1870* – was published in 2010 (Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam) and was also translated into Bahasa Indonesia. It was brought out in a slightly abbreviated format in 2014, entitled *Keuntungan kolonial dan kerja paksa; sistem priangan dari tanam paksa kopi di Jawa, 1720-1870* (Yayasan Pustaka Obor, Jakarta).

The whole project not only demanded considerable stamina and a broad perspective on the part of the research team, but assumed that their academic work would continue. That latter assumption proved incorrect. In 1986/87, the Faculty of Social Sciences at Erasmus University was trimmed down and there was no room in what survived for the Comparative Sociology Department. Jacques prematurely became professor emeritus. Wim also took retirement, while I was appointed to the chair of Comparative Sociology at the University of Amsterdam. Our splitting up in different directions derailed the Cimanuk project and made it impossible for us to keep to our agenda. But the scale of the work already done and the enormous database that had been brought together with such perseverance meant that the research, which we had embarked on with great enthusiasm, could not simply be abandoned. Wim Hendrix continued, now without pay, to retrieve files and official memoranda from archives and track down documents in libraries, to make them accessible, adding his incisive comments. In 1993, I agreed to write the entire history of the Priangan system, from its introduction to its abolition. This endeavour, recorded in this volume, was interrupted frequently and sometimes for long periods. That it was ever completed at all is due to Wim Hendrix's persistence. I dedicate this book to him and to the memory of Jacques van Doorn, to mark the many years of friendship we shared.

I am grateful to the Amsterdam Institute for Social Science Research (AISSR) for the grant awarded to me for the translations. Susi Moeimam has been very helpful in seeing the Indonesian edition to press while Andy Brown has once again translated my words into English. At an early stage Benedict Anderson patiently read through the Dutch version of my book manuscript. He made very helpful suggestions for alterations and additions but also strongly recommended bringing out an English edition. John Ingleson did the same and I am deeply grateful to both of them for their warm support.

*Jan Breman*

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