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Jan Breman (2014), Keuntungan kolonial dari kerja paksa; Sistem Priangan dari tanam paksa kopi di Jawa, 1720-1870

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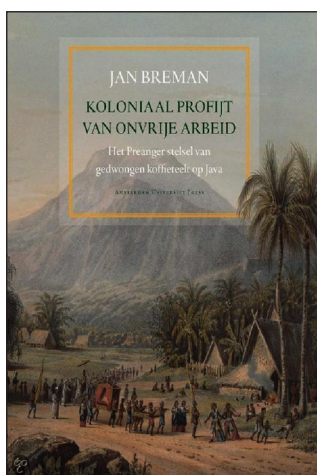
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he has presented underline the need to study oral tradition and its role in cultural advocacy of dispute settlement in Indonesia.

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Jan Breman, *Keuntungan colonial dari kerja paksa; Sistem Priangan dari tanam paksa kopi di Jawa, 1720-1870*. Translated by Jugiarie Soegiarto, Christina Suprihatin, and Indira Ismail, and edited by Susi Moeimam and Nurhayu W. Santoso. Jakarta: Yayasan Pustaka Obor Indonesia, 2014, xvi + 400 pp. ISBN: 978-979-461-874-5. Price: IDR 120.000 (soft cover).

Jan Breman, *Koloniaal profijt van onvrije arbeid; Het Preanger stelsel van gedwongen koffieteelt op Java, 1720-1870*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2010, viii + 455 pp. ISBN: 978-908-964-264-6. Soft cover.



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INTRODUCTION

The work of Jan Breman, *Keuntungan kolonial dari kerja paksa; Sistem Priangan dari tanam paksa Kopi di Jawa, 1720-1870*, investigates how colonialism provided vast areas of plantation for capitalism. His work is an important contribution to the historiography of the social, political and economical condition of Indonesia because it invites the rewriting of the Indonesian colonial history. The rewriting has to be done in order to put global economy as a context of the implementation of colonial policies and by showing the conditions of people those days who had to experience the impacts of the policies.

Furthermore, Breman's work discusses the discourse of sub-altern historiography, which convincingly shows the micro pessimism (violence against the population's humanity) of the coffee forced cultivation policy and the capacity of the population to resist in the way of Scottian. He is not giving an optimistic picture of an etatistic perspective highlighting the colonial economic growth. He challenges the existing dominant historiography glorifying that *kultuur-stelsel* policy or the forced cultivation system yielded enormous bulk of profits to the Netherlands economy, provided an economic breakthrough for local people to breach their economic dead end, and simultaneously ameliorated their economic well-being.

Breman has also shown the impacts of the forced labour implementation in the colonial policies toward the people of Priangan from a global economic perspective. Globalization in the Priangan Land emerged through the coffee planting policy. It was considered as the lowest level of the global commodification chains that supplied half of coffee demands in the world at that time. The coffee producers, for instance Pasundan cultivators, had experienced successive transformations from the status of cultivators and landowners at various levels to be merely selling their labour to the coffee plantations. They transformed into non-obligatory labour workers or coolies.

COLONIALISM AND HISTORIOGRAPHY

Globalization within the history of Priangan caused dramatic agrarian changes: the whole order, including land, production relation (power), profits, and labour, was connected to the operation of a new (economic-political) system named colonialism. The coffee cultivation was run through forced horticulture, forced labour, population mobilization, and changes in land uses, up to obligatory submission of harvested coffee grains. All these operations had caused misery to the lives of Priangan people. The colonial economy, which had begun from the establishment of the trading company VOC in eighteenth century until the end of the Forced Labour era, had produced a collies' society. In its turn, the system was the sign of the beginning of a new phase of economy, which was liberal economy. The establishment of plantation enterprises initiated the transformation of the people into a force of helpless and low cost labours.

INTERROGATING SOURCES

Professor Breman utilized official sources written by Dutch officials in the period between the end of the VOC and the beginning of the forced cultivation era even though he managed to evade the "colonial apologetics". His reading of the archives and official documents was done by "interrogating" those sources, detecting policy "cracks" and its effects to Priangan people, and extracting dissent voices that could be found smartly within other sources contradicting the dominant discourses. Testimonies written by colonial ministers or general governors could have been confirmed or confronted by testimonies of resident-assistants, coffee cultivation supervisors, cultivation directors, and archive officials.

PEASANT RESISTANCE

Breman indicates that various forms of resistance, such as “stealing, sabotage, and different other forms of disobedience,” finally caused the coffee plantation system’s failure (p. 284). That contention is the main thesis of the book. In the epilogue, he reaffirms that “The inference of my treatise shows that the *kultuur-stelsel* dismantled not by any external action, despite the excessive use of violence, but by disabling actions from inside and from below. The mass of labour workers on the Sunda highlands objected to continue to give what was asked from them ruthlessly: increasing amounts coffee grains to give up to capitalists” (p. 355).

The resistance happened within the chains of the forced cultivation process: in the transportations of young coffee plants to the Priangan highlands, soil and plants maintenance, harvest process, grains processing and in piling them up. Thus, there were no other policy considerations to dismiss the forced cultivation policy. Agricultural workers pulled off young coffee plants, abandoned them for a while to see them die, worked idly, ploughed the soil to damage the plants, cut the branches carelessly, harvested the grains lousily, and threw the grains into canals or mountain pits. The results were that hundred thousands of coffee plants died, production rate decreased dramatically and profits deflated for the colonial government.

Fleeing away was too risky for agricultural labour workers for they might be caught by colonial goons and faced a lethal punishment. They did not resist openly for they were under a power structure which was too omnipotent in enclosing and oppressing them. Workers were allowed only to be mobile between their settlement areas and plantation sites. People were forbidden to go in and out of the village and any activity outside coffee works had to get a permit from the village chief. Violence had been incorporated and spatialized. Such a covert resistance was a “rational response” from agricultural workers against the structural restriction suppressing them. Coffee was not their future economy for it operated without any promising “economic rationality”. Coffee was produced in a “forced cultivation” system, where production relations went exploitatively. Their resistance was reasonable, comparable to those “Zealand farmers who were obliged to give up a half, a quarter or a tenth of their harvest value”, that is how Breman quotes the rhetoric of Muntinghe (pp. 136, 347).

Breman’s thesis contradicts the dominant perspective, written by either Indonesians or foreign historians, which stated how the forced cultivation era ended as the state owned enterprises ran slowly and inefficiently, so that it had to shift to private enterprises sector. We can see how liberal ideas were voiced in the parliament. The subsequent argument of that perspective was rather a result of a political process than a result of a benign consideration of the Dutch India’s people prosperity, and contains critical voices that showed ruthlessness and horror experienced by the oppressed people. The ruling authority put great consideration upon those voices, but humanitarian consideration was not a primary concern. The main calculation remained over the facts that the

current economic system was not profitable anymore, and some correction was needed to fix the system.

COLONIAL INVENTIONS: VILLAGE, ELITE FUNCTIONS, AND LAND

In this work, Breman reaffirms certain inferences written in previous publications on the village, the elite, and the land in Java. There are products of the past, which we have to re-evaluate for they were actually “colonial constructions”: Javanese villages with their entire “territory” and power “hierarchic structure”. The cultivators had to be “bound to some work on a certain permanent land” for facilitating controls over lands and mobilization of labour forces that consisted of shifting cultivators.

Rice field making was not merely a technical matter of planting rice and assuring its irrigation, but also a strategy to make a labour force settle. “Sedentarization was a strategy deployed by rulers in Priangan in order to strengthen their grip over those farmer populations” (p. 32). Farmers’ settlement prevented them from moving, and rice farming made the agricultural surplus confiscation easier and bound them as subjects to their masters (p. 33). The VOC’s authority gave a full rein to higher and lower lords to control and mobilize their people to have a forced harvest. It is true that traditional hierarchical relationship had been known in pre-colonial era, but colonialism assigned new functions to it and corroborated it for coffee production interest.

Javanese villages were agglomerated and its population settlement had a well-ordered functions. They were made that way in the era of Preangerstelsel. Village as a homogenous collectivity and land property system were strengthened and constructed. It was in the Priangan Land that the lords and monarchic family membership were asked to be involved strictly by the colonial government in the process of land communalization, labour force mobilization and hierarchic empowerment.

The lands went through the similar process. Through the forced cultivation system, Javanese villages were made as bases for coffee production. Cultivators’ control over their lands, which were individually owned, gradually dismembered when those lands had to be used obligatorily for forced cultivation, or when those lands had to be abandoned because the labour forces had to be involved within the expansion of coffee plantations on the highlands. In turn, those lands were sanctioned to become “state domains”, and rights of those lands were given to the plantation companies in the post *Agrarische Wet* 1870 era.

CONCLUSION

Priangan Land, extended from Cianjur, Bandung, Sumedang, Sukapura, Limbangan, and parts of Cirebon, was imagined in a *Mooie Indie* manner by romantic painters. Bandung city until the mid twentieth century was surnamed *Paris van Java*, and grew as a shopping centre and colonial city comparable to Singapore today. Behind that colonial imagination curtain,

we witness the extraction of natural resources and human exploitation. Who would remember that fact?

Breman is not writing a past history that does not continue in space and time. It is as a desired historic work because his work on the Priangan system in the West Java “frontiers” reminds us about the colonialist production mode that caused enormous social and ecological disadvantages. In the past, that production mode was present in the name of “natural and labour productivities”, today it hides behind the veil of “developmental extension” for food and energy run by “foreign and domestic investments” via globalizing processes. Those frontier areas opened or dismantled extend along the geographical space of Nusantara (Merauke, Kutai, Kendari, Ketapang, Riau, Jambi, and many others), with the available various global commodities (nickel, gold, charcoal, palm oil, timber, and many others). Do we have to witness a history in its making where our population will become (and is becoming) free workers or coolies? We may hope that the leadership of this country could have public consciousness for safeguarding sovereignty and self-respect.

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