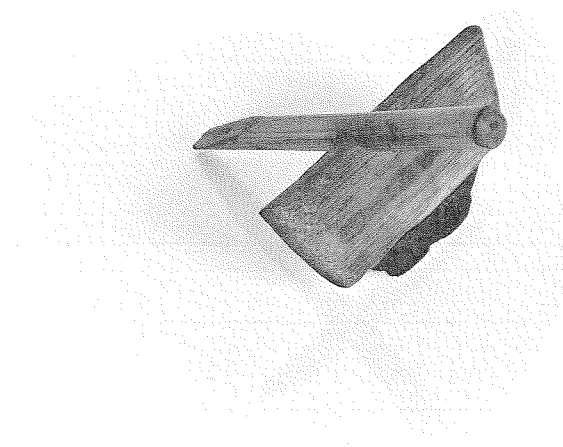


# ON THE SUBJECT OF LABOUR



*Essays in Memory of Frans Hüsken*

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Frans Hüsken (1945-2010)

BEN WHITE

Work and Survival in Rural Java  
*Javanese Peasant Budgets from the 1880s*

In 1972, I embarked on a study of the time budgets of Javanese peasants, visiting a sample of landless and near-landless households every six days for an entire year and asking them how they had spent the previous 24 hours. Many people (including myself) wondered if this was not a too-obsessive study of the daily minutiae of peasant life. In fact, more than 80 years earlier, an even more obsessive study had been done in nearby Bagelen by a Dutch local government official. In 1886 Herman G. Heyting, Controleur of Kutoardjo, undertook a year-long study of the budgets of three Javanese peasants, recording their activities every single day, as well as detailed information on their household incomes and expenditures.

Why did Heyting, who published his results under the pseudonym Arminius, think such a study was needed, and why did he decide to carry it out in this way? Many, he explains, find it hard to believe that Javanese work as hard as they say they do to earn a pittance, and even wonder whether they are trying to excite pity in order to get a reduction in their taxes.

We saw that the villager's diet, housing, utensils and clothing are the bare minimum necessary, without any surplus or comforts. But then how is it possible that the pitiful handful of coins that he earns can grow into the tens of millions of taxes that peasants pay? What does the native do to set [this money] aside? How does he live? How does he feed himself, and how much labour does that cost him? These are the kinds of questions we asked ourselves. But how to find out? (Arminius 1889: 1685-1686).

He noted that native officials, when asked about these things, could only answer with generalities. One-shot interviews with villagers in their homes, asking villagers to recall their household budgets over a long period, provided information of doubtful reliability:

[...] questions on how much rice the household consumed in a year, how many pieces of cloth were woven by the wife, how many days wage labour the man did, etc. were answered wrongly or incompletely, and endless detailed questioning [...] would conclude with the researcher putting words into the respondent's mouth (Arminius 1889: 1686).

He therefore decided, with the help of local schoolteachers and other low-ranking literate staff in nearby villages, to keep a daily journal of the work done by three peasant men and their household incomes and expenditures in rice, money or other goods. These data are reproduced in their entirety, day-by-day, for each peasant in a three-part, 102-page article, the first detailed time-budget study available for Indonesia and maybe for any Asian country (Arminius 1889) – Frans Hüsken was the first who drew my attention to this study more than 30 years ago.

The three selected peasants were: Sodrono, who had just under half a hectare of land comprising only 0.14 ha of irrigated rice land (sawah), a home garden (*pekarangan*) of 0.14 ha and an orchard of 0.17 ha; Cowikromo, who also had around 0.5 ha of land including 0.28 ha of sawah and 0.21 ha of *pekarangan*; and Wongsowikromo, who had 0.23 ha of land with only a tiny plot of 0.04 ha (= 400 m<sup>2</sup>) of sawah, the rest in *pekarangan* and rainfed *tegalan* fields. Cowikromo and Sodrono were liable to *heerendienst* (unpaid labour for the upkeep of government irrigation works and roads), while Wongsowikromo was liable to *koffiecultuurdienst*, labour in the coffee orchards. They were all liable to *desadiensten*, which included labour on the village head's land, upkeep of village roads and irrigation works and other tasks.

The work done by these three male peasants during the year is summarized in the table on the next page.

In addition to these forms of labour-tax the three peasants paid land-rent and head-tax in cash amounting to f 6.36, f 7.62 and f 1.87 respectively. Heyting converted these taxes into labour equivalents using the prevailing rate at which peasants could buy themselves out of a day of labour-tax service (20 *duiten* or f 0.166 for the first two, and 15 *duiten* or f 0.125 per day for Wongsowikromo). Their cash taxes are thus the equivalent of an additional 38, 46, and 15 labour days respectively.

*Labour inputs of three peasants in Bagelen in hours per year (1886)*

Type of labour	Sodrono	Cowikromo	Wongsowikromo
<i>Heerendienst/Koffie-cultuurdienst</i>	105	394	397
<i>Desadienst</i>	483	821	805
Work on own account:			
Own farm	1525	506	1108
Non-farm	–	457	20
Wage work	329	81	137
Total hours	2442	2259	2467
Total days*	344	329	301
Hours per day*	7.1	6.9	8.2
Labour-tax as proportion of all work	24%	54%	49%

\* Work days do not include days when no work at all could be done due to sickness (Sodrono 21, Cowikromo 36 and Wongsowikromo 58 days) or other obligations such as funerals and village meetings (Arminius 1889: various tables).

It is a pity that this early student of time allocation failed to record the labour inputs of the other members (women and children) of the three households. From indirect evidence it is clear that these were considerable, as may be expected when the male household head is occupied for a large part of his time in labour which generates nothing except the right to be a peasant. A large part of Cowikromo's cash taxes, for example, were paid from the income of his wife's weaving and the sale of *damet*, a sweet palm-sugar drink requiring much work in its preparation.

Much of the three households' cash income came from the sale of agricultural products other than rice from *tegalan*, home-gardens and orchards, chickens, cut grass for fodder, handicrafts or *damet*, from harvest wages and other wage work (although such wages were only a small part of total household incomes). These are all activities which later studies in the early 1970s found to involve large amounts of female and child labour, and to provide a significant proportion of small-peasant livelihoods (White 1976; Hart 1986).

Based on this information and on other details of the three peasants' agricultural production, Heyting makes an interesting calculation of the costs and benefits of land rights. In the case of Cowikromo for example, if we assign imputed values to his labour inputs at the buy-out rate mentioned above, the total cost of being a peasant (the land tax, head tax, labour tax plus his own inputs of labour and seed on his farm) was f 52.49, while the gross receipts (value of his farm produce sold or self-consumed) were only f 33.13, leaving him with an apparent net loss of f 19.36 per year. The same accounting for Sodrono and Wongsowikromo produces similar results: net loss when their own labour is valued at the prevailing wage rate, net profit only when no value is assigned to their labour. As Heyting observes wryly, it is fortunate that the peasant tends naturally to the latter method of thinking:

When we examine the costs and benefits of land ownership, theoretically it appears as a loss; but the native in these parts does not really consider his own labour and obligatory labour service directly in terms of money values (particularly because he only rarely converts his own free time into coolie or other wages). If our friend Cowikromo could read the figures above, he would claim that the costs are only f 9.32 and the benefits f 33.13, and thus that his access to land has brought him a windfall of f 23.81! How lucky that he is of such simple mind! (Arminius 1889: 1718-1719)

Heyting clearly did not think Javanese peasant farming on the small holdings common in Central Java was 'viable'. Some years later, as Assistant Resident of Bagelen, he was given the chance to act on this, being assigned to scout around in islands outside Java for possibilities of *kolonisatie*, taking two assistant *wedana* and six villagers with him. After three months travelling through various districts of Sumatra, his (1903) report recommended the establishment of villages of about 500 households in Lampung (southern Sumatra). Shortly thereafter he personally led 155 households from Bagelen to establish the first-ever *kolonisatie* settlement in Kecamatan Gedong Tataan, calling the new village simply 'Desa Bagelen'. The website of Lampung district government still celebrates his achievement.

Readers who have followed the debates on the agrarian ques-

tion in Europe around the end of the 19th century will recognize a theme in Heyting's reflections. The persistence and survival of peasant smallholder farming and its coexistence with more fully commoditised agriculture is only understandable if the peasant does not account for his own (and his family members') labour time, in what Kautsky called 'overwork and underconsumption' and Chayanov 'self-exploitation'. Some argued that peasants would simply disappear, others that they might survive but only as disguised proletarians, others that family farming could provide a basis for an efficient, modernising agriculture when linked to cooperative or other forms of agribusiness giving them access to economies of scale (Kautsky 1899; Chayanov 1966 [1929]; Lenin 1960 [1899]).

The last decades of Dutch colonial rule produced a large body of research and debate on agrarian conditions in Indonesia, in which the main participants were the scholars of the Landbouwhogeschool Wageningen, the Economische Hogeschool Rotterdam and the University of Leiden (among them Boeke 1910; Ploegsma 1936; Scheltema 1931; Vink 1941; De Vries 1931, who all wrote doctoral dissertations on these themes). This literature shows first, a strong tradition of detailed field research on peasant agriculture and village economy, and second, more theoretically informed debates on the fundamental principles of Indonesian agrarian economy and society. Heyting's study made an early and unique contribution to both these traditions of late colonial agrarian scholarship.

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