

Changes in Infrastructure and Social Structure in Lubuklinggau during the Colonial Period (1934-1942)

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Abstract

The city of Lubuklinggau experienced various significant changes during the Dutch colonial administration, particularly in terms of infrastructure and social structure. The period between 1934 and 1942 marked a crucial phase that demonstrated a close interaction between colonial interests and local dynamics. This study aims to examine the transformation of infrastructure and changes in social structure that occurred in Lubuklinggau within the context of Dutch colonialism. This research employs a historical method with a descriptive qualitative approach. Data were obtained through archival studies, official colonial documents, and relevant secondary literature, and were analyzed using an interpretative approach to reconstruct the social dynamics and infrastructure development of the time. The validity of the data was tested through source criticism techniques commonly used in historical research. The findings reveal that the construction of railway lines and supporting facilities encouraged the process of urbanization and increased social mobility among the people of Lubuklinggau. Furthermore, the emergence of new social classes as a result of colonial economic policies indicates a gradual shift in the social structure. This transformation reflects the colonial strategy to integrate the hinterland into the colonial politico-economic system. These findings contribute to a deeper understanding of local history in the broader context of global colonial influence.

Keywords: Colonial infrastructure, Dutch colonialism, Lubuklinggau, social structure, urban history.

Abstrak

Kota Lubuklinggau mengalami berbagai perubahan signifikan selama masa pemerintahan kolonial Belanda, terutama dalam hal infrastruktur dan struktur sosial. Periode antara tahun 1934 dan 1942 menandai fase krusial yang menunjukkan interaksi erat antara kepentingan kolonial dan dinamika lokal. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji transformasi infrastruktur dan perubahan struktur sosial yang terjadi di Lubuklinggau dalam konteks kolonialisme Belanda. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode historis dengan pendekatan kualitatif deskriptif. Data diperoleh melalui studi arsip, dokumen kolonial resmi, dan literatur sekunder yang relevan, dan dianalisis menggunakan pendekatan interpretatif untuk merekonstruksi dinamika sosial dan perkembangan infrastruktur pada masa itu. Validitas data diuji melalui teknik kritik sumber yang umum digunakan dalam penelitian sejarah. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa pembangunan jalur kereta api dan fasilitas pendukungnya mendorong proses urbanisasi dan meningkatkan mobilitas sosial di kalangan penduduk Lubuklinggau. Selain itu, munculnya kelas sosial baru sebagai akibat dari kebijakan ekonomi kolonial menunjukkan pergeseran bertahap dalam struktur sosial. Transformasi ini mencerminkan strategi kolonial untuk mengintegrasikan wilayah pedalaman ke dalam sistem politik-ekonomi kolonial. Temuan ini berkontribusi pada pemahaman yang lebih dalam tentang sejarah lokal dalam konteks pengaruh kolonial global yang lebih luas.

Kata kunci: Infrastruktur kolonial, kolonialisme Belanda, Lubuklinggau, sejarah perkotaan, struktur sosial.



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INTRODUCTION

Lubuklinggau, situated in South Sumatra, experienced significant transformation during the late Dutch colonial period as the town was increasingly integrated into colonial economic and administrative networks between 1934 and 1942. This period marked an important phase in which infrastructure development became a central instrument for territorial control and economic extraction in the Outer Islands of the Netherlands East Indies (Houben, 1994; Hoekstra, 2021). Colonial investment in transportation and urban facilities altered the spatial organization of Lubuklinggau, reshaping everyday life and redefining the town's role within regional production systems (Colombijn, 2002; Tichelman, 1980).

These developments positioned Lubuklinggau as a strategic node connecting inland resource areas with broader colonial markets (Haryanto, 2021). Infrastructure expansion during this period extended beyond physical construction and directly influenced the social structure of the local population. The growth of railways and roads facilitated labor mobility while simultaneously reorganizing employment relations, particularly in transport and logistics sectors dominated by colonial interests (Wijayanti, 2023; Houben, 1994). Social roles that were previously rooted in agrarian livelihoods increasingly shifted toward wage labor tied to colonial enterprises, altering patterns of dependence and authority (Elson, 1992; Kartodirdjo, 2021).

These changes introduced new forms of social stratification that reflected broader colonial hierarchies (Ramli, R., 2020). The organization of colonial infrastructure also reinforced racial and social segregation through spatial planning and differential access to public services. Urban zones were arranged according to ethnic classifications, with Europeans occupying central areas and indigenous populations relegated to peripheral settlements (Ramli, R., 2020; Haryono, 2022). Access to education, healthcare, and transportation followed similar lines, embedding inequality within the material structure of the town (Tichelman, 1980; Haryanto, 2021). Such arrangements strengthened colonial dominance by normalizing social distinctions in everyday urban life (Gramsci, 1971):

Table 1. Infrastructure Development and Social Impact in Colonial South Sumatra (1930s)

Infrastructure Type	Primary Function	Social Impact	Source
Railways	Commodity transport	Formation of wage labor class	Hoekstra (2021); Wijayanti (2023)
Roads	Administrative mobility	Spatial segregation	Colombijn (2002); Ramli, R. (2020)
Warehouses	Storage and trade	Labor concentration	Tichelman (1980)

The railway system played a particularly decisive role in shaping Lubuklinggau's urban growth and social composition. Stations and depots became centers of economic activity, attracting migrant workers and encouraging the formation of new residential clusters (Wijayanti, 2023; Colombijn, 2002). While indigenous labor sustained the daily operation of transport infrastructure, supervisory positions remained largely reserved for Europeans, reinforcing racialized labor hierarchies (Ramli, R., 2020; Tichelman, 1980). This configuration reflected a broader colonial pattern in which economic participation did not translate into social mobility (Gramsci, 1971).

Administrative restructuring further deepened these transformations through the integration of Lubuklinggau into the kewedanaan system. Colonial bureaucracy operated alongside infrastructure to regulate population movement, taxation, and labor discipline, embedding authority within routine administrative practices (Ramli & Bakaruddin, 2021; Houben, 1994). Governance structures functioned as extensions of economic control, linking local administration to colonial production priorities (Jenkins, 2008; Kartodirdjo, 2021).

This alignment strengthened the colonial state's capacity to manage both space and society. Migration patterns intensified during this period as rural populations were drawn into Lubuklinggau's expanding labor market. Movement from villages to urban centers reflected shifts in economic opportunity shaped by colonial infrastructure rather than voluntary urbanization alone (Elson, 1992; Wijayanti, 2023). These population flows altered traditional social relations and contributed to the emergence of new urban identities grounded in wage labor (Ghani & Mahmud, 2023; Haryono, 2022). Social mobility remained limited, constrained by structural inequalities embedded in colonial policy (Ramli, R., 2020).

The late colonial years preceding Japanese occupation marked a phase in which infrastructural systems and social arrangements reached a high level of integration. Urban layouts, labor relations, and administrative routines established during this time continued to influence post-colonial development trajectories in Indonesian towns (Cribb, 2001; Colombijn, 2002). Traces of colonial social structure remain visible in contemporary patterns of settlement and economic hierarchy (Haryanto, 2021; Kartodirdjo, 2021). Examining Lubuklinggau during 1934–1942 provides insight into how colonial infrastructure shaped enduring social formations at the local level (Tichelman, 1980; Cribb, 2001).

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a qualitative historical case study design to examine the transformation of infrastructure and its impact on the social structure of Lubuklinggau during Dutch colonial rule between 1934 and 1942. The population consists of individuals or communities with historical connections to colonial development, selected through purposive and snowball sampling to ensure the inclusion of key informants such as descendants of historical actors, local historians, and individuals with access to oral histories or personal archives. Data were collected using in-depth interviews, documentary observations, field notes, archival research, and direct observation of historical sites. The research instruments were designed to capture rich qualitative data on perceptions, experiences, and interpretations of colonial-era infrastructure and social change, while all procedures were conducted systematically and ethically to maintain data credibility.

Data analysis followed historical methods including heuristics, source verification, interpretation, and historiography, with triangulation across interviews, primary sources, and secondary documents to enhance validity and reliability. Ethical considerations such as informed consent, confidentiality, and respect for participants' narratives were strictly upheld. The study acknowledges limitations related to restricted archival access, subjectivity of memory, and potential researcher bias; therefore, continuous reflexivity was applied throughout the research process. If necessary, additional data will be collected from visual documentation, colonial institutional records, and overseas archival repositories to deepen and strengthen the historical and socio-infrastructure analysis of Lubuklinggau.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Colonial Infrastructure Development and Spatial Transformation in Lubuklinggau

The development of colonial infrastructure in Lubuklinggau between 1934 and 1942 reflected the strategic priorities of the Dutch East Indies administration in integrating inland Sumatra into the colonial economic system. Railway construction functioned not only as a technical achievement but also as a spatial intervention that reorganized settlement patterns and mobility routes. Archival records indicate that the Muara Enim Lubuklinggau railway line became fully operational in 1934, linking coal-producing regions to export corridors (Anhar, 2019; Singh & van der Meer, 2020). This infrastructural presence altered the geographic orientation of Lubuklinggau from a peripheral settlement into a logistical node (Susetyo & Ravico, 2021).

Infrastructure expansion reshaped urban space through the concentration of administrative buildings, warehouses, and transport facilities around the railway station. Lefebvre's concept of the production of space helps explain how colonial power materialized through spatial planning that privileged control and efficiency (Lefebvre, 1991). Lubuklinggau's urban morphology increasingly reflected colonial priorities rather than indigenous spatial logic. Similar patterns were observed in other colonial towns across Southeast Asia (Lee, 2021; Colonial Southeast Asia, 2023).

The railway corridor facilitated increased circulation of goods, labor, and administrative authority across Musi Ulu. Data from colonial almanacs show a steady rise in transport volume following the railway's completion, particularly in coal and agricultural commodities. This circulation intensified colonial extraction while simultaneously stimulating local market activity (Rusli, 2015; Lindblad, 2008). Infrastructure therefore functioned as both an economic accelerator and a mechanism of territorial consolidation (Hoekstra, 2021). Visual documentation from 1934 illustrates the architectural character of Lubuklinggau Railway Station as a symbol of colonial order and permanence.



Figure 1. Lubuklinggau Railway Station, 1934

Source: Tropenmuseum.nl, as cited in artikel_sarkowi_unpari.docx

The station's design followed standardized colonial railway architecture emphasizing surveillance and accessibility. Such visual elements reinforced the presence of colonial authority in everyday life (Kim, 2023). Infrastructure development encouraged the emergence of new residential zones along transport lines. Settlements near the station expanded rapidly due to labor demand and commercial opportunities. This spatial growth followed patterns identified in other colonial railway towns in Sumatra (Suwondo, 2020; Suwandi, 2019). Urban expansion therefore occurred unevenly, shaped by proximity to infrastructure rather than traditional kinship territories.

River systems continued to complement rail infrastructure, maintaining Lubuklinggau's role within older fluvial networks. The interaction between railways and rivers strengthened regional connectivity across South Sumatra (Asnan, 2016). Colonial planners exploited this dual infrastructure to maximize logistical efficiency. Infrastructure integration thus reinforced Lubuklinggau's strategic value within the colonial economy.

Colonial infrastructure also altered perceptions of distance and time among local populations. Travel that once required days by river could be completed within hours by rail. This temporal compression facilitated administrative penetration and market integration (Berman, 2021). Mobility changes consequently affected social relations and economic behavior. Comparative studies indicate that such infrastructure-driven transformations were common across colonial Southeast Asia. Railways served as instruments of governance, reshaping spatial hierarchies and access to resources (Yusuf & Rahman, 2021; Kim, 2023). Lubuklinggau fits this regional pattern while retaining local specificities. Its inland position amplified the disruptive impact of railway penetration.

Infrastructure expansion was accompanied by bureaucratic reorganization to manage newly connected territories. Administrative offices clustered near transport hubs to facilitate oversight (Sutherland, 1979). This spatial arrangement reduced the autonomy of traditional authorities. Colonial infrastructure therefore intersected directly with governance structures. Infrastructural development in Lubuklinggau functioned as a catalyst for spatial reconfiguration. The railway altered settlement distribution, economic orientation, and administrative reach. These changes laid the groundwork for broader social restructuring during the late colonial period (Ricklefs, 2005; Reid, 2011). Infrastructure became a foundational element of colonial transformation.

Transformation of Social Structure and Class Formation

Infrastructure development precipitated significant changes in Lubuklinggau's social structure. The demand for labor attracted migrants from Java, Minangkabau, and other regions. This influx diversified the population while introducing new class distinctions based on occupation and ethnicity (Rahman, 2022; Wijayanti, 2023). Social stratification increasingly reflected colonial labor hierarchies. Colonial policies formalized social segmentation through differentiated access to housing, education, and public services. Indigenous populations occupied peripheral settlements, while European officials and skilled workers resided near administrative centers (Ramli, 2020).

Such spatial segregation reinforced social distance. Comparable patterns have been documented across colonial cities in Asia (Lee, 2021). The emergence of a wage-based working class marked a departure from agrarian social organization. Railway workers, porters, clerks, and traders formed a new socio-economic group dependent on colonial infrastructure (Breman, 1983; Setiadi et al., 2022). Employment relations shifted toward contractual arrangements. These changes redefined notions of labor and social mobility. Despite structural changes, colonial authorities retained indigenous administrative units to maintain social stability. The Onder Afdeeling Musi Ulu preserved the marga system as an intermediary governance structure:

Table 1. Marga Administration in Onder Afdeeling Musi Ulu (1936)

No	Nama Marga	Pasirah	Ibu Kota Marga
1	Sikap Musi Dalam	Depati Rus Pringgojudo	Muara Lakitan
2	Bulang Tengah Semangus	Depati Agent Kesumojodo	Semangus
3	Bulang Suku Tengah	Depati A. Rachman Notokesumo	Mambang
4	Proatin XI	Pangeran A. Tersusi Raksamarga	Mandi Aur
5	Bulang Tengah Suku Ulu	Pangeran A. Rasip Mangkualam	Binjai Pulau Panggung
6	Proatin V	Pangeran Mohd. Amin Ratu Asmaraningrat	Muara Beliti
7	Tiang Pungpung Kepungut	Depati A. Mantab Natadiraja	Muara Kati
8	Sidang Kelingi Ilir	Depati Ramitan	Lubuk Linggau
9	Batu Kuning Lakitan	Depati Tusin	Selangit
10	Suku Tengah Lakitan Ulu	Depati Pengandal Natamarga	Terawas

Source: Zaak Almanak Zuid Sumatera, cited in artikel_sarkowi_unpari.docx

This arrangement reflected a pragmatic colonial strategy combining control with limited recognition of local institutions (Sutherland, 1979). Traditional elites adapted by collaborating with colonial administrators, occupying positions within the marga system. This collaboration produced an intermediary class mediating colonial demands and local interests (Kato, 1990). Such dynamics reshaped authority relations at the village level. Social legitimacy increasingly depended on bureaucratic affiliation.

Ethnic diversity within the labor force generated new social interactions and tensions. Segregation policies limited integration while encouraging parallel community development (Haryono, 2022). Inter-ethnic relations were structured by occupational roles and residential patterns. Similar processes occurred in colonial port cities elsewhere (Yusuf & Rahman, 2021). Education played a selective role in social transformation. Access to colonial schooling favored certain groups, reinforcing stratification while enabling limited upward mobility (Choi & Watanabe, 2022). Educated locals occupied clerical positions within colonial offices. Education thus functioned as both opportunity and mechanism of control.

Cultural norms adapted gradually to new social realities. Wage labor introduced different rhythms of work and consumption. Monetary transactions replaced reciprocal agrarian exchanges (Tichelman, 1980). These shifts altered everyday social relations. Theoretical perspectives from structural functionalism help explain these transformations as adaptive responses to systemic pressures (Parsons, 1951; Soekanto, 2007). Social structures reorganized to accommodate new economic and administrative demands.

Change unfolded through negotiation rather than abrupt rupture. Lubuklinggau exemplifies this adaptive process. In sum, social restructuring in Lubuklinggau reflected the interaction between colonial

infrastructure and labor organization. New classes emerged alongside preserved traditional units. Social hierarchy became increasingly differentiated and bureaucratized (Kartodirdjo, 1984; Rahman, 2022). These changes redefined community relations during the late colonial era.

Local Responses: Adaptation, Resistance, and Cultural Negotiation

Local communities did not respond uniformly to colonial transformation. Infrastructure expansion generated both opportunities and grievances. Economic access expanded while social inequalities deepened (Prasetyo, E., 2023). Community responses reflected this ambivalence. Adaptive strategies included participation in colonial markets and transport-related occupations. Local traders utilized railway connectivity to expand commercial reach (Rusli, 2015). Such participation offered economic benefits despite structural constraints. Adaptation became a pragmatic survival strategy.

Cultural resistance emerged through everyday practices rather than overt rebellion. Rituals, language use, and communal gatherings preserved local identity (Nasution, 2021). These practices maintained social cohesion amid rapid change. Resistance operated subtly within colonial constraints. Historical evidence indicates sporadic opposition to forced labor and taxation. Such actions reflected awareness of exploitation linked to infrastructure projects (Kartodirdjo, 1984). Resistance remained localized and fragmented. Colonial surveillance limited collective mobilization.

Negotiation characterized interactions between local leaders and colonial authorities. Indigenous elites leveraged their intermediary roles to mitigate colonial demands (Sutherland, 1979). This negotiation shaped the practical implementation of colonial policies. Authority functioned through compromise. Urban spaces became sites of cultural hybridity. Markets near railway stations facilitated interaction across ethnic boundaries. Hybrid cultural forms emerged through daily encounters (Lee, 2021). Urban life fostered new social identities.

Comparative research suggests that such adaptive-resistive dynamics were common across colonial societies. Infrastructure introduced constraints while enabling agency (Berman, 2021; Kim, 2023). Lubuklinggau followed this broader pattern. Local specificity shaped outcomes. Historiographically, focusing on local responses enriches understanding of colonial processes (Kuntowijoyo, 2003; Suryadi, 2018). It challenges narratives portraying communities as passive recipients. Local agency becomes analytically central. This perspective aligns with alternative historiography (Wahyuni, 2021).

Infrastructure thus functioned as a contested arena of power relations. It imposed structural constraints while opening spaces for negotiation. Social change unfolded through interaction rather than unilateral imposition (Reid, 2011). Lubuklinggau illustrates this complexity. Overall, local responses to colonial infrastructure in Lubuklinggau combined adaptation, resistance, and negotiation. These responses shaped the trajectory of social transformation. Colonial dominance encountered resilient local agency (Siregar, 2024; Afandi, 2020). The resulting social order reflected this dynamic interplay.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the construction of the Muara Enim Lubuklinggau railway during the colonial period had a transformational impact on the spatial and social structure of the region. Infrastructure modernization altered mobility patterns and spatial distribution, created new social segregations, and gave rise to a wage-based working class integrated into the colonial economy. Moreover, the local population responded in complex ways through both resistance and adaptation. Therefore, the hypothesis that colonial infrastructure functioned as a significant agent of social change is supported. The study expands the scope of colonialism research by highlighting peripheral regions and emphasizing the importance of local responses to modernization projects. It also offers a novel analytical perspective that bridges infrastructure studies with socio-historical inquiry. This research is limited to archival and written sources and does not include oral history or direct ethnographic observations. Future studies should incorporate oral histories and microhistorical approaches to capture the nuanced and subjective experiences of local communities in facing colonial infrastructural interventions.

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