

The Existence of Railway Transportation in the Cirebon Religion 1900-1942

Ninda Lutfianti^{1*}, Ponco Setiyonugroho², Yusuf Budi Prasetya Santosa³

^{1,2,3}History Education, Faculty of Education and Social Sciences, Universitas Indraprasta, Indonesia

*correspondence email : nindalutfianti11@gmail.com

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Abstrak

Kebutuhan transportasi di wilayah Cirebon pada awal abad ke-20 didasari oleh keterbatasan sarana angkut hasil perkebunan, khususnya tebu, menuju pelabuhan sebagai pusat distribusi ekspor. Pada periode ini, kereta api dan trem muncul sebagai moda transportasi yang secara signifikan membentuk kembali perkembangan sistem transportasi yang lebih efisien. Penelitian ini berupaya untuk meneliti bagaimana keberadaan kereta api di Cirebon pada awal abad ke-20 berfungsi sebagai jawaban atas keterbatasan infrastruktur transportasi yang ada. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode historis yang meliputi tahapan heuristik, kritik, interpretasi, dan historiografi. Pendekatan ini memungkinkan penelusuran secara sistematis terhadap sumber-sumber arsip, laporan perusahaan, serta catatan kolonial yang berkaitan dengan dinamika transportasi di Cirebon. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa keberadaan kereta api di wilayah Cirebon tidak hanya menjadi sarana vital dalam menopang sektor perkebunan kolonial, melainkan juga bertransformasi menjadi fasilitas publik yang mempercepat proses urbanisasi, memperluas jaringan perdagangan lokal, serta meningkatkan mobilitas sosial-ekonomi masyarakat. Dengan demikian, kereta api di Cirebon memiliki kontribusi ganda: sebagai penopang utama ekonomi kolonial berbasis perkebunan sekaligus instrumen modernisasi transportasi yang menghubungkan Cirebon dengan wilayah lain di Jawa.

Kata kunci: transportasi, kereta api, perkebunan tebu.

Abstract

The need for transportation in the Cirebon region in the early twentieth century was primarily driven by the limited means of transporting plantation products, particularly sugarcane, to the port as the center of export distribution. During this period, trains and trams emerged as modes of transportation that significantly reshaped the development of more efficient transport systems. This study seeks to investigate how the presence of railways in Cirebon in the early twentieth century functioned as a response to the limitations of existing transportation infrastructure. This study employs the historical method, which includes the stages of heuristics, source criticism, interpretation, and historiography. This approach allows for a systematic examination of archival records, company reports, and colonial documents related to the dynamics of transportation in Cirebon. The findings reveal that the railway system in Cirebon was not only a vital infrastructure supporting the colonial plantation economy but also transformed into a public facility that accelerated urbanization, expanded local trade networks, and enhanced socio-economic mobility. Therefore, the railway in Cirebon played a dual role: as a key driver of the colonial plantation-based economy and as an instrument of transportation modernization that connected Cirebon with other regions in Java.

Keywords: transportation, railway, sugarcane plantation.

INTRODUCTION

Transportation played a crucial role in supporting economic progress and served as a vital instrument for establishing trade networks between

regions. During the Dutch East Indies period, transportation infrastructure was still limited and concentrated in several urban centers. In Cirebon, transportation was primarily centered in the city,

connecting one town to another. However, the railway system in Cirebon also extended to smaller lines reaching the hinterland areas. These networks consisted of railways and trams, whose existence steadily increased from year to year and remained significant until the end of the Dutch colonial administration.

The emergence of railways and trams in the Dutch East Indies was primarily utilized as a means of transporting production goods, particularly in the hinterland regions. Prior to their introduction, transportation facilities were limited to the use of animal and human labor. In addition, river routes were relied upon by using small boats to carry goods to the ports. However, the efficiency of such transportation was highly limited, often resulting in considerable losses due to the imbalance between high levels of production, restricted transportation capacity, and increasing market demand (Haryoto Kunto, 1895).

The existence of railways and trams in Cirebon was managed by two different companies. The Cirebon-Cikampek railway line was owned and operated by the state enterprise Staatsspoorwegen, while the Cirebon-Semarang tram line was under the management of the private company Semarang Cheribon Stoomtram Maatschappij. Each of these networks had its own designated routes, yet both were designed to complement one another in

order to strengthen regional connectivity (Marihandono, Djoko., H., Budi, L. S., & Iswari, 2016).

The study of railways has often become a distinctive attraction within the realm of knowledge, particularly in the field of history, while also serving as a reflection of how railways functioned as a means of intercity connection. This has subsequently provided a reference point for other researchers to employ more than one spatial scope. Such a condition, however, presents a gap in this study, which seeks to focus more specifically on a single spatial context. Furthermore, the utilization of railways has generally been associated with public transportation services for passengers. This reality presents a different issue, as the presence of railways in Cirebon not only opened passenger transport services but also facilitated sugar transportation, which in fact became the most prominent service during its period of development.

Accordingly, this article seeks to address the question: "To what extent were the railways in Cirebon utilized by the people within this region?" The period of study spans from 1897, marking the beginning of railway development in Cirebon, until 1942, which signifies the end of Dutch colonial rule and the subsequent termination of railway operations in the region.

METHODS

This study employs the historical research method, which is closely related to systematic procedures, processes, and techniques in conducting descriptive-analytical investigations to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the research object (Helius Sjamsudin, 2007).

Through the historical research method, the study follows four main stages: heuristics, source criticism, interpretation, and historiography. First, heuristics refers to the process of obtaining historical sources. In this stage, library research was conducted by collecting various references such as archives, books, journals, and articles. Second, source criticism serves as an effort to examine the authenticity and credibility of the sources in order to establish historical accuracy. Third, interpretation involves re-examining the collected sources and synthesizing the available facts to construct a coherent understanding. Finally, historiography represents the concluding stage of historical research, in which the findings are presented in the form of a written historical account arranged in chronological order (Kuntowijoyo, 2005).

This article combines two main types of sources, namely primary and secondary sources. The use of primary sources as the main reference is accessed through Dhelper.nl. The site contains a number of contemporary archives or

official documents published directly by government institutions or other related agencies. The information presented reflects both general and specific conditions related to railways in certain regions of the Dutch East Indies. From Dhelper.nl, the author adopts archives of a general nature.

Meanwhile, for specific information regarding railways in the Cirebon region, the author utilizes official documents from the collection of the National Library of Indonesia, dating from 1897 to 1940, which include annual reports (referred to in Dutch as *Verslag*). In addition, as supporting materials, this research also employs secondary sources such as books and scholarly articles related to the railway system in the Cirebon region.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Existence of Railways

The implementation of the Cultivation System (*Cultuurstelsel*) between 1830 and 1870 in the Governorate regions became the main reason for the establishment of railways in the Dutch East Indies. The indigenous population living in these areas was forced to allocate portions of their land to cultivate export commodities such as sugarcane, coffee, and indigo. This policy significantly increased the volume of export commodities in the Dutch East Indies. However, the high levels of production and consumption were not balanced by adequate means of

transportation. At that time, transportation still relied heavily on animal and human labor (Lutfianti, 2024). The limitations faced by sugar entrepreneurs in transporting sugar production materials became a source of concern, as it resulted in significant financial losses.

During the colonial period, the railway system in the Dutch East Indies, particularly in the Cirebon region, was managed under two different ownerships. The first was the state owned railway company, Staatsspoorwegen (SS), and the second was the privately owned company, Semarang Cheribon Stoomtram Maatschappij (SCS). Both companies maintained their own existence and operated with relatively similar significance in the region.

The initial establishment of railways was primarily intended to serve economic needs, particularly those of sugar entrepreneurs, due to the rising demand for sugar products in the international market. Beyond this function, the railways were also utilized for transporting other goods, such as agricultural and plantation products, factory materials, infrastructure supplies, and various commodities destined for distribution to the ports. In addition to meeting the demand for freight transport, the railway system also served the purpose of passenger transportation.

In the early period of railway development in Java, passenger services were exclusively available to the nobility and the European community. However, the situation changed with the emergence of private railway companies in the late nineteenth century, which made railway transportation accessible to the general population (Mirza, 2023). However, there were class distinctions that separated the upper classes from the lower classes in railway usage. Moreover, in its early development, the establishment of railways was intended not only to serve economic interests but also to fulfill military purposes (Lutfianti, 2024).

Eastern Region

SCS became the sole company operating in the eastern region of Cirebon. The establishment of SCS began when the Java Spoorweg Maatschappij (JSM) had previously constructed the Semarang- Cirebon line in 1885. Subsequently, JSM decided to expand its network into the hinterland, particularly targeting areas with sugarcane plantations and sugar factories. As a result, a new line was opened to connect Tegal and Balapulang (Marihandono, Djoko., H., Budi, L. S., & Iswari, 2016).

However, after five years of operation, SCS was unable to sustain its business due to its inability to cover company losses and repay capital to its shareholders. It was predicted that if the

company continued to operate, it would face significant risks of deficit and financial losses. Consequently, the company decided to dissolve and sell its assets to any bidder willing to take over these costs. This offer was made at the end of 1891, and an agreement was reached on January 18, 1892, with the Semarang Cheribon Stoomtram Maatschappij (SCS), which agreed to the purchase. The new SCS was officially recognized by the government in 1895 (Marihandono, Djoko., H., Budi, L. S., & Iswari, 2016).

After the ownership of JSM was transferred to SCS through the purchase of the concession, SCS introduced a new policy by converting the railway lines previously owned by JSM into tram lines (railways with smaller gauges). The track gauge for the tram ranged between 0.90 and 1.067 meters, whereas the standard railway gauge measured 1.435 meters (Staatsblad van Nederlandsch Indie No.190, 1893). The reason behind this change was to avoid the financial losses that had previously occurred and to achieve savings in operational costs, with the expectation of generating greater profits (Rachmawati, Farda Berlian, 2023).

SCS was granted a concession from May 4, 1895, until April 5, 1994, covering a period of 99 years (Hermawan, 2020). As the tram operated on narrow-gauge tracks its main function was to connect

remote hinterland areas that supplied commodities to railway halts, from which the goods were then transported to major railway stations (Nurzharah, 2023). Since trams operated on a smaller scale compared to railways, they were limited to short-distance routes due to the narrower tracks, smaller carriages, and lighter locomotives. Their speed was also lower, averaging 25-30 km/h (Mirza, 2023), while the maximum load capacity could not exceed 3,000 kg. The primary function of the tram was to serve the transportation of goods and passengers within the local area.

The establishment of JSM began in the 1870s, driven by the increasing demand for sugar products in the international market. This development was closely related to the trade routes along the northern coast of Java, particularly between Semarang and Cirebon, which were among the main sugar-producing regions. The existence of major ports in Cirebon and Semarang also supported this growth, serving both as the main points of export and as the terminal stations of the SCS line. However, the growing demand was not matched by adequate transportation facilities, which still relied on ox-carts and hand-pulled wagons. As a result, the transportation of production goods was extremely slow, leading to stockpiles in warehouses and, in many cases, spoilage of sugar products. Such conditions caused significant

financial losses for sugar entrepreneurs (Lutfianti, 2024).

At the time of its establishment, the SCS tram line was intended for both freight and passenger transport, and it was initially constructed as a single-track line. In addition, the SCS route was also commonly referred to as the *suikerlijn* or “sugar line,” as it primarily served as many as 40 sugar factories along its route (Lutfianti, 2024). However, the SCS line did not exclusively serve the sugar industry. It also facilitated the transport of various other goods such as industrial materials, trams, infrastructure supplies, and other commodities required by local communities. These goods were distributed not only for export-import purposes through major ports but also for domestic circulation.

This condition is evident from the statistical data of sugar exports through the Port of Cirebon. In 1900, the export value was recorded at f 6.056.500, of which 80.48% was dominated by sugar commodities. By 1914, the value had almost doubled to f 12.694.400, with sugar still accounting for 70.56% of the total exports. These figures demonstrate not only the strategic role of Cirebon as a sugar export hub but also the significant dependence of the local economy on sugar production and its distribution through railway and tram networks such as the SCS (Susanto Zuhdi, 2002). This marked the existence of

the railway as a means of transportation in the Cirebon region.

Western Region

The concession in the western part of Cirebon was owned by the Dutch East Indies government company, *Staatsspoorwegen* (SS), with the Cirebon-Cikampek line. The function of this line was to connect cities through the ports located along the Silk Route, including Cirebon and Batavia. The Cirebon-Cikampek line was inaugurated in 1912 by Governor-General Idenburg (Firdaus & Hamidah, 2020).

The purpose of opening the Cirebon-Cikampek line was closely related to its geographical location along the northern coast of Java, particularly since both regions had ports that served as centers of economic activity in Java. Initially, transportation to connect these areas was limited only to sea routes. However, after the railway line was opened, it made transportation between Batavia and Cirebon via land routes more efficient. Beyond that, this efficiency extended into various vital sectors of the Dutch East Indies colonial administration, such as governance and the economy (Firdaus & Hamidah, 2020).

In terms of the economic sector, the existence of the railway was evident in two of the most prominent aspects: industry and ports. In the industrial field, *Staatsspoorwegen* (SS) played a significant

role in transporting agricultural and plantation products that became leading commodities in the international market. Some of these commodities within the Cirebon area included coffee, rice, vegetables, indigo, and others. Furthermore, one of the industrial collaborations undertaken by SS in Cirebon City could be seen in the transportation of products from the British American Tobacco (BAT) cigarette industry. BAT products were transported by SS trains to the port. Up until 1929, the presence of SS railways in Cirebon was strongly felt, as it ranked second in terms of exports and imports of essential goods in Java and Madura, with tobacco being the main commodity (Firdaus & Hamidah, 2020).

In the governmental sector, SS also played a role as a bridge for coordination activities between the central government in Batavia and the Resident government, which was usually carried out to facilitate the exploitation of the Dutch East Indies. One example of this was seen in the SS bridge repair project in the Cirebon Residency, which cost as much as f 34.210. Moreover, other residencies in the surrounding areas could also take advantage of the existence of the SS railway when they needed to travel to Batavia. Thus, the existence of the Cirebon-Cikampek line managed by SS had a very broad influence, with many positive impacts felt by the colonial government

The Existence of Railways

In the second half of the 19th century, the Dutch colonial government planned to boost its economy by opening agricultural and plantation lands (Falah, 2011). This was supported by the enactment of the Agrarian Law of 1870 (Agrarische Wet 1870), which led to an influx of foreign investors into the Dutch East Indies. Since the Cultivation System, in which most land policies were controlled by the government, private enterprises had been pressing to be given space to invest in the Dutch East Indies (Masyrullahushomad, 2019).

Private enterprises utilized this opportunity not only in the plantation sector but also in transportation. In this case, both sectors collaborated as an integrated system that mutually benefited one another. Plantations served as the source of raw materials and products to be transported, while the railway functioned as the means of transporting these materials and plantation products.

SCS specifically existed as a transporter of sugarcane and sugar, although it was also possible for other goods to be transported. This was due to the Cultivation System, which included a working arrangement known as the Suikercontract (Sugar Contract). Under this contract, the government was obliged to order the population to cultivate sugarcane as part of the compulsory cultivation policy and deliver it either to

government warehouses or directly to sugar factory owners. Furthermore, the milled sugar was required to be sold to the government at predetermined prices (Firdaus & Hamidah, 2020).

In this case, sugar factories occupied a dualistic position. First, the government did not provide opportunities for private parties to be involved in the process of agrarian production in Java, making colonial land purely a domain of state exploitation. Second, the government required sugar factories to process raw materials into finished products, namely turning sugarcane into sugar (Firdaus & Hamidah, 2020).

Passenger transportation was predominantly utilized by the majority of people living in rural areas. They usually had purposes either related to economic activities or simply recreation. In urban areas, various economic and educational facilities such as markets, shops, factories, and schools were available, while rural or hinterland communities produced goods from agricultural, industrial, and manufacturing activities. These differences in facilities created a situation in which communities became mutually dependent on one another (Lutfianti, 2024). In Cirebon itself, sugar factories located along the SCS railway line also served as partners in its operation. There were a total of 12 sugar factories, including Niew Losari, Niew Tersana, Karang Suwung, Jati Piring,

Luwung Gajah, Sindang Laut, Surawinangun, Arjawinangun, Gempol, Parung Jaya, Jatiwangi, and Kadipaten (Hartatik, 2018).

In addition to transporting sugar, both the SCS and SS railways also carried various types of commodities that were in high demand on the market, such as coffee, rice, vegetables, indigo, and others. Moreover, although their primary function was focused on the transportation of sugar, these two railway networks also played a role in carrying raw materials and manufactured goods produced in the Cirebon region (Firdaus & Hamidah, 2020). SCS played a strategic role as a hub of trade by utilizing the railway as its primary means of transportation. This was evident in the establishment of facilities for the production of arrack and spirits in Palimanan in 1928, which recorded an export value of f 1.755.585. In this context, SCS's role extended beyond domestic transportation, as it also opened access to international markets for products manufactured in Cirebon. Consequently, the presence of the railway strengthened Palimanan's position as one of the key industrial centers for alcoholic beverages in the Dutch East Indies. Moreover, SCS expanded its trade network to the western part of Cirebon by constructing a branch line from Jamblang (Klangenan) to the ballast stone factory at Mount Giwur, spanning 5 km, in 1922. This

expansion demonstrates that SCS not only functioned as a transporter of plantation products but also facilitated the distribution of industrial commodities that supported the development of colonial infrastructure (Firdaus & Hamidah, 2020).

Meanwhile, the Staatsspoorwegen (SS), with its railway line stretching from Cirebon to Cikampek or westward, also played an important role in serving various needs. Unlike the SCS, which was primarily recognized for transporting sugar products, SS did not specialize in a particular commodity. Instead, it functioned as a multipurpose transporter of diverse agricultural and industrial products. In 1929, several SS halts in Cirebon, such as Kaliwedi, Arjawinangun, and Bangodua, served as both shipping and receiving stations. The Arjawinangun halt, for example, operated as a key shipping station, sending out 1.170 tons of rice, 740 tons of vegetables, 325 tons of fruit, 254 tons of potatoes, and 160 tons of peanuts to destinations outside the Cirebon Residency. Similarly, the Kaliwedi halt specialized in the shipment of vegetables and fruits. In contrast, the Cangkring halt (Plumbon District) served as a receiving station, handling rice shipments from Indramayu and cassava flour (gapek) from Bandung and Manggarai. From Cangkring, significant quantities of fruits particularly mangoes amounting to 1.107 tons and peanuts were then transported to

western cities along the Cirebon-Cikampek railway line. This illustrates SS's function as a dynamic connector between agrarian hinterlands and urban markets, highlighting its contribution to the circulation of food commodities in the Dutch East Indies (Firdaus & Hamidah, 2020).

In addition to their role in the economic sector of the Cirebon region, the presence of SCS and SS also transformed the social order of Cirebon's society. The increase in sugar production, coupled with the rising demand in international markets, led to a growing need for plantation workers and laborers in the sugar factories. This development introduced the lower-class community particularly plantation farmers and factory laborers to the concept of a wage system. Laborers were employed for 12 hours per day, with only one day off every two weeks. Furthermore, the wage system was structured on a daily payment basis, marking a significant shift in labor relations and socio-economic patterns within colonial Cirebon (John Ingleson, 2013).

Moreover, the presence of the railway network in the Cirebon region created greater efficiency in transportation flows. Various sectors were affected, particularly the industrial sector, which became more widely and easily connected. Several railway routes provided direct access to the ports or

served as a means of linking land transportation with maritime routes, thereby expanding economic activities beyond the local scale and even reaching international markets. In addition, the railway facilitated interconnections between major cities. This development can be observed in the railway lines stretching from Batavia to Surabaya, with the SS and SCS lines intersecting in the Cirebon region, making the city a strategic hub in colonial transportation and trade networks.

Entering the 1930s, the modernization of transportation became increasingly prominent in the Dutch East Indies. Railway transport, which had previously been the primary mode of travel for various social groups, began to be gradually replaced by automobiles and buses. The emergence of these new modes of transportation offered relatively lower fares compared to trains. In addition, their reach extended further, providing access to remote and rural areas that were not adequately served by the railway network (Memori van Overgave Residen Tegal, M.Rinkes, 12 Juni 1930, 1930). Consequently, the interest of a portion of the population began to shift.

Furthermore, the Economic Depression of the 1930s contributed to the decline of railway operations. Several aspects of the railway sector, particularly in the Cirebon region, were affected. First, the volume of both freight and

passenger transport began to decrease. This decline ultimately led to a reduction in railway revenues, and several railway lines were forced to cease operations in order to mitigate the risk of greater financial losses (Verslag Semarang-Cheribon Stoomtram-Maatschappij 1931: Algemeen En Financieel Verslag).

CONCLUSION

The implementation of the Cultivation System in the Dutch East Indies had a significant impact on the plantation industry, particularly the sugarcane plantations in the Cirebon Residency. The demand for sugar production in international markets also increased, yet it was not matched by the available transportation infrastructure. This situation had serious repercussions for the plantation industry. One solution to this problem was the establishment of tram and railway lines at several points in the Dutch East Indies, including the Cirebon Residency.

The Cirebon region was a strategic point within the trade network and, geographically, the area was suitable for sugarcane cultivation. Consequently, Cirebon became both the starting and ending point for the SS railway line from Cirebon to Cikampek and the SCS tram line from Cirebon to Semarang, serving freight transport primarily sugar and passenger services. The railway quickly became the dominant mode of

transportation in Cirebon, as well as in other regions connected by these lines. However, approaching the Economic Depression of the 1930s, the prominence of railways in the Cirebon area began to decline.

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