



Impact of the Great Postal Road on Infrastructure Development and Social Dynamics in Java under Herman Willem Daendels

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ABSTRACT

The construction of Great Postal Road, known as the *De Grote Postweg*, played a transformative role in shaping infrastructure development and social dynamics in Java during the early 19th century. This study examines the historical context, motivations, and impacts of the 1,000 km road, stretching from Anyer to Panarukan, constructed under the administration of Governor-General Herman Willem Daendels. Employing the historical method, the research follows a four-step process: heuristics, verification, interpretation, and historiography, ensuring data accuracy and reliability. The findings reveal that the primary objectives of the road were to improve communication across Java and bolster defenses against British threats along the northern coast. Furthermore, the construction resulted in substantial changes to the island's infrastructure and brought profound socio-economic consequences to the local population. This article concludes that although the road primarily served colonial interests, its enduring legacy significantly influenced the socio-economic transformation of the regions it traversed.

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INTRODUCTION

The construction of the Great Postal Road, or *De Grote Postweg*, by Herman Willem Daendels in the early 19th century marks a pivotal milestone in Indonesia's colonial history, particularly on the island of Java (Bachtiar et al., [2022](#)). Spanning 1,000 kilometers from Anyer to Panarukan, this monumental project was designed to strengthen communication networks, accelerate military mobilization, and enhance administrative oversight for the Dutch colonial government (Ricklefs, [2009](#)). Beyond its strategic political intent, the construction of this road became a transformative instrument for infrastructure development and societal governance in Java—leaving a significant and lasting imprint on the island's socio-economic landscape (Mrázek, [2002](#); van der Meer, [2017](#)).

The Great Postal Road was built through forced labor, known as *rodi*, which conscripted thousands of indigenous workers (Coté, [2014](#)). This labor system inflicted immense suffering, with countless lives lost due to grueling working conditions and the lack of protections for laborers (Furnivall, [2010](#)). Despite its human cost, the road catalyzed a fundamental transformation of Java's spatial and infrastructural organization. It became a vital artery, facilitating the faster distribution of goods, services, and information along Java's northern coast while supporting the colonial economic agenda (Niel, [1992](#)).

On a social level, the Great Postal Road reshaped patterns of local interaction and introduced new hierarchies between the colonial administration and indigenous populations (Akhyat, [2015](#)). Previously isolated communities became interconnected, though this integration occurred within the exploitative framework of colonialism (Taylor, [2003](#)). The road's presence accelerated urbanization in several regions along its route, fostering new dynamics in social and economic relationships between communities (Fasseur, [1994](#)). In this way, the Great Postal Road reflects the inherent duality of colonial development—simultaneously bringing progress and suffering (Boomgaard & Hart, [2010](#); Sari et al., [2023](#)).

The colonial government's infrastructural approach also fostered greater cultural interaction (Sunjayadi, [2019](#)). Increased mobility along the road enabled the spread of cultural practices, technologies, and commodities between



regions (Boomgaard, [1990](#)). While these exchanges contributed to the formation of new social and cultural identities among the Javanese, they were frequently overshadowed by the socio-economic pressures and exploitative conditions imposed on local populations (Firmansyah & Mirzachaerulsyah, [2023](#); Roosmalen, [2015](#)).

Moreover, the Great Postal Road served not only as a tool for colonial administrative control but also accelerated the economic integration of Java (Nurwulandari & Kurniawan, [2020](#)). The transportation network allowed previously isolated areas to participate in broader economic activities, particularly the trade of commodities such as coffee, sugar, and tea. This directly influenced local market dynamics and led to the emergence of new trade hubs along the route (Elson, [1994](#)). The ripple effect of this development can be seen in the rise of new societal groups, such as intermediary traders and transportation service providers, who began to play increasingly prominent roles in the colonial economic structure.

Beyond its economic contributions, the Great Postal Road also played a pivotal role in strengthening communication infrastructure. In the early 19th century, the integrated postal and courier systems became significantly more efficient with the existence of this road, enabling information and directives from Batavia (modern-day Jakarta) to reach other regions more swiftly (Carey, [2008](#)). This improvement not only reinforced colonial authority but also enhanced local capacities in responding to newly implemented policies. However, these benefits were firmly embedded within the exploitative colonial framework, wherein the indigenous population derived minimal advantages compared to the substantial gains enjoyed by the Dutch government.

From a socio-cultural perspective, the Great Postal Road brought profound changes to migration patterns among local communities. The route stimulated population mobility as individuals sought employment opportunities or new trading prospects in other areas (Hoogervorst & Nordholt, [2017](#)). Yet, increased migration also led to challenges, such as social conflicts between local residents and newcomers, who often introduced different values and cultural practices (Cribb, [2000](#)). Despite these conflicts, such interactions also fostered cultural acculturation, enriching local traditions in areas such as art, language, and consumption patterns.

Environmentally, the construction of the Great Postal Road had a considerable impact on local ecosystems. The extensive land clearing required to build the road caused significant alterations to the landscape, which disrupted agrarian activities in nearby communities (Peluso, [1992](#)). The deforestation necessary to establish the road reduced access to natural resources that had once been integral to local livelihoods. Consequently, many communities were forced to adapt their ways of life, transitioning from traditional agrarian systems to roles within the emerging colonial economic framework.

Although the construction of the Great Postal Road is often heralded as a technical achievement of the colonial administration, its legacy remains deeply ambivalent (Robison, [1982](#)). On one hand, the road laid the groundwork for modern transportation systems in Java; on the other, it symbolizes the structural injustices inherent in colonial policies. This study aims to further examine how the socio-economic transformations initiated by the road's construction continue to shape Java's societal dynamics to this day (Asrinaldi, [2022](#)).

The study of Daendels' Great Postal Road remains a critical topic in colonial history, as it reveals the far-reaching influence of colonial policies on infrastructure development and social dynamics in Java. Such research is essential for understanding the colonial administration's interaction with local communities in the context of infrastructure modernization and its impact on spatial organization, mobility, and socio-economic structures. Scholarly investigations into the impacts of the Great Postal Road have been extensive. Sunjayadi (2020) highlights how the road accelerated military mobility and colonial administration, significantly influencing the social structure of communities in the Jakarta-Bogor region (Sunjayadi, [2020](#)). In a separate study, Bachtiar et al. (2022) demonstrate how the road triggered urbanization in western Java, fundamentally transforming the spatial layout of cities (Bachtiar et al., [2022](#)). Meanwhile, Raharjo (2024) emphasizes Daendels' policies during the 1808–1811 period, particularly the use of forced labor, which had profound socio-economic consequences for local populations (Raharjo, [2024](#)). These studies collectively agree that the Great Postal Road played a strategic role in colonial infrastructure modernization while introducing complex social ramifications for indigenous communities.

This research seeks to analyze the Great Postal Road's role in advancing colonial military and economic strategies in Java, including its construction objectives, implementation techniques, and effects on military mobility and economic distribution. Additionally, the study explores the social and economic impacts on local communities, such as the forced

labor system, shifts in social structures, and patterns of interregional connectivity. It also underscores the road's influence on infrastructure development and urbanization in Batavia, particularly in enhancing administrative efficiency, logistics, and the spatial inequalities it engendered.

METHOD

This study employs the historical method and literature review as its primary approaches. The historical method is utilized to analyze and integrate various disciplines, thereby constructing arguments grounded in verifiable facts (Kuntowijoyo, [2013](#)). The historical research process is conducted through four stages: heuristics, source criticism, interpretation, and historiography. Historical facts are collected from a variety of archival sources, including Dutch colonial archives housed at the National Archives of the Republic of Indonesia (ANRI), with particular emphasis on documents titled *Memorie van Overgave* and colonial administrative reports on infrastructure development in early 19th-century Java. Additionally, records from the Nationaal Archief in the Netherlands, including official reports from the administration of Herman Willem Daendels, were also utilized. These facts are analyzed to construct an accurate and objective historical narrative, resulting in a valid interpretation of the construction of the Great Postal Road (*De Grote Postweg*) and its impacts on society.

The literature review method serves as a complementary data collection technique, conducted through the analysis of books, literature, records, and relevant reports related to the research topic (Abdurrahman, [2019](#)). In this study, secondary sources such as *A History of Modern Indonesia Since c. 1200* by Ricklefs and *Netherlands India: A Study of Plural Economy* by Furnivall are particularly significant. The data obtained through this method is critically analyzed to construct arguments grounded in robust theoretical and empirical examinations (Zed, [2014](#)). By combining relevant primary and secondary sources, this research ensures the reliability and validity of the data, thereby producing a comprehensive and credible historical conclusion.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Construction of the Great Postal Road: Military and Economic Infrastructure in the Daendels Era

The construction of the Great Postal Road (*De Grote Postweg*) by Herman Willem Daendels in the early 19th century was a strategic initiative by the Dutch colonial government to address the looming British threat while consolidating administrative and economic control over Java. Spanning 1,000 kilometers from Anyer to Panarukan, this major infrastructure project was designed to facilitate the swift mobilization of troops and logistics. Colombijn (2022) notes that the road's primary purpose was to mitigate Java's vulnerability to external threats and accelerate the transport of military forces and goods, which was critical to maintaining Dutch dominance in the colonial territory (Colombijn, [2022](#)).

The road's construction relied heavily on the *rodi* system, or forced labor, a stark reflection of the exploitation of local populations. Thousands of indigenous workers were coerced into grueling labor under harsh conditions, often with insufficient compensation, leading to significant loss of life due to hunger and disease. Moreover, the project required the seizure of land that had previously sustained local livelihoods. Hoogervorst and Nordholt (2017) highlight that the hierarchical nature of Javanese society made obedience to colonial orders appear obligatory, despite the economic and social harm inflicted upon the local population (Hoogervorst & Nordholt, [2017](#)).

From a military perspective, the Great Postal Road significantly improved the efficiency of troop movements and logistical supply chains. Mrázek (2002) observes that the road enabled the Dutch to respond swiftly to threats while overcoming Java's geographical challenges, such as difficult terrain (Mrázek, [2002](#)). This development fortified colonial dominance over Java and offered a strategic advantage in suppressing local uprisings and defending against external attacks, particularly from the British, who were the primary colonial rival at the time.

Economically, the Great Postal Road had substantial impacts. It expedited the transportation of agricultural commodities, such as coffee, sugar, and spices, from Java's interior to key northern coastal ports, where they were exported to international markets. Carey (2008) underscores that this infrastructure supported the economic exploitation of Java as a critical supplier of colonial commodities (Carey, [2008](#)). However, the economic benefits were disproportionately enjoyed by the Dutch colonial government and European elites, while indigenous populations faced increasing economic pressures.

The Great Postal Road also spurred urban development along its route, particularly in cities such as Batavia and Bandung. Lombard (2005) argues that improved accessibility gave rise to new social groups and facilitated rural-to-urban migration (Lombard, [2005](#)). In Bandung, for instance, improved business connections and smoother distribution networks fostered its growth into a modern urban center influenced by European lifestyles (Sunjayadi, [2020](#)). Yet, this progress came at the cost of deepening social inequalities and consolidating colonial dominance over Java's socio-economic dynamics.

In addition to facilitating military and economic mobility, the Great Postal Road played a pivotal role in accelerating urbanization across Java. This strategic route opened access to previously isolated rural areas, creating new opportunities for urban growth in cities along the road, such as Batavia, Bandung, and Semarang. Lagae (2023) emphasizes that the road drove urbanization by integrating rural areas into colonial trade networks, enabling the flow of goods, capital, and labor toward rapidly expanding urban centers (Lagae, [2023](#)). This process had complex socio-economic repercussions, particularly in reinforcing Java's colonial structures.

In Bandung, the construction of the Great Postal Road catalyzed the city's transformation into a regional administrative and economic hub. The city evolved into an urban center distinguished by its unique blend of colonial architecture and modern urban planning. Kusno (2010) explains that such infrastructure allowed the colonial elite to utilize Bandung as a residential haven with healthier and more comfortable conditions compared to Batavia, which at the time was plagued by environmental issues like malaria (Kusno, [2010](#)). However, these benefits were unevenly distributed, with local populations often marginalized in decisions regarding urban development.

Beyond its role in urbanization, the Great Postal Road reshaped social dynamics in ways that disproportionately favored the colonial elite. Cities along the route emerged as economic hubs, attracting labor migration from rural areas. This shift altered Javanese social structures, as indigenous laborers were increasingly drawn into the colonial economic system. Degroot (2015) notes that the migration of rural labor to major cities deepened local dependency on the colonial economy, exacerbating social inequalities between the indigenous population and the colonial elite (Degroot, [2015](#)).

Nevertheless, the existence of the Great Postal Road also brought significant environmental challenges. Urban expansion along the route often neglected environmental sustainability. Deforestation for road construction and urban development in cities such as Batavia and Bandung resulted in ecological degradation, limiting rural communities' access to natural resources. Cribb (2000) argues that these consequences not only restricted land and forest access but also worsened the economic conditions of already marginalized communities suffering under colonial policies (Cribb, [2000](#)).

The Great Postal Road influenced social relations in the emerging urban centers it connected. The infrastructure facilitated not only physical mobility but also accelerated cultural exchanges across Java. Cities such as Bandung became meeting points for local and colonial cultures, fostering hybrid expressions in architecture, art, and urban lifestyles. Reid (2011) asserts that this cultural interaction accelerated localized globalization in Java, though its benefits largely remained concentrated among social classes with access to urban opportunities (Reid, [2011](#)).

The Impact of the Great Postal Road on Local Communities

During the construction of the Great Postal Road, Herman Willem Daendels implemented a forced labor policy (*rodi*) that conscripted indigenous communities with little regard for their welfare. Thousands of workers were mobilized for this ambitious project, often without sufficient food or fair wages. In his book *Jalan Raya Pos, Jalan Daendels*, Pramoedya Ananta Toer vividly describes the tragic consequences of this policy, noting that many workers perished from malaria, starvation, and exhaustion. He remarks, "Along the Great Postal Road lie the largest cemeteries in Java, silent witnesses to the mass deaths orchestrated by the colonial government" (Toer, [2012](#)). Such statements underscore the severe social toll of the project, which some scholars have labeled a form of genocide against the indigenous population. Pratama (2024) estimates the death toll exceeded 12,000, based on English reports from 1815 (Pratama, [2024](#)).

On the economic front, the colonial government leveraged the Great Postal Road to expand its economic network. One notable initiative was the implementation of the Market Ordinance of 1854, which established markets in regions such as Cisarua, Tugu, and Palung Panjang. These markets functioned not only as trading hubs but also as centers of local social interaction. The ordinance was strategically designed to facilitate the distribution of goods to

inland regions, supporting economic integration. However, the colonial administration's primary objective remained the increase of tax revenue to bolster state finances.

The construction of the Great Postal Road also transformed land transportation in Java. Traditional modes of transport, such as ox-drawn carts (*pedati*), wagons, and *shikar*, were widely employed by communities for the movement of goods and people. The *pedati*, typically drawn by buffaloes, became a dominant mode of transportation despite its slow pace. The improved road infrastructure provided better access for such transport, thereby fostering both local and colonial trade. Thus, the road served not only as a strategic military asset but also played a crucial role in advancing economic activities across Java.

Under Daendels' administration, the exploitation of forced labor extended beyond the Great Postal Road to include coffee plantations, one of the colony's key export commodities. Mandatory coffee cultivation was introduced to boost production, particularly in the Priangan region. Kartodirjo and Suryo (1991) note that the number of coffee trees grew dramatically from approximately 27 million to over 72 million during the 19th century, reflecting the surging international demand for the commodity (Kartodirjo & Suryo, [1991](#)). However, Dutch monopolization of coffee production not only exploited plantation yields but also coerced indigenous communities into a repressive labor system, including the transportation of harvests along the Great Postal Road.

While the Great Postal Road significantly contributed to strengthening the colonial economy, its benefits were far from equitably distributed. The Dutch administration profited immensely from trade and taxation, while the indigenous population suffered under forced labor, loss of access to productive land, and economic marginalization. The Great Postal Road, with its multifaceted implications, stands as a contradictory symbol of colonial infrastructure modernization—one that supported economic growth while deepening socio-economic disparities and undermining the rights of local communities.

The construction of the Great Postal Road indeed reflects colonial advancements in infrastructure, yet it also vividly illustrates the prevailing social injustices under Dutch colonial rule. Designed to facilitate the transportation of export commodities such as coffee and sugar and to strengthen colonial administrative access across Java, the road yielded no direct benefits for the local populations involved in its construction. Instead, they were reduced to mere instruments of production, marginalized within an economic system engineered for colonial gains.

The forced labor policy employed during the road's construction inflicted not only physical suffering but also severe economic consequences for indigenous communities. Many farmers were forced to abandon their agricultural lands to fulfill labor demands, leading to declining crop yields and disruptions to their livelihoods. This condition exacerbated poverty among local populations, leaving them with little choice but to submit to a repressive system that offered no alternatives.

The Great Postal Road also precipitated significant changes in Java's social structure. The centralization of colonial power facilitated by the road weakened local autonomy and displaced traditional cultural practices that had once thrived in individual regions. Systems of village governance, which had previously been grounded in local wisdom, were gradually supplanted by centralized policies dictated by the colonial administration. This process eroded local identities and disrupted established social dynamics.

Moreover, the Great Postal Road triggered urbanization and the growth of new cities along its route. Cities such as Bandung and Semarang flourished as regional hubs of trade and administration. However, this urbanization exacerbated disparities between urban and rural areas. While cities thrived, rural villages remained isolated and excluded from the benefits of development, thereby entrenching socio-economic inequalities between advanced urban centers and underdeveloped rural hinterlands.

The Great Postal Road, with all its far-reaching consequences, embodies the contradictions inherent in colonial infrastructure projects. On one hand, it facilitated connectivity and economic progress for the colonial administration; on the other, it reinforced domination and exploitation of the local population. The road remains a powerful symbol of how modernization can be wielded as a tool of power—one that deepens inequalities and leaves indigenous communities marginalized in its wake.

The Impact of the Great Postal Road on Development in Batavia

The construction of the Great Postal Road (*Grote Postweg*) under the administration of Herman Willem Daendels had far-reaching effects, not only from a military perspective but also in unlocking unforeseen economic opportunities. Beyond strengthening the colonial defense infrastructure, the project catalyzed significant developments in transportation and mobility across Java, particularly in strategic regions such as Batavia. One of the immediate outcomes of the road's construction was the emergence of new transportation systems, such as the horse-drawn tram, which began operating in Batavia on April 20, 1869. This tram system marked an important innovation, facilitating the transport of people and goods while improving access to key economic hubs, including markets and significant districts like Maester Cornelis (modern-day Jatinegara).

The horse-drawn tram, operational from 1869 to 1883, became an integral part of Jakarta's transformation into a colonial economic and trade center. The tram infrastructure was made possible by the existence of the Great Postal Road, which enhanced interregional mobility, making transportation faster and more efficient. Beyond facilitating the movement of goods and people, the tram symbolized the modernization of transportation in the Dutch East Indies. This improved accessibility stimulated local economic growth by expanding markets and increasing productivity. Originally designed for military purposes, the Great Postal Road inadvertently created new economic interactions that further entrenched the Dutch colonial economy in Java.

Moreover, the horse-drawn tram spurred the development of new areas along its route. By connecting rural regions to urban centers, it expanded economic growth zones and facilitated greater accessibility for communities surrounding Batavia. As the colonial administrative center, Batavia reaped considerable benefits from this infrastructure, which laid the foundation for the modern transportation systems seen today. However, this development also solidified colonial control over indigenous mobility, further integrating local populations into the colonial economic system—both as laborers and as consumers of imported goods transported via these networks.

Nevertheless, the positive outcomes were accompanied by significant drawbacks for the indigenous population. This transportation system was constructed using indigenous labor, often coerced under exploitative conditions, with minimal wages or none at all. Moreover, infrastructure projects such as the Great Postal Road and the horse-drawn tram primarily benefited the colonial authorities rather than the local communities. While mobility and economic access improved, the indigenous population remained trapped in an oppressive socio-economic reality. In many cases, the primary focus of these transportation systems was to facilitate the exploitation of natural resources and commodities from Java's interior to coastal ports, with little regard for local welfare.

Despite these inequities, the construction of such infrastructure instilled a newfound awareness among the indigenous elite, who began to recognize the importance of infrastructure for economic and political development. Although initially designed to serve colonial interests, Dutch infrastructure projects ultimately inspired nationalist leaders in their struggle for independence. Transport infrastructure such as the Great Postal Road and the horse-drawn tram exemplified how a nation could achieve economic self-reliance and improve societal well-being through sustainable development. While steeped in exploitation, this infrastructural transformation provided invaluable lessons in Indonesia's journey toward modernity.

Ultimately, the Great Postal Road and the horse-drawn tram functioned not merely as tools of transportation but as instruments of Dutch political and economic domination in the East Indies. These projects expanded colonial economic networks and reinforced Dutch political influence across the region. However, they also catalyzed significant social changes among indigenous populations, who increasingly questioned the legitimacy of colonial rule and began advocating for their rights. Thus, while built for colonial interests, this infrastructure inadvertently became a catalyst for broader social and political change in the Dutch East Indies, particularly in Java.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that the construction of the Great Postal Road (*Grote Postweg*) under Herman Willem Daendels served not only as military and economic infrastructure but also as a powerful symbol of Dutch colonial authority that oppressed the indigenous population. While the road's primary purpose was to strengthen defenses against British threats and improve interregional communication, its impact on local communities was profoundly detrimental. Indigenous workers were subjected to forced labor under brutal conditions, receiving inadequate wages

and enduring significant hardships, including illness and death. The Great Postal Road stands as a stark example of labor exploitation and the social inequalities entrenched during the colonial period.

A limitation of this study lies in the scarcity of specific data concerning the number of casualties and the socio-economic impacts experienced by indigenous communities during the road's construction. Furthermore, this research primarily focuses on the historical perspective of infrastructure development, without delving deeper into the evolving social and cultural dynamics among indigenous communities resulting from the project. Future research is needed to explore the long-term social impacts of colonial infrastructure and its role in fostering political awareness and resistance among the indigenous population.

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