

## **Ethical Policy and The Modernization of *Gemeente Cirebon* (1901–1930)**

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### **Abstract**

This study examines the implementation of the Ethical Policy and the formation of colonial modernity in *Gemeente Cirebon* between 1901 and 1930, with particular attention to transportation infrastructure and its social consequences. Using the historical method and a descriptive qualitative approach, the study analyzes colonial reports, statistical records, administrative archives, contemporary newspapers, and relevant secondary literature. The findings show that railways, roads, and port facilities expanded regional connectivity and accelerated the circulation of export commodities, especially sugar, from inland production areas to the Port of Cirebon. Yet this modernization was deeply ambivalent. While it stimulated urban growth, economic circulation, and access to modern facilities, it also sharpened social inequality and strengthened colonial control over indigenous communities. Improvements in the economic, health, and educational sectors were distributed unevenly and remained closely tied to colonial interests. The article argues that the Ethical Policy in Cirebon functioned not only as a reform program but also as an instrument of exploitation, regulation, and social control.

### **Keywords**

ethical policy; *Gemeente Cirebon*; colonial modernity; transportation infrastructure

### **Article History**

|             |              |              |              |
|-------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|
| Received    | Revised      | Accepted     | Published    |
| 30 May 2026 | 22 June 2026 | 24 June 2026 | 05 July 2026 |

### **How to Cite**

Meishfar, M. F., Wicaksono, P. G., Afifah, S. N., & Ediyono, S. (2026). Ethical policy and the modernization of *Gemeente Cirebon* (1901–1930). *Yupa: Historical Studies Journal*, 10(2), 138-158. <https://doi.org/10.30872/yupa.v10i2.6667>

## Introduction

Cirebon occupied an important position in the Sundanese cultural sphere. Its strategic setting, framed by Mount Indrakila (Ciremai), the sea, and a coastline with an international port in its time, made the region significant to the Kingdom of Pajajaran and to merchants from various countries. Through its international port, Cirebon became a place where many kinds of commodities were exchanged, including spices, textiles, metals, and luxury goods. This maritime activity turned Cirebon into a rapidly developing commercial center, brought prosperity to sections of the local population, and strengthened Pajajaran's political position in the region (Suteja, 2024). Geographically, Cirebon is located on the northern coast of Java, an area that has long been marked by intense social and economic mobility. Its status as a port and trading town endured across different historical periods. During the Pajajaran or Sunda-Galuh period, Cirebon functioned as a maritime economic base in eastern Priangan. Prabu Siliwangi, the ruler of the period, positioned Cirebon as an important node of civilization in eastern Pajajaran. Beyond its economic role, Cirebon also increasingly demonstrated its importance as a center of culture and Islamic politics in Java.

The strengthening of Dutch power along the northern coast of Java in the eighteenth century gave Cirebon its own distinctive colonial dynamics. The Dutch trading company developed plantation zones and settlements to support its commercial operations in the Asia-Pacific region, a pattern consistent with the wider colonial use of territorial organization, commodity production, and transport infrastructure to secure economic extraction (Dell & Olken, 2020; Knight & van Schaik, 2001; Setiadi et al., 2022). In essence, Cirebon formed part of the supply chain for commodities such as sugarcane. This role became more pronounced after the Ethical Policy (*Ethische Politiek*) was introduced in 1901, when the Netherlands Indies government systematically sought to develop its colony both morally and infrastructurally. Cirebon's development during this period also took administrative form: the region was transformed into a *gemeente*, a status broadly comparable to a modern municipality.

This transformation occurred intensively in the early twentieth century, a development shaped by increasingly complex contemporary needs. Art deco architecture became one of the visual markers of colonial Cirebon's urban growth, reflecting a broader Netherlands Indies pattern in which colonial urban modernity was expressed through municipal planning, built form, lifestyle, and differentiated access to urban facilities (Fakih, 2023; Hoogervorst & Schulte Nordholt, 2017; Schulte Nordholt, 2011). Transportation was also central to the city's changing dynamics. Cirebon's strategic position was reinforced when state railway companies such as the *Staatsspoorwegen* (SS) and private companies such as the *Semarang Cheribon Stoomtram Maatschappij* (SCS) became engines of the city's economy and of its emerging modern culture. The expansion of economic circulation generated further opportunities for urban development. This study therefore seeks to explain the condition of Cirebon's development during the Ethical Policy period, when industrialization expanded rapidly, especially in transportation infrastructure. The port, paved roads, and railway lines constituted concrete evidence of this transformation. These dynamics provide the basis for examining Ethical Policy and the Modernization of *Gemeente Cirebon* (1901–1930) for Infrastructure, Transportation, and Social Dynamics.

## Method

This study uses the historical method with a descriptive qualitative approach to analyze the development of infrastructure and transportation in *Gemeente Cirebon* during the Ethical Policy period (1901–1930) and its effects on the social and economic life of the community. The sources consist of both primary and secondary materials. The primary sources include colonial government reports, colonial statistical data, administrative archives of *Gemeente Cirebon*, and contemporary newspapers containing information on infrastructure and transportation development. The secondary sources include books, journal articles, undergraduate theses, master's theses, and other scholarly works relevant to the history of the Ethical Policy, colonial modernity, and urban development in Cirebon.

The research was conducted through four stages of the historical method. The first stage was heuristics, namely the collection of sources relevant to the research theme. The second was source criticism, which included external criticism to assess the authenticity of sources and internal criticism to examine the credibility of their contents. The third was interpretation, in which historical facts were interpreted to understand the relationship between Ethical Policy, infrastructure development, and the social changes that occurred in Gemeente Cirebon. The fourth was historiography, namely the organization of the research findings into a systematic and chronological historical narrative. Through these stages, this study explains how the development of transportation infrastructure under the Ethical Policy not only encouraged urban modernization but also functioned as an instrument for strengthening colonial economic interests and social control in Cirebon.

## Results and Discussion

### The Development of Cirebon as a Region

The development of Cirebon can be traced across successive historical periods, giving the region a relatively coherent and systematic chronology. Geographically, Cirebon occupied a strategic location on the coast of Java, which made it one of the long-standing centers of coastal culture and economy. In the classical period, the area began as a hamlet or small village that supported an economy based on agriculture and maritime activity. The historical traces of Cirebon began to appear during the Galuh Kingdom under Prabu Niskala Wastu Kencana, whose court was located in Kawali, Ciamis. At that time, two spatial designations were known: Cirebon Girang, referring to the inland area, and Cirebon Larang, referring to the coastal area. Chronologically, these areas remained important economic points and overland routes in the Sunda-Galuh region until the reign of Sri Baduga Maharaja in 1480.

The political form of Cirebon began to emerge when Jayadewata's son, Prince Walangsungsang, opened a forest area to establish a small settlement near Amparan Jati and built a kuta kosod that later became known as the Pakungwati Palace in 1430. His authority was initially local, yet this moment is often regarded as the beginning of the Cirebon Sultanate lineage. The local community also knew Raden Walangsungsang as Prince Cakrabumi and commonly referred to him as Mbah Kuwu Cirebon. Kuwu was a title used by local authorities to designate a village head; therefore, the use of the title for Raden Walangsungsang reflected his status as a foundational local leader in Cirebon society. Raden Walangsungsang and his younger sister, Nyi Mas Rarasantang, were Muslims and were able to perform the pilgrimage to Mecca. Nyi Mas Rarasantang was also a central figure in the founding of the Cirebon Sultanate. She was the mother of Syarif Hidayatullah through her marriage to Syarif Mesir. In the following period, a political order imbued with Islamic values was transmitted to her son, Syarif Hidayatullah, better known as Sunan Gunung Jati, whose rule in Cirebon began in 1479.



Figure 1. Pakungwati Palace ([Leiden, 1935](#))

Cirebon's historical dynamics continued to evolve. As the region expanded and Sunan Gunung Jati proved effective in governing its political and strategic areas, the year 1520 marked a new turning point. Gradually, Cirebon, which had previously been a vassal of Pajajaran, became a polity with full sovereignty. Under Sunan Gunung Jati, Cirebon's territorial influence extended from Kuningan, Majalengka, and Sumedang to the coast of Banten. One of the most ambitious political maneuvers was the placement of Prince Hasanudin, Sunan Gunung Jati's son, to rule Banten in 1526 and the occupation of Sunda Kelapa in 1527 through Fatahillah. In this sense, Cirebon's influence stretched from east to west, from West Java to the coast of Banten.

Geopolitical dynamics also shaped the Cirebon polity. During the period of Panembahan Ratu I, an older territorial conception was systematically used, namely the Sunda-Galuh boundary marked by the Citarum River as a concrete border of the state. The development of the Banten Sultanate and its expansion into Lampung required a new political adjustment. More specifically, Banten under Sultan Maulana Yusuf held authority over the western side, while Cirebon exercised control over the eastern side of the Citarum. Cirebon's relatively stable condition during this period also enabled political cooperation with Mataram under Panembahan Senopati in the late sixteenth century. The political constellation of Java acquired a new axis after the fall of Demak in 1546, as Mataram gradually developed into the dominant power in Java.

Dynamic political conditions in Java continued during the Girilaya period (Panembahan Ratu II), from 1649 to 1667, when Mataram was ruled by Amangkurat I and had become a new hegemonic power in Java. Girilaya's state visit to Mataram marked the beginning of the fragmentation of Cirebon as a unified political entity. The instability of Mataram's politics, particularly the Trunojoyo rebellion in Pleret, coincided with Girilaya's death in Mataram. This created a domino effect because he had not yet determined the status of the heir to the throne. Uncertainty over Cirebon's political future enveloped the nobility. Cirebon's elites were compelled to divide the kingdom in order to avoid conflict over succession and civil war. In detail, the Kasepuhan Sultanate under Martawijaya occupied the Pakungwati Palace complex with the title Sultan Sepuh; the Kanoman Sultanate under Kertawijaya occupied the former residence of Cakrabuana, or Witana, with the title Sultan Anom; and the Kacerbonan Sultanate under Wangsakerta carried the title Prince Tohpati. Administrative authority was consequently divided, although the identity of Cirebon as the lineage of Sunan Gunung Jati remained intact.

### **Ethical Policy**

The weakening of the Cirebon Sultanate's hegemony on the coast of Java was also influenced by an external factor: the Dutch trading company, the VOC (*Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie*). This Dutch company systematically intervened in local governments in Java, including the Cirebon lineage. The division of the Cirebon kingdom was also connected to foreign intervention aimed at weakening local rulers. Gradually, the sultans became trapped in the VOC's commercial monopoly system, which disadvantaged them. The strengthening of the VOC in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries along the coast of Java marked the beginning of the erosion of the political sovereignty of local rulers, including the sultans of Cirebon.

The physical development of modern infrastructure in Cirebon can be traced to the period of Herman Willem Daendels, when Cirebon became part of the Great Post Road (*Grote Postweg*) network designed to support defense and logistical capacity across Java on a large scale, even though its functional benefits did not reach wider social layers. During the Cultivation System (*Cultuurstelsel*), physical development remained relatively limited because the Netherlands Indies government prioritized the cultivation of specific export commodities. By the late nineteenth century, however, early developments such as the construction of sugar factories (*suikerfabriek*), roads, and railway facilities became markers of modernity in Cirebon. In general, this system had a major economic impact, but it also produced severe social inequality and consequently drew public criticism. The climax came when the Netherlands Indies government introduced a new policy that was officially intended to benefit the indigenous population, namely the Ethical Policy (*Ethische Politiek*), in 1901.



Figure 2. Map of H. W. Daendels' Great Post Road in the nineteenth century

In practice, a significant gap remained between indigenous people and Europeans. Although the Ethical Policy was presented as an expression of moral responsibility by the Netherlands Indies government, several sources also described it as a form of Dutch “debt of honor” to the colony. In principle, the policy was implemented through the development of education, irrigation, and emigration. These programs appeared beneficial to the indigenous population, but in practice they remained directed toward colonial control and the interests of the Dutch colonial state. Even so, indigenous groups still gained limited access to these programs. The early twentieth-century Ethical Policy therefore became an important starting point for new intellectual currents and the rise of nationalism, which later prepared the ground for Indonesia’s revolutionary period. The Cultivation System and the Ethical Policy differed in definition, but in implementation both strengthened the exploitative economic structure of the Netherlands Indies, ensuring that the greatest benefits remained in colonial hands.

The Ethical Policy also operated in Cirebon. Through this policy, the region developed further, although within the constraints imposed by the European colonial government then in power. This situation influenced the development of infrastructure in Cirebon. Government buildings and public facilities appeared systematically during this period, making the early twentieth century a moment when Cirebon’s urban face shifted from a more conservative order toward a modern one. These facilities were supported by the development of public services that brought certain benefits to the people of Cirebon and its surroundings. Although access remained restricted by the distinction between Europeans and inlander, these developments laid the foundations for public policies that had increasingly direct effects on the Cirebon area, especially the city of Cirebon.

#### **Cirebon as a *Gemeente***

Cirebon’s development unfolded through a deeply chronological set of events and intensified during the transition between Hindu and Islamic political orders in the fifteenth century. Travel accounts on the archipelago, including those of Tomé Pires, mentioned Cirebon as a strategic and busy port city. Its status as a port dominating the coast of Java declined when Mataram controlled Cirebon in the seventeenth century. This decline continued after the Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie (VOC) concluded an agreement on January 7, 1681, which increasingly isolated Cirebon and subjected its trade to monopoly. During this period, Cirebon experienced a form of disintegration between local rulers and their people. Although the identity of a port city remained attached to Cirebon, the strengthening of external power in the eighteenth century discredited it as an inland town (*Inlandsche stad*). It was even referred to as a neglected coastal settlement (*het geminachte strandnest*) ([Weekblad Voor Indie, 1918–1919](#)).

This developmental dynamic continued during the nineteenth-century Netherlands Indies period. The bankruptcy of the VOC in 1799 opened the way for the Dutch government to administer the region more comprehensively. The coastal zone remained important as an economic and defensive artery, and Cirebon was systematically positioned not only as a port city but also as an area connected to inland zones with the potential to sustain economic activity. In 1859, the Netherlands Indies government officially opened an export and import port in Cirebon, although administration at that time remained centered in Batavia. The implementation of the

Ethical Policy in the early twentieth century had a significant impact on Cirebon’s administrative activities. In 1906, the region was designated a gemeente, or municipality, as part of the decentralization of the Netherlands Indies government to support more structured and rapid development; however, colonial municipal governance elsewhere in Java also shows that decentralization did not remove racial inequality from urban decision-making (Fakih, 2023; Otto, 2015). According to Staatsblad 1906 No. 122, a new regional council was established for Gemeente Cheribon, with J. H. Sigal appointed as chair of the council. Successive chairmen of Gemeente Cirebon were as follows on Table 1.

Table 1. List of Chairmen of the Cirebon Council, 1906–1920

| Years in Office | Council Chair    |
|-----------------|------------------|
| 1906-1906       | J.H.J Sigal      |
| 1906-1908       | A.P. Breevoordt  |
| 1908-1911       | A.Canne          |
| 1911-1914       | J.Ph Fesevur     |
| 1914-1915       | P.H Frolich      |
| 1915-1917       | J.H. Nieuwenhuys |
| 1917-1920       | A.J.H Eyken      |

Source: *Gedenkboek van Cheribon*

The economic sector was decisive for Cirebon’s development. Urban progress, accompanied by demographic growth, became a distinctive sign of the city’s transformation. According to Milone (1966), in 1926 Cirebon’s status was elevated to stadsgemeente, granting it wider authority in urban development. The city also became known by the motto “Per Aspera Ad Astra”, represented visually by three shrimps and one white star. The motto means “through hardship and mire toward the stars.” It served as a symbolic effort to improve the city’s image because Cirebon had previously been associated with dirtiness and backwardness. The motto therefore expressed hope and optimism for a better future. As urban development intensified, the council appointed J. H. Johan as burgemeester, or mayor, of Cirebon in 1920. During this period, many programs focused on urban health.



Figure 3. Emblem of Gemeente Cheribon (1927)

As part of the ethical policy implemented in the Netherlands Indies, the government of Gemeente Cheribon recognized a shared problem: the city’s poor and polluted environment. The motto therefore became part of the colonial government’s spirit of development in Cirebon. Later, in 1926, during the tenure of burgemeester R. A. Schotman, Cirebon underwent extensive infrastructure improvement and construction, including the expansion of roads and the beginning of construction on the iconic Cirebon City Hall. Public services and facilities were increasingly improved during this period to support a healthier and more hygienic urban environment. Between 1920 and 1930, Cirebon developed into a cleaner, more structured city with more adequate infrastructure.

## Infrastructure

### Government Sector

Modern infrastructure had existed before the Ethical Policy period, but its benefits were still limited for both Europeans and indigenous people. Physical development carried out by the Netherlands Indies government in Cirebon was a targeted strategy because such infrastructure supported the survival of the modern city and enabled economic circulation comparable to other coastal cities. The traces of the Ethical Policy in Cirebon's strategic buildings can be seen in the following sectors. Government was the primary basis of the municipal administration (*gemeente*). Governmental instruments were vital objects whose existence was necessary in any city, including Cirebon, which functioned as a political base of the Netherlands Indies and an extension of Batavia as the administrative center. In 1906, Cirebon became a *gemeente*, or municipal town, led by a council chair. As development intensified, the area was later elevated to *stadsgemeente*, or municipality, in 1926.

The situation at the time required a basic supporting instrument: a physical building that could function as the center of municipal government and administration. The raadhuis, or city hall, became an urgent need as the city expanded. Its construction took place between 1910 and 1920. Architecturally, the building used the Indische Empire Style, producing an impression of grandeur while also retaining a tropical design approach appropriate to Cirebon's environment. The name raadhuis is no longer used after the establishment of the Republic of Indonesia in 1945, but the building has continued to serve as the city's administrative center, or Cirebon City Hall, located on Jalan Siliwangi.



Figure 4. *Raadhuis Gemeente Cheribon* (1934)

### Health Sector

Before the Ethical Policy, Cirebon was treated as a marginalized area, a status connected to its poor environmental and health conditions. Many parts of the city had polluted waterways, and diseases such as malaria frequently became serious problems for the colonial government. With the implementation of the Ethical Policy and Cirebon's elevation to *gemeente* status, efforts to organize infrastructure began, especially in the health sector. The municipal government not only repaired drainage channels but also built health facilities in the form of a hospital (*ziekenhuis*).



Figure 5. *Ziekenhuis Oranje Cheribon* in *Gedenkboek van Cheribon*, p. 120

During the mayoralty of J. H. Johan, municipal policy increasingly favored a healthier and cleaner city. The initial construction plan was prepared in 1919, but construction began only in

1920 and was completed in 1921. The facility was named Oranje Hospital (*Ziekenhuis Oranje*) and contained 133 beds across several pavilion classes. This strategic facility remains an important element of modern Cirebon's health system. Today it continues to serve a similar function under the name Gunung Jati Regional Hospital, located on Jalan Kesambi, Cirebon City (Molsbergen, 1931).

### Education Sector

Education in Cirebon had existed since the classical period, generally in the form of *pesantren*, which remained traditional and focused on theological learning. The introduction of the Ethical Policy in 1901 should have had a positive impact on modern education in Cirebon, yet until 1917 such education seemed not to have been fully implemented. In that year, a proposal emerged calling for the establishment of a European-style school in Cirebon. The government of *Gemeente Cheribon* cooperated with the private Frobel organization to implement education in the municipality (Fong, 1925)



Figure 6. Algemeen Middelbare School (AMS) van de M.U.L.O. te Cheribon (1925)

The establishment of the M.U.L.O. (*Meer Uitgebreid Lager Onderwijs*) school was therefore carried out by both the private sector and the municipal government. The city government covered the school's operational costs, including facilities and infrastructure, while the private Frobel organization was responsible for providing teaching staff. Although the education sector in Cirebon experienced various fluctuations, European-style education such as M.U.L.O., or middle school, became an important foundation for formal and modern education in contemporary Cirebon. The building is still used for educational purposes today and is now known as SMP Negeri 1 Kota Cirebon.

### Social and Economic Sector

This period also saw significant development in social and economic life. The basic institution of market exchange had existed since the Cirebon Sultanate period. The growth of modern European styles in early twentieth-century Cirebon produced its own impact through the construction of more representative market buildings and a banking sector integrated with other urban facilities. Two modern markets that developed significantly during the Ethical Policy period were Kanoman and Balong.

The modernization of markets in Cirebon had received little comprehensive attention before 1915, until the municipal government appointed an inspector to address the problem. Between 1917 and 1918, many revitalization projects were carried out to create more representative and adequate markets, giving Cirebon several proper spaces for trade. The iconic Kanoman Market was rebuilt in 1924–1925 with the addition of storage facilities for meat and seafood, making it more closely integrated with the marine and livestock economy of the Cirebon region.



Figure 7. Kanoman Market in Gedenkboek van Cheribon, p. 110

### Transportation

In the early twentieth century, the Netherlands Indies period was marked by the growth of three major types of transportation infrastructure: rail transport, maritime routes, and roads. Officially, this development was framed as modernization and as part of the implementation of the Ethical Policy in colonial territories. In substance, however, it functioned more as a new strategy by the Netherlands Indies to extract and utilize the colony's economic potential more effectively, especially by linking plantations, processing facilities, ports, and urban markets into a more integrated colonial economy ([Dell & Olken, 2020](#); [Knight & van Schaik, 2001](#)). The transportation networks built during this period were designed to accelerate the flow of export commodities, especially sugar from numerous sugar factories (*suikerfabriek*) scattered along Java's northern coast, including the Cirebon region.

### Rail Transportation Infrastructure

By the 1930s, Java's rail-based transportation network, consisting of railways and tramways, had exceeded 5,000 kilometers, comparable to several European networks; this expansion should be read not only as technological progress but also as part of a colonial spatial economy that reorganized production, circulation, and urban hierarchy ([Dell & Olken, 2020](#); [Setiadi et al., 2022](#)). This expansion helped build major towns in the colony. It connected Java's agricultural and industrial sectors, especially sugarcane plantations, to global markets and made them part of a modern economy in the early 1900s. Railway infrastructure development in the Cirebon region began when SCS N.V. took over the Semarang–Cirebon concession from the *Javasche Spoorweg-Maatschappij* (JSM), a subsidiary of the *Bataviasche Ooster Spoorweg-Maatschappij* (BOS), on September 16, 1896. Until 1896, JSM had built and operated the Tegal–Slawi–Balapulang line, which extended for 24 kilometers. However, the company failed to generate sufficient profit from its operations, suffered capital losses, and was eventually forced to cease operation. After SCS obtained the concession to operate the Semarang–Cirebon line, it proposed changing the railway into a tramway or light railway, equivalent to a third-class railway. This change was intended to reduce construction costs and accelerate development. The line was built to facilitate the transport of sugar production from factories along the Semarang–Cirebon corridor ([Hermawan et al., 2023](#)).

SCS built and operated tramways and light railways that connected Semarang and Cirebon, along with their feeder lines. The route passed through several towns on Java's northern coast, including Pekalongan and Tegal. It was also known as the *suikerlijn*, or sugar line, because by 1905 it passed 27 sugar factories along its route ([Hermawan et al., 2023](#)). Sugar was Cirebon's largest export commodity, and these trains were used to transport large quantities of it.

As port infrastructure developed over time, SCS attempted to construct a railway line at the Port of Cirebon in order to facilitate the transport of export commodities. This plan initially could not proceed because the land around the port was owned by Staatsspoorwegen, and SCS did not have permission to build railway tracks in the port area. With no alternative, trains had to stop at Prujakan Station, after which export commodities were transported by animal-drawn carts.

According to [Hermawan et al. \(2023\)](#), Prujakan Station was approximately one kilometer from the Port of Cirebon. This practice had existed since 1887 and ended in 1889 after Staatsspoorwegen did not carry out further development. In that year, SCS built a permanent railway track at the Port of Cirebon.



Figure 8. *Station te Cheribon van de Semarang-Cheribon Stoomtram Maatschappij* ([Leiden, 1902](#))

Two concessions were developed and railway lines were built in Cirebon: the Semarang–Cirebon line by SCS and the Batavia–Cikampek–Cirebon–Kroya line by SS. SCS built the tramway between Losari and Cirebon (Prujakan). This line passed sugar factories between Losari and Cirebon and became known as the *suikerlijn*. It followed the Losari–Ciledug–Sindanglaut–Mundu–Cirebon route and began operation in 1897. Because the line circled the sugar factories, the travel distance between Losari and Cirebon became longer. The sugar factories along this route included Karangsoewoeng Sugar Factory, SF Sindanglaoet, SF Leuweunggajah, and SF Nieu Tersana ([Hermawan et al., 2023](#)).



Figure 9. Route of Station te Cheribon of the Semarang-Cheribon Stoomtram Maatschappij

During the Japanese occupation, the eastern Cirebon tramway between Mundu and Losari was closed and some of its rails were removed for war purposes. The line has not operated since. After Indonesian independence, sugar transport was shifted to the SS line, as shown by the railway crossing between Sindanglaut Station and Sindanglaut Sugar Factory, as well as another crossing

between Karangsuwung Station and Karangsuwung Sugar Factory. Both stations were located on the Cirebon–Kroya line ([Hermawan et al., 2023](#)).

### Maritime Infrastructure

Cirebon was surrounded by broad and fertile plains crossed by water-rich rivers, located opposite an accessible mountain route to the Preanger region and on the large Bay of Cirebon. Cirebon was placed under the jurisdiction of the Port of Semarang, while local management was handled by a port manager. The rivers in Cirebon did not present significant geographical obstacles. Therefore, in the early development of the port, no large-budget infrastructure was required to support port activity. Ships anchored in open waters, and cargo barges served as connectors to the mainland. These barges moved along the small river that flowed through Cirebon or were simply moored for loading and unloading cargo ([Molsbergen, 1931](#)).

Around 1865, the river mouth was reclaimed, creating a 20-meter-wide channel bordered on the left by a quay wall and on the right by a breakwater. This breakwater extended 200 meters beyond the general shoreline, with its end not even reaching a depth of 1.50 meters at high tide. The harbor channel, which was originally oriented northeast, curved at its end almost parallel to the shoreline in order to protect the river mouth as much as possible from waves ([Molsbergen, 1931](#)).

An inland harbor of similar scale stood on two small rivers, the Kendoeroean and the Kali Batjin. These rivers functioned as natural drainage channels during the rainy season, but in the dry season they were used as open disposal areas, affecting the health of communities living nearby. Efforts to direct the Kendoeroean's flow toward the sea had already been undertaken 50 years earlier, especially to address waste-disposal problems.



Figure 10. Kali Batjin

This situation did not become a serious problem until new issues emerged, including flooding in Chinese settlements and the need for a stronger current toward the sea around the Kendoeroean and Kali Batjin rivers for shipping purposes. The duration of steamship calls began to matter, making faster loading and unloading necessary. This required a shift to larger vessels with greater draft, which also had to be handled from the shore. Work began gradually. The entire rear harbor, which could not be accessed by large vessels, was filled and replaced by a drainage channel. As [Molsbergen \(1931\)](#) explained, construction then began on a 520-meter breakwater extending to a depth of 1.50 meters below low tide, in continuation of the existing eastern dam. This ensured safe entry into and exit from the harbor at a depth of 2.50 meters below high tide.

During construction in 1888, the plan was further supplemented by the construction of a second dam, parallel to the oldest one. Its upstream section extended 100 meters shorter and

reached a length of 350 meters. A stone dam was built from the base end to the coast, or the northern edge of the present first inner harbor, creating a very broad basin bordered on the landward side by a stone slope along Pasisirweg ([Molsbergen, 1931](#)).

Maritime infrastructure continued to advance alongside the profits obtained by the Netherlands Indies government from export activity at the port. In 1889, construction work included building quay walls, adding two landing stairs, installing a 14-ton loading crane, and constructing paved roads. Two iron warehouses began to be built that year, and their storage capacity had to be expanded with another warehouse around six years later. This clearly reflected a significant increase in trade, whose influence extended as far as Yogyakarta and Solo. Exported goods grew in volume in response to market demand. These commodities included sugar, rice, alcoholic beverages, tapioca, fertilizer, fish, soybeans, iron, and timber.

Continuous land accretion along the coast meant that the breakwater extended in 1888 no longer reached far enough into the sea to guarantee the water depth needed for inland navigation. In addition, the increasing movement of goods encouraged the construction of more large boats, which required deeper water. Further extension of the breakwater therefore became unavoidable, and this work was completed in 1918. The eastern breakwater was extended another 550 meters to the east, forming a curve and reaching a water depth of 250 meters below low tide. The western breakwater was extended parallel to it but 130 meters shorter to provide easier access. Given the busier shipping traffic, these breakwaters were set 80 meters apart, unlike the existing navigation channel, where the breakwaters had been only 50 meters apart ([Molsbergen, 1931](#)).

The continuously increasing movement of goods, especially sugar, could no longer be accommodated. This was why a second inner harbor was built in the same year, separated from the existing harbor by a headland 300 meters long and 130 meters wide. A paved road was built along the longitudinal axis of this headland, and sufficient space was provided on both sides for the construction of two rail tracks connected to the network of the Samarang–Cheribon Stoomtram Maatschappij, N.V. (SCS). The major harbor expansion completed in 1918 and 1919, at a cost of around 800,000 guilders, significantly increased the port's capacity. It later became clear, however, that after approximately ten years further expansion would be needed to manage the continually growing movement of goods. In the meantime, equipment was improved and four hand cranes were purchased, making available two heavy cranes with lifting capacities of 12 and 14 tons respectively, one 7-ton crane, and four smaller cranes with capacities ranging from 1 to 3 tons ([Molsbergen, 1931](#)).

In 1929, the western half of the northern edge of the second inland harbor was raised along a length of 170 meters and prepared for construction. At that time, the required paved road and railway tracks were also built. With a uniform land depth of 50 meters, the total available surface area reached 8,500 square meters. Without substantial changes to the existing arrangement, the other half of this riverbank, with approximately the same surface area, remained available for future land expansion ([Molsbergen, 1931](#)).

### **Road Infrastructure in Cirebon**

The roads in Cirebon were initially little more than dirt-road networks in poor condition and showed no development with meaningful impact. Comparative work on Semarang shows that road construction in colonial port cities was closely connected with land-use change, urban expansion, and the reorganization of economic space ([Hartatik et al., 2022](#)). There was no significant government effort to add to or expand the roads around Cirebon until 1916, when the Netherlands Indies government attempted to develop them with an annual budget of around £20,000. The road network was then expanded, and several roads were widened. Work proceeded gradually, and in April 1926 the government decided to pave almost all of these roads, at a cost of £325,000. In addition to paving, the roads were equipped with sidewalks for pedestrians. In 1928, construction began on two new roads: a connecting road between Pesisir and Kebonbaroe and the Havenweg–Laan Eyken road, both funded through government subsidies. The two roads were completed in 1930. The total length of roads managed by the municipal government and located within the old municipal boundaries reached 28.37 kilometers. Of this total, 13.04 kilometers were main roads with very dense and busy traffic. The total area of paved roads

reached about 140,000 cubic meters. Some roads were equipped with simple gardens and were kept in good condition. These gardens added aesthetic value and enhanced the city's appearance ([Molsbergen, 1931](#)).

Street lighting in Cheribon using oil began in 1915, when an oil concession was granted to N.V. Maatschappij tot Exploitatie van Lichtfabrieken in Nederlandsch-Indië. In May 1916, a proposal appeared in the municipal council to study the possibility of constructing and operating a municipal power plant to support lighting needs. This plan was later abandoned. In December 1924, the government granted an electricity concession to the Ned. Ind. Gas-Mij, despite strong opposition to the wishes and expectations of the municipal council, which had forwarded A.N.L.E.M.'s concession request with a more favorable recommendation. In April 1925, the electric company began operating. The amount the city had to pay for lighting was very high, and there was consequently an intention to press for a reduction in tariffs ([Molsbergen, 1931](#)).

### **Impacts on Life in Cirebon**

The development of transportation infrastructure in early twentieth-century Cirebon produced a contradictory double impact. On the one hand, the construction of railways, the port, and paved roads reflected the physical advancement of the city and the implementation of the Ethical Policy. On the other hand, this modernization strengthened colonial exploitation by redirecting local resources toward the interests of the sugar industry and export trade. Cirebon society was divided between groups that benefited from modernization, such as local elites and entrepreneurs, and groups that were negatively affected, especially fishers, small farmers, and laborers who lost access to land and resources. An analysis of the social, economic, health, and educational impacts is therefore important for revealing the paradox of colonial modernization, which appeared progressive but substantively widened inequality.

### **Impacts on the Socio-Economic Sector**

Geographically, Cirebon's strategic location on the coast of Java made it one of the centers of cultural, social, and economic activity in both coastal and inland hinterland areas over time. In the classical period, the region was a hamlet or small village supporting an agrarian and maritime economy. Coastal communities inhabited the coastal areas of the Cirebon Residency, while inland communities lived in the interior of the residency ([Mutawally & Mahzuni, 2023](#)). The traces of Cirebon's civilization began to be recorded during the Galuh Kingdom under Prabu Niskala Wastu Kencana, whose court was located in Kawali, Ciamis. The two areas were known as Cirebon Girang, or the inland area, and Cirebon Larang, or the coastal area. This indicates that, even without colonial intervention, Cirebon society had already been divided into two groups according to the geographical characteristics of their environment ([Atja, 1986](#)).

Most coastal communities made their living as fishers or pond managers, while others worked in non-agrarian and service sectors, such as trade, crafts, and ship-loading labor. Compared with inland communities, coastal livelihoods were more diverse. This diversity can be seen in Cirebon's toponyms associated with particular occupations, such as *pekiringan*, meaning a place of dried-fish sellers, and *pajunan*, referring to an area of pottery craftsmen ([Ruspani & Mulyadi, 2014](#)). Such occupational differentiation also helps explain how colonial urban society produced new social layers connected to trade, transport, clerical work, services, and commercial consumption ([Hoogervorst & Schulte Nordholt, 2017](#)). By contrast, inland communities living in fertile areas generally worked as farmers and livestock raisers. Although these two groups had different socio-economic characteristics, they were mutually dependent. Inland communities supplied food and export raw materials for coastal society. Conversely, coastal communities supplied marine products and served as intermediaries for imported goods that were later used by inland society ([Mutawally & Mahzuni, 2023](#)).

During Dutch colonial rule, the coastal population of Cirebon generally depended on fishing and pond ownership because their settlements were located near the bay, which was rich in marine resources. The bay's waters contained diverse biota such as fish, shrimp, and squid, making it suitable for maritime economic activity ([Moyle & Cech, 2004](#)). Fishers in Cirebon were divided into two main groups: coastal fishers and offshore fishers. Coastal fishers usually caught fish near the shoreline to meet household needs, so their activity was not yet commercially oriented.

Offshore fishers, by contrast, worked farther out at sea and sold their catch for economic profit ([Masyhuri, 1996](#)). They believed that waters farther from settlements contained more abundant fish. In addition to fishing, coastal communities developed ponds used for shrimp cultivation and salt production. These products were then processed into shrimp paste and salt, commodities that had been known as Cirebon's leading products since the sultanate period ([Rosidin & Syafaah, 2016](#)).

Although divided into two groups, both types of fishers still used traditional fishing technology and had not been strongly influenced by Western technology. While in the harbor, the two groups appeared similar because both used traditional sailing vessels known as bingkung. The main difference lay in the fishing gear they used: coastal fishers used hooks, cast nets, and sero traps, whereas offshore fishers used payang nets pulled by boats to obtain larger catches. The use of payang nets made offshore fishers more effective than coastal fishers because they could follow fish movements in open waters and obtain larger catches ([Sudirman & Mallawa, 2004](#)).

Fishing communities in colonial Cirebon had a social structure divided into three strata: juragan fishers, independent fishers, and laboring fishers. Among these groups, laboring fishers were the most numerous, while juragan formed the smallest group. Juragan acted as owners of capital, boats, and fishing equipment; they did not go to sea directly but relied on the labor of fishing workers to conduct fishing activity. In addition to controlling fishing equipment, juragan generally also owned ponds as an additional economic resource. Independent fishers differed from juragan because they worked on their own with their own equipment and did not employ other workers. Laboring fishers, meanwhile, worked under the direction of juragan because they did not possess the operational equipment needed to fish independently. In the system of profit sharing, net profits after operational costs were deducted were divided equally between the juragan and the workers, but the workers' share then had to be divided again among all crew members involved ([Masyhuri, 1996](#)).

Like coastal communities elsewhere along the northern coast of Java, Cirebon fishers also had customary traditions closely tied to maritime life, especially sedekah laut or nadran ([Indrahti & Maziyah, 2021](#)). This tradition was performed as an expression of gratitude for the abundance of fish catches. The nadran procession usually involved the slaughter of a buffalo, whose head was then cast into the sea as part of the ritual. After the casting ceremony, the community held a procession known as ider-ideran ([Hadid & Surtikanti, 2024](#)). Participants carried replicas of various animals, including real animals and mythological creatures such as snakes, frogs, and dragons. These symbols were interpreted as representations of Islam's victory over falsehood and as invitations to various beings to follow goodness. The nadran tradition has existed since the sultanate period and continues to be practiced by fishing communities in Cirebon, Indramayu, and Pamanukan.

In the early colonial period, the livelihoods of both coastal and offshore fishers in Cirebon were relatively stable and did not face serious economic obstacles. This condition began to change in the 1920s, when fish catches declined sharply. The decline in marine yields made it difficult for many fishers to maintain their livelihoods and directly affected the economy of coastal communities that depended heavily on fisheries. Several interconnected factors contributed to this decline. One was the arrival of foreign fishers who also exploited Cirebon waters, increasing competition for marine resources. Environmental degradation in coastal waters and the effects of the global economic crisis, or Great Depression, from 1929 to 1939 further worsened the lives of fishers during the colonial period.

In the 1920s, indigenous fishers in Cirebon came under pressure from Dutch and Japanese fishers who dominated the fishery sector with more modern equipment. Motorized boats, new types of nets, and more organized sailing systems enabled foreign fishers to obtain larger catches than local communities. Their advantage was not only technological; they also maintained more orderly work patterns and therefore developed stronger trade relations with fish collectors. Japanese fishers were known for distributing marine products to markets more quickly and consistently, which made them more trusted in the fish trade. This situation further weakened the position of indigenous fishers, who still worked with traditional methods and lacked strong

organizations for collective protection. While foreign fishers had established formal associations in several coastal towns, local fishers continued to operate individually, making it difficult for them to face increasingly tight competition. As a result, many indigenous offshore fishers abandoned their occupation and shifted to coastal fishing or pond management.

This occupational shift created new problems for Cirebon's marine environment. After Cirebon developed into one of the trading centers of the twentieth century, demand for marine products increased and fishing was carried out on a large scale. Previously, offshore fishers had played an important role in meeting trade demand because they could produce marine commodities for export markets. However, when competition with foreign fishers became increasingly difficult, many indigenous fishers moved their fishing grounds closer to the coast. As a result, the exploitation of marine resources in coastal areas became excessive as fishers tried to compensate for declining income. The growing number of fishers along the coast reduced catches further and made life more difficult for small fishers who depended on the sea to meet family needs. In addition, the opening of new ponds involved the cutting of mangrove forests, causing serious damage to coastal ecosystems and weakening their ability to protect land from abrasion and tidal flooding ([Alongi, 2002](#); [Erftemeijer & Lewis, 2000](#); [Primavera, 2006](#)).

The crisis experienced by fishing communities worsened during the global economic turmoil of 1929–1939. Trade competition allowed foreign fishers to sell fish at relatively low prices, causing market prices to decline continuously. [Wahyuningsih and Fatimatuazzahroh \(2019\)](#) also argue that the global economic crisis caused the selling price of salted fish as an export commodity to fall sharply, leaving indigenous fishers unable to earn adequate profits. This situation made life increasingly difficult for coastal communities because their income no longer matched the costs of going to sea. Under these pressures, fishers along Java's northern coast began looking for ways to survive by forming collective organizations. One successful association was Misojo Sari in Pemalang, established to support the fish-auction process and protect fishers from debt bondage to moneylenders. Its success inspired fishers in other areas, including Cirebon and Tegal, to form similar organizations as expressions of economic solidarity amid a prolonged crisis.

Inland communities in colonial Cirebon generally relied on agriculture and livestock. Crops commonly cultivated by farmers included rice, sugarcane, coffee, and indigo, all of which had economic importance for the region. In addition to farming, communities raised various livestock, including cattle, goats, horses, native chickens, ducks, and muscovy ducks, both for daily needs and for economic purposes. By the early twentieth century, rice remained the main agricultural product because it served as both a staple food and a trade commodity. Rice production in Cirebon's inland areas continued to develop significantly over time, strengthening the role of the agrarian sector in the regional economy. Coffee and indigo had previously been important export commodities during the VOC and Cultivation System periods before market demand for both declined. After the value of coffee and indigo decreased, sugarcane emerged as the new leading commodity that dominated colonial economic activity in Cirebon until the end of Dutch rule. Alongside these major crops, farmers also cultivated kapok, cassava, vegetables, legumes, shallots, and various fruits to support household needs.

Sugarcane cultivation in Cirebon began to develop in 1830 and expanded further after the Ethical Policy was introduced in the early twentieth century. The irrigation system built by the colonial government encouraged the expansion of sugarcane plantations in inland areas such as Sindanglaut, Jatipiring, Karangsuwung, Kadipaten, Jatiwangi, and Arjawinangun ([Goldberg, 1940](#)). Sugarcane plantations in these areas were managed through monoculture, meaning that one type of crop was planted continuously over a large area of land. In cultivation, sugarcane fields used the reynosa system, which involved creating long trenches connected to water channels. This technique was applied because sugarcane requires moist soil and a sufficient water supply. The sugarcane variety widely cultivated in Cirebon was "Cirebon Hitam," known for its resistance to environmental conditions and its capacity to produce large harvests. The growing period was relatively long, about fourteen to sixteen months before harvesting ([Evizal, 2018](#)). At harvest time, sugarcane stalks were cut manually with machetes, tied into bundles, and transported to sugar factories by ox-drawn carts before this transport function was gradually replaced by

railways. In the 1920s, the colonial government began implementing new policies aimed at expanding sugarcane plantation areas in inland Cirebon. To support this policy, the government issued regulations compelling communities to surrender their land for the production of colonial commodities. Through this policy, many rice fields owned by indigenous farmers were converted into sugarcane plantations managed by sugar companies.



Figure 11. Suikerfabriek van Cheribon (1920)

Farmers who lost their land were then directed to work as plantation laborers or sugar-factory employees because these jobs were considered capable of providing better income. The policy did succeed in increasing sugar production and expanding sugarcane acreage until shortly before 1930. However, the situation changed drastically when global economic turmoil struck at the end of the 1920s and sharply reduced international demand for sugar. The crisis forced many sugar companies to reduce plantation areas and dismiss workers on a large scale, leaving farmers once again in economic difficulty. The decline reached its peak in 1936, when sugarcane plantation areas contracted dramatically. This condition became known as the malaise period and was felt across much of Java.

After the decline of the sugar industry, many farmers tried to convert former sugarcane plantations back into rice fields so that they could again be used to grow rice. These efforts often failed because soil quality had deteriorated as a result of long-term monoculture. Continuous sugarcane cultivation depleted soil nutrients and made the land less fertile for other crops. The use of chemical fertilizers, pesticides, and the burning of sugarcane residues also accelerated agricultural environmental damage in inland Cirebon. These effects were visible in the transformation of the soil structure, which changed from loose and workable to hard and sandy, making it difficult to return to productive rice cultivation. Ecological damage also caused many forms of vegetation and animals that had previously supported agricultural activity to disappear gradually. To adapt to increasingly degraded land, some farmers chose to plant cassava because it was more tolerant of dry and infertile soil ([Cock & R. H. Howeler, 1978](#)). Cassava was then used as food or processed into tapioca flour and other food products that helped sustain the economy of rural communities ([Sukarno et al., 2023](#)).

### **Impacts on the Health Sector**

Before the Ethical Policy was implemented, the health conditions of Cirebon's population were deeply concerning. The urban environment was known for its slums, poor drainage, polluted waterways, and lack of adequate sanitation facilities. These conditions made infectious diseases, especially malaria, easy to spread and turned them into serious problems for both the colonial government and the local population. The high incidence of disease affected not only the quality

of life of residents but also the economic activity and stability of Cirebon as a growing port city. In the wider Netherlands Indies context, public health interventions were unevenly distributed and often reflected the administrative capacity and priorities of colonial rule ([Bosma, 2015](#)). This situation pushed the colonial government to undertake improvements after the Ethical Policy was introduced in the early twentieth century, particularly after Cirebon obtained *gemeente* status, which demanded a more modern and organized urban order. Through this policy, the government began to treat public health as an important part of developing a colonial city considered clean, healthy, and productive.

Health improvements were carried out through various measures, including the repair of drainage systems, the organization of residential environments, and the construction of modern medical facilities. The colonial government recognized that poor sanitation was one of the main causes of disease outbreaks, so urban drainage was repaired to reduce stagnant water and pollution. The construction of a hospital was also an important step in supporting urban health services. During the administration of Mayor J. H. Johan, health policy was strengthened through the construction of Oranje Hospital (*Ziekenhuis Oranje*), planned in 1919. Construction began in 1920 and was completed in 1921, making it one of the largest modern health facilities in colonial Cirebon. The hospital had about 133 treatment rooms divided into pavilion classes, indicating a more structured system of health care than had previously existed. *Ziekenhuis Oranje* functioned not only as a center of medical treatment but also as a symbol of urban modernization produced by the Ethical Policy in the health sector.

The impact of this policy can be seen in the colonial government's growing attention to urban public health, especially in controlling infectious diseases and providing medical services. The construction of the hospital and the improvement of sanitation helped create a more orderly urban environment than in the previous period. In addition to serving Europeans, these medical facilities were gradually used by indigenous residents, although access remained limited by colonial social stratification. The health infrastructure built during this period later became an important foundation for the development of modern health services in Cirebon after independence. The former Oranje Hospital has retained its function as a public health center and is now known as Gunung Jati Regional Hospital, located on Jalan Kesambi, Cirebon City. The continuity of the hospital's function shows that health development under the Ethical Policy had a long-term influence on the infrastructure of modern Cirebon.

### **Impacts on the Education Sector**

Education in Cirebon had in fact existed since the classical period through traditional *pesantren* spread across different areas. This educational system focused on religious learning, especially Islamic theology, with simple teaching methods transmitted across generations. Although it played an important role in shaping the social and religious life of the community, *pesantren* education did not fully accommodate the needs of modern knowledge that developed in the early twentieth century. When the Ethical Policy was introduced by the Dutch colonial government in 1901, education became one of its main concerns, with the aim of creating a more educated society through Western-style schooling. In practice, however, modern education in Cirebon developed slowly and showed no significant change until around 1917. This condition indicates that the implementation of the Ethical Policy in the education sector was not immediately felt by Cirebon society, particularly in the provision of modern formal schools for the urban population. Limited educational facilities and the lack of European-style schools led the government of *Gemeente Cheribon* to formulate new steps to accelerate the modernization of education in the region ([Laars, 1927](#))

To improve education, the municipal government cooperated with the private Froebel organization to establish a modern European-style educational institution in Cirebon. This cooperation became a concrete expression of the Ethical Policy in education, particularly in expanding access to formal schooling for urban society. One important result of this policy was the establishment of M.U.L.O. (*Meer Uitgebreid Lager Onderwijs*), a secondary school using a modern Dutch educational system. In its implementation, the government of *Gemeente Cheribon* was responsible for operational costs, infrastructure development, and the provision of school

facilities, while Frobel supplied qualified teachers according to European educational standards. The presence of M.U.L.O. changed the educational pattern in Cirebon because the community was introduced to a modern system of learning that was more structured, disciplined, and oriented toward general knowledge. The school became not only a place of learning but also a symbol of social transformation that marked the entry of Western educational culture into colonial society. Through European-style education, an educated social group emerged with administrative ability, language skills, and modern knowledge needed in both bureaucracy and the colonial economy ([Leiden, 1934](#))

Although modern education in Cirebon encountered various obstacles and fluctuations, schools such as M.U.L.O. became important milestones in the history of formal education in the region. The educational system introduced during the Ethical Policy gradually shifted the community's educational orientation from one based primarily on religion toward a broader form of general education. Another impact was the emergence of opportunities for some indigenous people to receive an education that had previously been accessible only to certain groups. Beyond improving intellectual capacity, modern education also helped shape new social awareness among indigenous students regarding progress, organization, and social change. The educational infrastructure built during the colonial period later became the basis for the development of formal educational institutions in Cirebon after Indonesian independence. One visible continuation of this legacy is the former M.U.L.O. building, which still stands and remains in use as an educational institution under the name SMP Negeri 1 Kota Cirebon. Its continued existence shows that the Ethical Policy's influence on education left a long-term impact on the development of Cirebon's modern educational system.

## Conclusion

The development of Cirebon during the Ethical Policy period from 1901 to 1930 shows a major transformation in infrastructure, transportation, and the dynamics of social life. As a coastal region that had held a strategic position in trade and cultural exchange since the classical period, Cirebon developed into a center of colonial economic and administrative activity on the northern coast of Java. The implementation of the Ethical Policy by the Netherlands Indies colonial government encouraged changes in urban planning and the construction of modern facilities, especially after Cirebon obtained *gemeente* status in 1906 and *stadsgemeente* status in 1926.

This modernization was visible in the construction of government, health, education, market, road, port, and rail-transport infrastructure integrated with colonial economic activity. The presence of railway companies such as *Staatsspoorwegen* (SS) and the *Semarang-Cheribon Stoomtram Maatschappij* (SCS) turned Cirebon into an important distribution route for export commodities, especially sugar. In addition, the construction of the port, paved roads, urban lighting, and other public facilities demonstrated the colonial government's effort to form a more orderly and hygienic modern city. Yet modernization under the Ethical Policy was not entirely directed toward the welfare of the indigenous population. The infrastructure that was built was fundamentally oriented toward strengthening colonial economic interests and accelerating the exploitation of natural resources in the Cirebon region. Its effects can be seen in the emergence of social inequality between Europeans and indigenous people, particularly in access to education, health, and economic opportunity.

In the socio-economic sector, coastal and inland communities experienced changes in their patterns of life as a result of the dominance of the sugar industry, economic competition, and the excessive exploitation of natural resources. These changes also produced environmental degradation and economic crisis when the Great Depression struck at the end of the 1920s. Nevertheless, the Ethical Policy left an important influence on the formation of modernity in Cirebon. Modern educational infrastructure such as M.U.L.O., the construction of Oranje Hospital, modern markets, and colonial urban planning became the foundation for public facilities in contemporary Cirebon. The Ethical Policy period in Cirebon can therefore be understood as a phase of paradoxical colonial modernization: on the one hand, it brought physical and

administrative advancement to the city; on the other, it reinforced structures of exploitation and social inequality within colonial society.

### **Funding Statement**

This research received no external funding.

### **Conflict of Interest**

The author(s) declare no conflict of interest. If a conflict exists, it must be disclosed clearly.

### **AI Use Disclosure**

The author used generative AI tools only for language editing and proofreading. The author reviewed and verified all content and remains fully responsible for the manuscript.

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