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RECONSTRUCTING COLONIAL ADMINISTRATIVE LANDSCAPES: POWER, GOVERNANCE, AND EVOLUTION OF THE ONDERAFDELING LAHAT IN SOUTH SUMATRA, 1860–1942

Tomy Wijaya[1*], Fatimah Alauwiyah[2], Dedi Irwanto[2], Risa Marta Yati[2]
[1]State University of Jakarta, Jakarta, Indonesia
[2]Sriwijaya University, Palembang, Indonesia
*Correspondence: tomywijaya808@gmail.com
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Abstract
This article examines the evolution of Dutch colonial administration in the Lahat region of South Sumatra between 1860 and 1942, focusing on territorial reorganization, bureaucratic consolidation, and the transformation of Indigenous governance. Rather than treating the Onderafdeling Lahat as a fixed administrative entity, the study traces successive changes in colonial territorial arrangements and institutional structures. Employing a historical research method that combines chronological reconstruction and thematic analysis, it draws on colonial administrative archives, statutory regulations, government reports, historical maps, contemporary newspapers, and relevant scholarly literature. The findings reveal that colonial administrative expansion in Lahat developed through a gradual process of institutional consolidation. The incorporation of Pasemah into the Residency of Palembang in 1868, the establishment of Lahat as the capital of the Afdeeling Palembangsche Bovenlanden in 1906, and subsequent administrative reforms demonstrate the changing territorial organization of colonial rule. The *controleur* played a central role in supervising local administration and regulating the relationship between colonial authorities and Indigenous institutions, particularly the marga system and its traditional leaders. Meanwhile, railway development, which reached Lahat in 1924 and Lubuklinggau in 1933, strengthened regional connectivity and supported the expansion of colonial administrative and economic activities. This study argues that colonial domination in the Lahat region operated through the interaction of bureaucratic supervision, institutional adaptation, coercive capacity, and infrastructural integration. By providing a microhistorical examination of inland colonial administration, this article contributes to a broader understanding of territorial governance and the transformation of Indigenous authority in colonial South Sumatra.

Keywords: colonial administration, district reorganization, Dutch East Indies, infrastructural expansion, Onderafdeling Lahat

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Introduction

Colonial administrative frameworks established in the interior of South Sumatra in the nineteenth century marked a pivotal moment in the augmentation of Dutch power (Rianda & Yulifar, 2025). Following the conclusion of the Palembang War and the annexation of the region into the Dutch East Indies, the colonial administration aimed to restructure the inland territories that had formerly operated under predominantly autonomous clan-based systems (Muhidin, 2018). This reorganization was motivated not only by the necessity to quell opposition but also by the requirement to create an administrative structure conducive to economic extraction in resource-abundant areas. The Besemah highlands, comprising Lahat, Pagar Alam, Kikim, Lintang, and Semende, emerged as a strategic frontier in this context. Its geographic location connecting the Bukit Barisan interior to Palembang's trade networks rendered it crucial for consolidating political authority and facilitating economic integration (Idris et al., 2020).

Colonial intervention in this region manifested through the creation of administrative units such as the *onderafdeling*, which served to centralize governance and enhance bureaucratic control over rural communities. In Lahat, this process developed incrementally, encompassing the establishment of districts, the enhancement of the controller's authority, and the integration of indigenous institutions into the colonial administrative framework (Wargadalem & Susanti, 2023; Wijaya et al., 2025b). These measures exemplified a comprehensive strategy of indirect rule, wherein traditional authority structures were not abolished but restructured to align with colonial interests.

Current historiography on South Sumatra mainly focuses on politically and economically important areas. These areas include Palembang and resource-rich regions such as Muara Enim and Prabumulih (Irwanto et al., 2018; Putra & Sunarti, 2022). Research typically emphasizes sultanates, trade networks, and resource exploitation. However, the dynamics of inland administration remain less studied. For example, Wijaya and Alauwiyah (2025) show that the colonial system formalized customary structures, providing a framework for examining how the Besemah community in Lahat interacted with colonial governance. In contrast, Aldi et al. (2021) find that the Ogan Ilir *Onderafdelling* relied mainly on formal districts and the controller's authority, incorporating fewer customary institutions than Lahat. Thus, Lahat saw mutual adaptation between local and colonial systems, while Ogan Ilir saw a more rigid division and colonial dominance. Together, these studies highlight both indigenous adaptation within colonial governance and the distinct interactions between local and colonial systems in different regions.

This research investigates how the administrative evolution of the Onderafdeling Lahat from 1860 to 1942 served colonial objectives. Specifically, it examines how the establishment of Lahat functioned as a governance tool in South Sumatra’s interior and how administrative restructuring shifted indigenous Besemah clan dynamics. The study frames Lahat within wider debates on colonial expansion, especially the link between economic aims and political control, as well as the strategic role of infrastructure, such as the Prabumulih–Lahat–Lubuklinggau railway, in enhancing administrative integration.

This article enhances the historiography of Indonesian colonial administration by providing a micro-historical analysis of an inland administrative unit overlooked in prior research. This approach fills a significant gap in scholarship.

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Understanding the administrative development of the Onderafdeling Lahat offers insight into broader processes shaping regional authority, colonial control strategies, and contemporary governance structures. The article illustrates colonial governance through the reorganization of local institutions, the centralization of bureaucratic power, and the implementation of calculated infrastructure projects to assimilate peripheral areas. This analysis offers fresh perspectives on indirect rule in South Sumatra and underscores the persistent structural legacies of colonial administration that continue to influence modern governance.

Method

This research employs a historical research method to examine the formation, transformation, and development of colonial administration in the Lahat region of South Sumatra between 1860 and 1942. Rather than treating the Onderafdeling Lahat as a fixed administrative entity throughout this period, the research traces changes in territorial arrangements, bureaucratic structures, and Indigenous institutions under Dutch colonial rule. It combines chronological reconstruction and thematic analysis to examine administrative policies, colonial power relations, territorial reorganization, infrastructure development, and the transformation of Indigenous authority (Irwanto & Sair, 2014). This approach situates developments in Lahat within the broader political and administrative strategies of the Dutch colonial government in the interior of South Sumatra.

The research draws on primary and secondary sources. Primary sources include colonial administrative archives, statutory regulations, government reports, historical maps, and contemporary newspapers obtained from digital and institutional repositories, particularly Delpher, KITLV, and the National Archives of the Netherlands. Key documentary sources include the *Staatsblad van Nederlandsch-Indië*, *Regeerings-Almanak voor Nederlandsch-Indië*, and *Koloniaal Verslag*. Secondary sources comprise scholarly books, peer-reviewed journal articles, and previous historical studies on colonial administration and Indigenous governance in South Sumatra. Sources are selected based on chronological relevance (1860–1942), their relevance to administrative development and Indigenous authority in Lahat, and their evidentiary value in representing colonial and local perspectives. Source criticism involves external examination of authenticity, provenance, authorship, and date, as well as internal evaluation of credibility, context, and potential colonial bias. Conflicting archival accounts are critically compared rather than automatically dismissed, as discrepancies may reflect changing administrative boundaries, competing institutional interests, and differences in historical perspectives.

The collected evidence is organized into four thematic categories: colonial administrative policies and institutions, territorial reorganization, infrastructure development, and the transformation of Indigenous authority. Particular attention is given to the interactions between colonial officials, including residents, *assistent-residents*, and *controleurs*, and Indigenous authorities such as *pasirah* and *kerio*. The analysis examines how colonial power operated through bureaucratic supervision, institutional adaptation, and the regulation of local governance. Historical interpretation is strengthened through source triangulation, chronological comparison, and contextual analysis to assess the consistency of evidence and distinguish formal regulations from their implementation. The study also avoids

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anachronistic interpretations and deterministic explanations of historical change, particularly concerning the relationship between infrastructure development and administrative expansion. These procedures provide a systematic basis for reconstructing the development of colonial administration and its impact on Indigenous governance in the Lahat region between 1860 and 1942.

Findings and Discussion

The colonial context and the strategic position of Lahat

The political logic of colonial penetration

The colonial incursion into the Besemah hinterland in the late nineteenth century was primarily a strategy for territorial consolidation aimed at converting semi-autonomous inland areas into manageable territories within the Dutch imperial framework. After the dissolution of the Palembang Sultanate, the Dutch faced the challenge of assimilating areas that retained significant socio-political independence. Administrative units like the *onderafdeling* should be seen not as neutral bureaucratic actions but as a calculated strategy to institutionalize control, enhance surveillance, and reinforce imperial authority in border regions (Panji & Suriana, 2014). Lahat, as a component of this frontier, gained importance not only locally but also as an exemplar of how colonial governance infiltrated inland Southeast Asian societies.

The structural foundation of this expansion was established by economic imperatives that operated through administrative rationalization. The resource potential of the Besemah region, especially in forest products and plantation commodities, necessitated extraction, regulation, standardization, and secure distribution (Irwanto, 2017). Without administrative oversight, logistical uncertainty would have increased, tax collection would have been constrained, and local resistance would have been allowed to impede commodity flows. Consequently, the formation of a formal administrative structure in Lahat should be understood as part of a wider colonial rationale, in which economic exploitation relied on the establishment of stable, monitored, and bureaucratically cohesive regions.

The political imperative of overseeing resistant and mobile populations simultaneously influenced colonial expansion. The Besemah community, noted for its robust internal cohesion and adaptive mobility, presented a structural challenge to direct colonial governance (Wijaya et al., 2025a). The Dutch employed administrative strategies that facilitated indirect yet ongoing supervision, rather than depending exclusively on coercion. The appointment of controllers with significant authority enabled the colonial state to oversee social, economic, and political activities while reducing overt conflict (Putri et al., 2016). This illustrates a wider trend in colonial administration, in which surveillance was integrated into bureaucratic practices rather than imposed solely through military force.

The designation of Lahat as the administrative hub of the *onderafdeling* exemplifies how spatial organization served as an instrument of control. By consolidating authority in a strategically positioned hub, the Dutch effectively managed population movement, coordinated policy execution, and enhanced oversight of adjacent regions. The presence of a controller in Lahat formalized colonial authority and facilitated direct supervision of Besemah clans (Alauwiyah et al., 2025). In this regard, Lahat was not simply an administrative entity but a

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pivotal point within a broader framework of colonial governance, connecting inland societies to the political and economic systems of the colonial state.

The colonial administration in Lahat relied on strategic adaptation of indigenous institutions rather than their eradication. The enduring nature of the clan (marga) system as a source of local legitimacy necessitated negotiation with established power structures for effective control. The Dutch adopted indirect rule, incorporating customary institutions into the colonial administrative system while subordinating them to external authority (Kahin, 2004). This method elucidates a crucial aspect of colonial administration: the capacity to assimilate indigenous systems to enhance dominance while preserving the social structures of power.

This integration process led to a functional transformation of indigenous leadership. Traditional authorities, such as *pasirah*, were redefined as intermediaries responsible for administrative functions, including taxation, population registration, and dispute resolution (Jayanti & Masyhur, 2021). Although these roles maintained the external framework of traditional leadership, they fundamentally transformed its direction. Authority, once grounded in communal responsibilities, was reoriented toward implementing colonial policies, signifying a transition from self-governance to bureaucratic subjugation (Rochmiatun et al., 2023).

The integration of traditional institutions into colonial governance in Lahat produced a hybrid yet uneven power structure. Indigenous authority was formally maintained, but the growing influence of the controller subordinated it to colonial supremacy. This transformation redirected local leadership to align with colonial objectives. These included taxation, labor mobilization, and territorial governance. Colonial control did not fully displace established institutions; instead, it relied on incremental reconfiguration. The formation of the Onderafdeling Lahat exemplifies this comprehensive strategy. Administrative centralization, oversight, and institutional modification reinforced imperial power. The Lahat case illustrates a broader trend of inland integration in colonial Southeast Asia. Here, dominance was established by systematically aligning indigenous frameworks with colonial political and economic aims.

Lahat as a regional node in the South Sumatran Highlands

The importance of Lahat in the South Sumatran highlands stems from its role as a strategic hub for colonial governance, facilitating mobility, surveillance, and territorial control. Lahat, situated between the lowlands of Palembang and the upland areas of Besemah and Musi Ulu, served as a pivotal location for controlling access to inland communities (Melisa, 2012). This geographical advantage made it especially significant in colonial strategies aimed at converting fluid, semi-autonomous hinterlands into administratively coherent and manageable territories.

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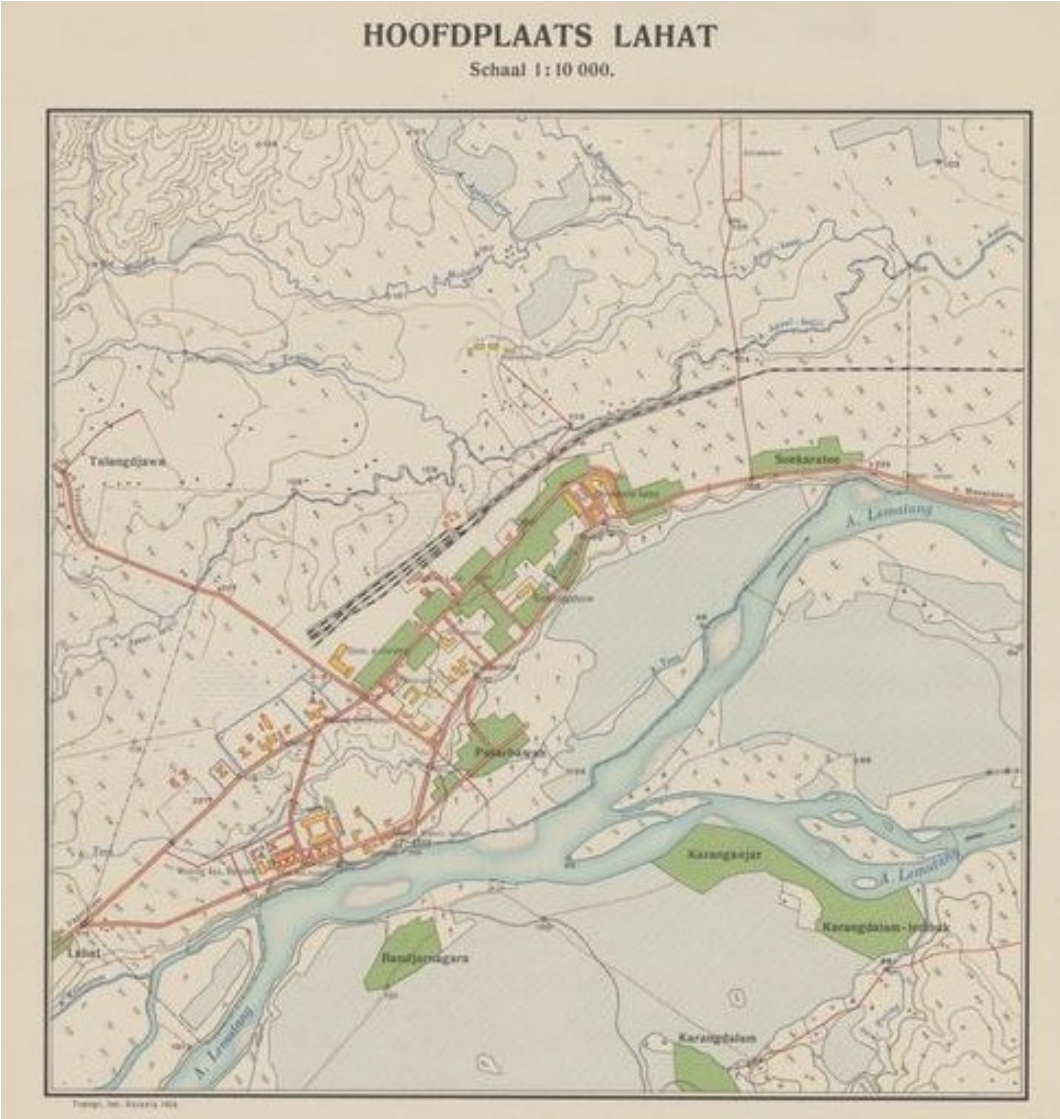

Figure 1. Geographic map of Lahat Regency, 1924 (Topografische inrichting in Nederlandsch-Indië, 2009)

Before colonial intervention, Lahat served as a pivotal nexus in traditional trade networks connecting upland producers to downstream markets. Commodity flows, including resin, coffee, and pepper, traversed mountainous routes linking Besemah, Lintang, Kikim, and Semende to Palembang (Yosepin, 2022). The Dutch repurposed and restructured existing mobility networks, integrating them into a colonial administrative framework instead of developing new systems from the ground up. This illustrates that colonial governance functioned by strategically adapting existing spatial frameworks to enhance economic extraction and administrative control.

During Dutch governance, Lahat's geographical position was recontextualized within an overarching framework of surveillance and control. The regulation of mobility through this node enabled the colonial state to oversee the movement of goods, individuals, and information, thereby diminishing the autonomy of inland communities (Irwanto et al., 2025). In this context, dominion

over territory directly equated to dominion over economic activity and political stability. Lahat subsequently served as a channel through which the colonial administration assimilated the Besemah hinterland into the broader imperial framework.

In addition to economic regulation, Lahat served as a surveillance center to oversee socially mobile and politically robust populations. The mobility and robust internal cohesion of the Besemah community rendered them challenging to govern solely through direct coercion (Meliono, 2009). The Dutch centralized administrative authority in Lahat to systematically monitor demographic shifts, communication trends, and potential dissent. This illustrates a comprehensive colonial strategy wherein surveillance was integrated into spatial organization, facilitating indirect yet constant oversight of local communities.

The classification of Lahat as an *onderafdeling* further entrenched this surveillance-focused governance. As an administrative hub, it facilitated the orchestration of colonial policies, encompassing taxation, population registration, and legal enforcement, under the oversight of the controller (Juwono, 2023). This institutional framework not only reinforced bureaucratic oversight but also enabled the incorporation of indigenous authority into the colonial system, as local leaders served as intermediaries within a centralized administrative structure.

The development of railway infrastructure in the early twentieth century amplified Lahat's significance within this control system. The Prabumulih–Lahat–Lubuklinggau railway line improved connectivity, enabling colonial officials to access previously unreachable regions and implement policies more effectively (Wijaya & Yusuf, 2025). Infrastructure served not only as an economic instrument but also as an extension of administrative authority, facilitating expedited surveillance, coordination, and intervention throughout the interior.

Improved accessibility led to comprehensive administrative restructuring, redefining territorial boundaries and expanding colonial officials' reach into rural regions. As a result, the controller could implement more effective and sustained oversight. Moreover, enhanced mobility helped incorporate local communities into colonial administrative and economic frameworks; at the same time, it diminished the autonomy of indigenous governance by aligning it with colonial aims. Lahat's evolution into a regional administrative hub illustrates the operation of colonial power through spatial strategy, infrastructural advancement, and institutional modification. This case reflects a wider trend of colonial state formation in Southeast Asia, marked by new patterns of mobility, heightened surveillance, and systematic reorganization of indigenous authority within a centralized bureaucracy.

Administrative formation of the Onderafdeling Lahat, 1860-1900

Early colonial penetration and district organization

The expansion of Dutch colonial authority in the Lematang Oeloe and Pasemah regions during the second half of the nineteenth century involved both military intervention and the subsequent development of formal administrative arrangements. Rather than representing a straightforward transition from military occupation to bureaucratic governance, this process reflected the gradual institutionalization of colonial authority following the establishment of political control over the interior territories of South Sumatra.

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An important administrative development occurred in 1868, following the restoration of colonial authority in the subjugated Pasemah territories. According to the *Koloniaal Verslag* (1868), a decision issued by the Governor-General on 22 July 1868, No. 17, and promulgated under *Indisch Staatsblad 1868*, No. 89 (1868), formally incorporated Pasemah into the Residency of Palembang as an *onderafdeeling* of the *Afdeeling Lematang Oeloe*. The same report identifies Bandar as the administrative residence of the *controleur* responsible for the area. It also explains that this arrangement was intended to simplify and accelerate the handling of administrative affairs in the region. This decision therefore represents an important institutional milestone in the formal incorporation of Pasemah into the colonial administrative system.

The establishment of this administrative arrangement illustrates how colonial authority was extended through the placement of European administrative officials and the formal classification of territories within the regional government structure. The appointment of a *controleur* at Bandar provided an identifiable administrative presence through which the colonial government could manage governmental affairs in Pasemah. Nevertheless, the existence of this office should not automatically be interpreted as evidence of uniform or effective colonial control across all settlements. The official report primarily reflects the government's administrative perspective, and the practical extent of colonial authority requires further examination through local records, correspondence, and other contemporary sources.

The relationship between colonial administration and indigenous institutions also requires consideration. In South Sumatra, the colonial government did not simply eliminate the existing *marga* system. Instead, indigenous institutions continued to operate within a changing colonial administrative framework. This pattern can be understood as a form of indirect administration, in which customary authorities and local institutions were retained while increasingly incorporated into the structures of colonial government. Research on the transformation of *marga* governance in South Sumatra demonstrates that colonial authorities subsequently intervened in the organization of local communities, including the formation, restructuring, and administrative grouping of *marga* territories (Wijaya & Alauwiyah, 2025).

However, the specific administrative changes documented in Musi Ulu between 1906 and 1942 should be distinguished from developments in Pasemah during the nineteenth century. Susetyo dan Ravico (2021b) demonstrate that colonial intervention in Musi Ulu involved the reorganization of *marga* territories and their incorporation into lower administrative units, including Muara Beliti, Semangus, and Terawas. Their findings provide a useful regional comparison for understanding the subsequent institutional transformation of customary government, but they should not be used as direct evidence of identical administrative practices in Lematang Oeloe or Pasemah before 1900.

The administrative terminology used for this period is particularly important. The available contemporary record identifies Pasemah in 1868 as an *onderafdeeling* within the *Afdeeling* Lematang Oeloe, with the *controleur* stationed at Bandar. Consequently, referring to the entire administrative formation during 1860–1900 as the Onderafdeling Lahat risks projecting a later administrative configuration onto an earlier period. The distinction is supported by the *Regeerings-Almanak voor*

Nederlandsch-Indië (1917), which records the later structure of the Afdeeling Palembangsche Bovenlanden, with Lahat as its administrative capital. The area included several *onderafdeelingen*, among them Lematang Oeloe, whose administrative center was Lahat, and Pasemahlanden, whose administrative center was Pagar Alam.

This later reorganization, associated with *Staatsblad* 1906, No. 466 and subsequent administrative regulations, marks a distinct phase in the development of colonial territorial administration. It should therefore be examined as part of the administrative restructuring of the early twentieth century rather than treated as an established arrangement for the entire period from 1860 to 1900. The distinction also demonstrates the importance of tracing administrative boundaries and institutional names chronologically rather than assuming that later territorial configurations had existed unchanged throughout the colonial period.

From a broader analytical perspective, these developments can be interpreted as part of the colonial state's gradual effort to make local territories and populations administratively legible. Scott's (1998) discussion of state simplification provides a useful conceptual framework for examining how governments classify territories, standardize administrative arrangements, and incorporate local institutions into centralized systems of authority. Nevertheless, this theoretical perspective should be used to guide interpretation rather than as empirical proof that specific mapping, population registration, surveillance, or land-boundary operations had already occurred in Lematang Oeloe and Pasemah during 1860–1900. Such claims require corroboration from contemporary maps, administrative reports, land records, and other archival documents.

Thus, the period from 1860 to 1900 is best understood as an early phase of colonial administrative consolidation in Lematang Oeloe and Pasemah. The formal incorporation of Pasemah into the Residency of Palembang in 1868 and the establishment of a *controleur* at Bandar provide concrete evidence of the institutional expansion of colonial authority. At the same time, the continuation of indigenous institutions and the subsequent reorganization of territorial administration indicate that colonial governance developed through a combination of formal bureaucratic structures and the adaptation of existing local institutions. These developments laid part of the historical foundation for the more extensive administrative restructuring of the *Palembangsche Bovenlanden* in the early twentieth century.

The role of the controleur and colonial bureaucratic mechanisms

The *controleur* constituted an important component of the Dutch colonial administrative apparatus in the Lahat hinterland. However, the expansion of bureaucratic governance should not be interpreted as a straightforward replacement of military intervention by civilian administration. Contemporary evidence suggests that administrative supervision and coercive power operated simultaneously. In his 1884 account of the Palembang highlands, J. C. Loman identified Lahat as the seat of the *assistent-resident* and reported that the town contained a fort with a garrison of approximately 300 soldiers. In the neighboring Kikim district, the *controleur* was based at Bunga Mas, where his residence stood alongside a barracks and a prison. The barracks housed ten *pradjoerits*, whose stated responsibilities included protecting the official and maintaining public order

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in the district (Loman, 1884). These observations demonstrate that colonial administration in the Lahat hinterland relied on an interconnected apparatus of civilian officials, military personnel, and local administrative infrastructure rather than on bureaucracy alone.

The authority of the *controleur* extended beyond the representation of colonial interests and the transmission of administrative instructions. Loman's account provides evidence of the official's involvement in local judicial and administrative proceedings. The *controleur* presided over a *rapat*, a council that dealt with disputes between villages and was composed of prominent local leaders. Decisions reached through this forum required the approval of the Resident before implementation (Istianda et al., 2021). This arrangement illustrates how colonial authority penetrated local governance through the supervision of dispute settlement and the validation of decisions made by indigenous leaders. It also reveals the hierarchical nature of colonial administration: local institutions retained a role in resolving disputes, but their decisions remained subject to the approval of higher colonial authorities.

The relationship between European administrative officials and indigenous institutions was further shaped by the incorporation of the *marga* system into the colonial bureaucratic hierarchy. At the local level, a *pasirah* headed a *marga*, while a *kerio* administered a *dusun* and a *pengawo* occupied a lower village-level position. These offices were not simply abolished when Dutch authority expanded. Instead, they continued to perform governmental and customary functions within an increasingly regulated administrative structure. Studies of the Palembang Residency explain that the *controleur*, as head of an *onderafdeeling*, exercised supervisory authority over *marga* administration, while the *assistent-resident* supervised the *controleurs* within an *afdeeling*. Regulations formulated by a *marga* also required approval from the higher administrative authority before taking effect (Irwanto et al., 2010; Istianda et al., 2023). This arrangement allowed the colonial government to extend its authority through existing local institutions without having to replace every level of indigenous administration.

The resulting system was neither entirely autonomous customary government nor a fully centralized bureaucracy. The *marga* retained responsibilities in local administration, customary law, dispute settlement, and the management of certain revenues. These revenues included land-related charges, forest-use fees, and payments associated with rivers and fishing areas. Nevertheless, the authority to administer these matters operated within a broader colonial framework, in which disputes involving relations between *marga* territories and certain administrative regulations could be referred to colonial officials (Irwanto et al., 2010; Istianda et al., 2023). Consequently, the role of the *controleur* should be understood not as the direct replacement of the *pasirah* but as part of a supervisory mechanism that restricted and mediated the exercise of local authority.

This institutional arrangement reflected the broader colonial practice of indirect administration in the Palembang Residency. Local leaders retained positions and functions that were socially recognized within their communities, but their authority increasingly operated under colonial administrative supervision. The relationship was therefore asymmetrical: indigenous officials remained important intermediaries in local governance, while the colonial state maintained superior authority over administrative organization and the approval of certain decisions.

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Wijaya and Alauwiyah (2025) interpret this development as a process of co-optation and institutional adaptation, through which the *marga* system was incorporated into changing state structures rather than immediately eliminated. Research on Musi Ulu also demonstrates that colonial intervention could reshape *marga* territories and their administrative relationships, although the specific developments in Musi Ulu should be treated as a regional comparison rather than as direct evidence of identical practices in Lahat (Susetyo & Ravico, 2021).

The everyday operation of colonial bureaucracy should, however, be described with attention to the available evidence. The contemporary account of 1884 documents the *controleur's* involvement in the *rapat*, the presence of an official residence, and the use of armed personnel to maintain order. Later studies describe the supervision of *marga* regulations and the administrative hierarchy connecting local officials to the *controleur*. These sources provide a basis for discussing administrative oversight, judicial supervision, and institutional subordination. They do not, by themselves, establish that *controleurs* in Lahat routinely conducted systematic population registration, monitored all forms of labour, or inspected economic production and inter-clan relations according to a standardized procedure. Such practices require further confirmation from dated inspection reports, correspondence, tax records, population registers, or other specific administrative documents.

Communication infrastructure also contributed to the expansion of colonial administrative reach, although its development took place in different stages. Loman observed telegraph poles along the road connecting Lahat and Bunga Mas in 1884, indicating the presence of communication infrastructure in the hinterland during the nineteenth century (Loman, 1884). Railway infrastructure, by contrast, became an important addition during the twentieth century. The railway network in South Sumatra reached Lahat in 1924, while subsequent extensions connected Lahat with Tebing Tinggi and, eventually, Lubuklinggau during 1932–1933 (Ravico & Susetyo, 2021). These developments strengthened the movement of people, officials, and commodities across the region. They should nevertheless be understood as a later reinforcement of colonial connectivity rather than as the initial foundation of bureaucratic administration in Lahat.

The historical significance of the *controleur* therefore lay in the capacity of the colonial administration to combine bureaucratic supervision, judicial authority, local intermediaries, and security arrangements. This process did not produce the immediate disappearance of indigenous institutions. Instead, it transformed the institutional environment in which *pasirah*, *kerio*, and other local officials exercised their authority. The longer-term consequences must also be examined through subsequent political changes, particularly the integration of customary institutions into the postcolonial village administration and the abolition of the *marga* system in South Sumatra in 1983. Research on the later transformation of *marga* governance indicates that the institutional changes did not necessarily erase all customary practices and social relationships, even though the formal administrative status of the *marga* was fundamentally altered (Abdullah et al., 2020; Wijaya & Alauwiyah, 2025). Thus, the role of the *controleur* in the Lahat region was not merely administrative: it formed part of a wider process through which colonial power reorganized the relationship between territorial administration, indigenous authority, and local society.

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Infrastructure, transportation, and administrative reorganization, 1900-1942

The railway network and its impact on administrative control

The expansion of the railway network in South Sumatra represented an important component of the Dutch colonial government's efforts to integrate inland territories into its broader economic and administrative system. Railway construction was undertaken by the *Zuid-Sumatra Staatsspoorwegen* (ZSS), a state-owned railway administration whose development activities in South Sumatra and Lampung began in 1911 (Wijaya & Yusuf, 2026). Construction of the South Sumatran network proceeded in successive stages, beginning with the Kertapati–Prabumulih section, which was opened to public traffic on 1 November 1915. The network was subsequently extended toward Muara Enim and Lahat, with the latter connection completed in 1924. Further expansion continued westward from Lahat through Tebing Tinggi and Muara Saling, eventually reaching Lubuklinggau on 1 June 1933 (Ravico & Susetyo, 2021).

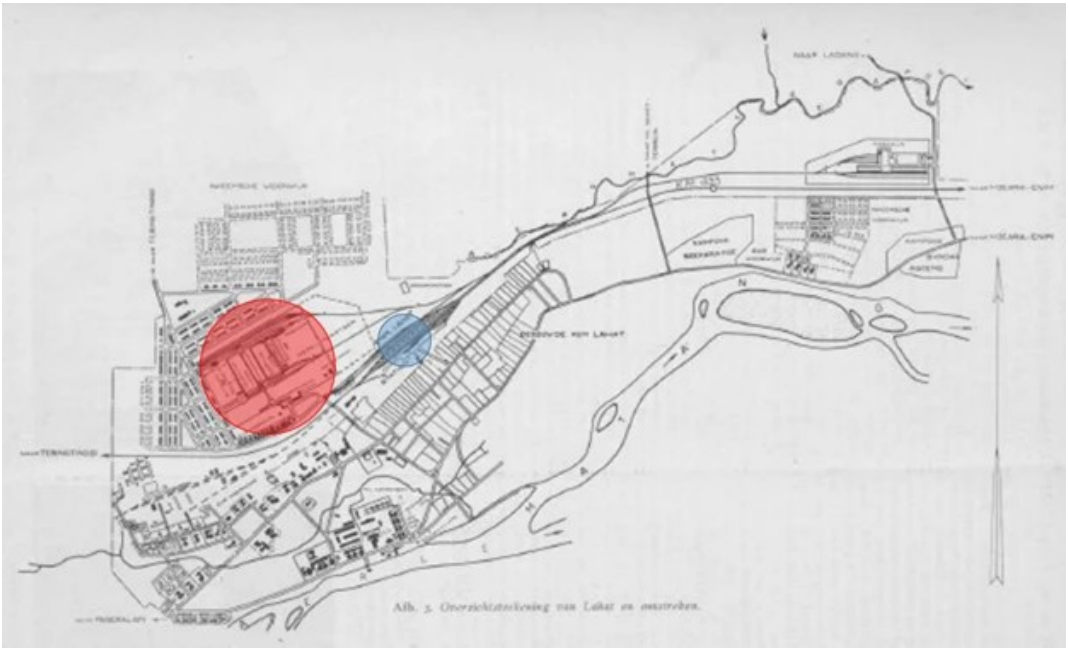

Figure 2. The location of *Werkplaats* Lahat is marked with a red circle, while the location of Lahat Station is marked with a blue circle (Anggraeny, 2026)

Lahat subsequently emerged as an important logistical and operational node within this expanding railway network. Its strategic position was reinforced by the establishment of the *Werkplaats* (central railway workshops), whose construction began in late 1929. The facility was located in Lahat because of its central position within the railway network and its suitability for maintaining and repairing locomotives, passenger coaches, and freight wagons. The establishment of this facility demonstrates that Lahat's significance extended beyond its function as a railway station to include the maintenance and operational management of the colonial railway system (Anggraeny, 2026). Beyond its transportation function, railway development also coincided with changes in the administrative importance of inland settlements. In Musi Ulu, the colonial government relocated the administrative capital of the *Onder Afdeeling* from Muara Beliti to Lubuklinggau.

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This decision was closely associated with economic developments, including rubber cultivation in Belalau, oil-palm production in Air Temam, and agricultural colonization in Tugumulyo (Susetyo & Ravico, 2021b). These activities required a transportation system capable of moving commodities efficiently toward Palembang. Following the opening of the Muara Saling–Lubuklinggau railway section in 1933, Lubuklinggau was formally designated as the new administrative seat of the *controleur* of Musi Ulu through *Staatsblad van Nederlandsch-Indië* 1934 No. 186 (3 April). This sequence illustrates how railway infrastructure supported the expansion of colonial economic activities and administrative functions in the interior



Figure 3. Lahat Station exemplifies the crucial function of transportation infrastructure in reinforcing colonial dominance and assimilating the hinterland into the political-economic framework of the Dutch East Indies.
From: Lahat station + emplacement -, (n.d.)

The integration of railway infrastructure into the colonial economic system also intersected with broader transformations in indigenous governance. Rather than abolishing traditional marga institutions, the colonial administration retained and incorporated them into a hierarchical bureaucratic structure. Local leaders, particularly the *pasirah*, continued to exercise administrative responsibilities but operated within a framework of colonial authority, under the supervision of officials such as the *controleur* and *assistant-resident* (Wijaya & Alauwiyah, 2025). Administrative reorganizations in Musi Ulu, including the restructuring of territorial units and the relocation of the administrative capital to Lubuklinggau, illustrate how local governing institutions were increasingly accommodated within

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colonial administrative arrangements. The colonial government also reorganized the territorial and bureaucratic relationships among marga units, while maintaining their role as intermediaries in local governance (Susetyo & Ravico, 2021). Railway expansion contributed to these developments by improving the transportation capacity and accessibility required to support colonial economic activities and administrative operations. Nevertheless, these institutional changes should be understood as part of a broader process of colonial administrative restructuring rather than as an exclusive consequence of railway development.

At the social and spatial levels, railway expansion created additional opportunities for the movement of commodities and passengers between inland settlements and regional economic centers. The railway facilitated the circulation of agricultural products and other resources while providing a faster means of transportation for local populations. However, access to railway services also reflected the colonial social hierarchy, as passenger facilities were organized into different travel classes and incorporated distinctions between European and indigenous passengers. These arrangements indicate that railway infrastructure simultaneously facilitated economic mobility and reproduced elements of colonial social stratification (Ravico & Susetyo, 2021). In the Besemah and surrounding inland regions, the expansion of railway connections provided additional conditions for changing patterns of economic interaction and spatial connectivity. Nevertheless, the extent to which railway development transformed local settlement patterns, labor relations, and community autonomy varied across different localities and requires further examination through contemporary administrative reports, railway traffic records, and local historical evidence. Overall, the South Sumatran railway network illustrates how colonial infrastructure functioned not merely as a transportation facility but also as an important material foundation for economic integration and the expansion of administrative reach. Lahat's position within this network demonstrates the interconnected relationship between transportation infrastructure, resource mobilization, and the territorial organization of colonial power in South Sumatra.

Restructuring administrative districts and extending colonial influence

The expansion of colonial administrative control in the interior of South Sumatra was shaped by the interaction between bureaucratic reorganization and the development of modern transportation infrastructure. Rather than initiating this transformation, railway construction reinforced an administrative framework that had already been established through successive colonial reforms. Following the enactment of *Staatsblad* 1906, No. 466, the Palembang Residency was reorganized into several administrative divisions, including the Afdeeling Palembangsche Bovenlanden, with Lahat as its administrative capital (*hoofdplaats*). This afdeeling comprised five onderafdeelingen: Lematang Ilir, Lematang Ulu, Pasemah-landen, Tebing Tinggi, and Musi Ulu. Each territorial unit had its own administrative center, including Pagar Alam for Pasemah-landen and Muara Beliti for Musi Ulu (Susetyo & Ravico, 2021). These arrangements demonstrate that colonial territorial administration was established through formal bureaucratic policies before the railway network reached the western interior of South Sumatra.

The restructuring of administrative districts continued through subsequent reforms, particularly the reorganization of 1912, which separated the indigenous

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administrative apparatus (*Inlandsche Bestuur*) from the European colonial administration (*Binnenlandsch Bestuur*). Within Onder Afdeeling Musi Ulu, the indigenous administrative structure was organized into District Musi Ulu and three subordinate units: Muara Beliti, Semangus, and Terawas. These administrative units incorporated several marga communities under the supervision of colonial officials. *Demangs* and assistant *demangs* were responsible for implementing administrative directives and remained accountable to the colonial *controleur*. The reorganization therefore established a more hierarchical administrative relationship between colonial officials and indigenous governing institutions. The consolidation and adjustment of marga boundaries also reflected considerations of territorial proximity, population size, and administrative convenience, rather than simply following existing traditional settlement boundaries (Susetyo & Ravico, 2021). This process illustrates how colonial authorities gradually incorporated indigenous institutions into a more standardized bureaucratic framework.

The relationship between infrastructural development and administrative expansion became particularly evident in the 1930s. The construction of the railway connection from Lahat to Lubuklinggau proceeded in stages, with the Lahat–Tebing Tinggi section opening on 1 July 1932, the Tebing Tinggi–Muara Saling section on 1 November 1932, and the final Muara Saling–Lubuklinggau section on 1 June 1933 (Ravico & Susetyo, 2021). Shortly afterward, the colonial administration designated Lubuklinggau as the new administrative seat of the controleur of Musi Ulu through Staatsblad van Nederlandsch-Indië No. 186, dated 3 April 1934. This decision transferred the administrative center from Muara Beliti to Lubuklinggau, placing civil registration, official documentation, and administrative regulations under the supervision of the colonial authorities based there. The appointment of W. P. Gitzels as *controleur* of Musi Ulu on 18 January 1935 further demonstrates the institutional implementation of this administrative relocation (Susetyo & Ravico, 2021). The chronological relationship between railway completion in 1933 and the relocation of the administrative headquarters in 1934 suggests that improved transportation accessibility supported the expansion of colonial administrative functions in the interior.

The incorporation of transportation infrastructure into the colonial administrative system also affected the position of indigenous governing institutions. Rather than completely abolishing the marga system, the colonial government retained these institutions while reorganizing their administrative responsibilities within a hierarchical structure. The *pasirah* continued to function as the head of the marga, but their position became increasingly integrated into the colonial bureaucratic apparatus. Meanwhile, *demangs* and assistant *demangs* served as intermediary officials connecting indigenous territorial administration with the European colonial bureaucracy. The responsibilities of local leaders were therefore increasingly linked to colonial administrative directives, while the appointment and recognition of marga leadership remained subject to colonial authority. The restructuring of marga institutions, including the amalgamation of neighboring units and the subordination of local officials to colonial administrators, illustrates the operation of indirect colonial governance in the Palembang Residency (Susetyo & Ravico, 2021; Panji & Suriana, 2014)

The railway also contributed to the economic integration of inland territories by facilitating the transportation of agricultural and plantation commodities. In

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Onder Afdeeling Musi Ulu, colonial economic activities included rubber cultivation in Belalau and Air Temam, oil-palm production in Taba Pingin, and agricultural development in Tugumulyo (Susetyo & Ravico, 2021). These activities generated transportation demands that encouraged the colonial government to develop a railway connection capable of moving commodities from the inland region toward Palembang. Railway accessibility also supported population mobility and the development of the Tugumulyo colonization project, particularly through the transportation of Javanese settlers to the agricultural settlement between 1937 and 1940. These developments indicate that railway infrastructure contributed not only to the circulation of goods but also to the geographical expansion of colonial agricultural and settlement policies. Nevertheless, the extent to which railway stations themselves became independent commercial centers requires additional evidence from local station records, commercial statistics, and contemporary administrative reports.

Ultimately, the restructuring of administrative districts in South Sumatra demonstrates how colonial territorial governance developed through the interaction of bureaucratic reform, the incorporation of indigenous institutions, and the expansion of transportation infrastructure. Lahat maintained its importance as the administrative capital of Afdeeling Palembangsche Bovenlanden, while Lubuklinggau acquired a more prominent position as the administrative center of Onder Afdeeling Musi Ulu following its designation as the seat of the controleur in 1934. The relationship between the completion of the railway connection in 1933 and the subsequent administrative relocation illustrates how infrastructure facilitated the consolidation of colonial authority in the interior. Rather than representing an entirely new system of governance, these developments reflected the gradual adaptation of existing territorial and indigenous institutions to the administrative and economic priorities of the Dutch colonial state in South Sumatra.

Conclusion

The development of colonial administration in the Onderafdeling Lahat region between 1860 and 1942 demonstrates that the expansion of Dutch authority in the interior of South Sumatra was a gradual political and institutional process involving bureaucratic consolidation, territorial reorganization, infrastructural development, and the incorporation of Indigenous institutions into the colonial administrative system. Rather than emerging as a fully established administrative unit from the beginning of the period, the administrative configuration of Lahat evolved through successive changes in territorial organization and governmental structures. The *controleur* played an important role in this process by supervising local administration, regulating the exercise of Indigenous authority, and connecting colonial officials with traditional institutions, including the *marga*, *pasirah*, and *kerio*. These findings indicate that colonial domination did not depend exclusively on military intervention or the direct replacement of existing institutions. Instead, it operated through institutional adaptation and indirect rule, which enabled the colonial government to extend its authority while retaining selected elements of indigenous governance. Infrastructure development, particularly the expansion of railway connectivity during the twentieth century, subsequently reinforced the administrative and economic integration of the region. This study contributes to the historiography of Indonesian colonial administration

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by providing a microhistorical analysis of how colonial power was established, negotiated, and institutionalized in the Lahat hinterland.

The findings also reveal that colonial administrative reorganization had consequences extending beyond the immediate objectives of territorial control and bureaucratic efficiency. The incorporation of Indigenous institutions into colonial governance altered the relationship between customary authority and state administration, positioning local leaders as intermediaries within a hierarchical system of colonial supervision. This institutional transformation formed part of a longer historical trajectory in which customary structures were subsequently reconfigured under postcolonial government policies. Nevertheless, the extent to which contemporary administrative boundaries, local leadership patterns, and governance practices directly reflect colonial arrangements requires further historical verification, as these institutions also underwent significant changes after Indonesian independence. The historical significance of colonial administration in Lahat therefore lies not simply in the persistence of particular territorial or institutional structures, but also in the reconfiguration of relationships between local authority, administrative institutions, and centralized government.

This research is limited by the uneven availability of archival materials and the predominance of colonial administrative perspectives, which restrict the reconstruction of Indigenous experiences and local responses to colonial intervention. Its primary emphasis on administrative institutions also leaves aspects of everyday social relations, local political negotiations, and Indigenous agency insufficiently explored. Furthermore, differences in administrative terminology and territorial boundaries across the period require cautious interpretation when reconstructing institutional continuity and change. Future research could address these limitations by incorporating local and family archives, oral histories, ethnohistorical approaches, and comparative studies of other regions in South Sumatra. Such investigations would provide a more nuanced understanding of how colonial policies were experienced, negotiated, and adapted by local communities, while further clarifying the long-term transformation of Indigenous governance in the region.

Generative AI Statement

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Tomy Wijaya contributed to the writing of the original manuscript, conceptualization, methodology, data collection, historical source analysis, interpretation of findings, and manuscript revision; Fatimah Alauwiyah contributed to the translation and language editing; Dedi Irwanto and Risa Marta Yati contributed to the academic supervision and critical review. All authors read and approved the final version of the manuscript. This research received no specific funding from any public, commercial, or non-profit funding agency. The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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