

## The Influence of Dutch Colonialism on Traditional Houses in Kabupaten Subang, West Java, Indonesia

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### ABSTRACT

This paper traces the influence of Dutch colonialism on traditional houses of an agricultural community in Kabupaten Subang, West Java, Indonesia through the emergence and evolutionary transformation of balandongan, a distinctive structure that has significant role and meaning in the dwelling culture of the local people until today. Field surveys were carried out in six kampongs, namely kampong Gunung Sembung, Mariuk, Cibogo, Sumur Gintung, Gembor, and Padamulya. It is argued that balandongan was a child of the Ethical Policy which has opened vast opportunities for private enterprises to develop their business and for farmers to attain more prosperous life. Balandongan was first constructed by well-off farmers in Kabupaten Subang as an additional structure to provide spaces for rice production activity and its ritual cycles.

**KEYWORDS:** Kabupaten Subang, balandongan, traditional house, the Ethical Policy.

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### INTRODUCTION

Kabupaten Subang is a regency located in the northern part of West Java Province, situated at 107°31' – 107°54' east longitude and 6°11' – 6°49' south latitude, with the total population of 1,477,483 peoples, covering an administrative area of 205,176.95 hectares. The majority (43.28%) of its inhabitants are farmer and agricultural workers. Total areas of paddy fields in Kabupaten Subang amounted to 171, 957 hectares, yielding about 1 million tons of rice a year(BPPDK Subang, 2011). Not surprisingly, this fertile regency is hailed as “the rice stock of West Java”.

The history of rice production in Kabupaten Subang dates back to the XVII century when the king of Mataram Sultan Agung started his plan to conquer the city of Batavia which was under control of the VOC (*Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie* or Dutch East India Company, 1602-1799). Since the Kingdom of Mataram was situated in Central Java Province, accordingly the northern coast of Subang was selected as a strategic spot for the military base and central logistic of Mataram armies, due to its proximity to Batavia and also its convenient accessibility from the Java Sea. The Mataram soldiers soon arrived at the north coast of Subang, cleared the forest, and opened paddy fields. Unfortunately, this pioneering endeavor was uncovered by the Dutch who consequently burned all paddy fields and granaries. Mataram armies tried to attack Batavia consecutively in 1628 and 1629. However, they failed to defeat the Dutch owing to poor strategies and logistics. (Niemeijer, H.E., 2012:15). To evade punishment from the king while continuing their revolt, the defeated Mataram armies resided in the north coast of Subang. They procreated and spread around the area, and become the forerunner of many earliest villages in the northern part of Subang. For quite a long time, the descendants of Mataram armies remained a threat for the VOC who persistently attempted to protect Batavia for its political and economic interests.

The region of Subang at the time was under the jurisdiction of the Sumedang Kingdom, who ruled under the patronage of Mataram Kingdom. To shield itself from aggressive expansion of neighboring kingdom of Banten who aspired to expand its territories, Sumedang Kingdom resorted to the protection of the VOC by granting it an exclusive control over the region of Subang. Such decision incited resistances and rebellions from the local communities, who subsequently launched repeated attacks on the VOC and the representatives of Sumedang kingdom in Subang, with the support of Banten kingdom who had the interest of taking over Batavia and conquer Sumedang kingdom. The chaotic condition reached its height when Ranga Gede the representative of Sumedang kingdom in Subang was imprisoned by the Banten Kingdom (Hardjasaputra, A.S., 2008:51).

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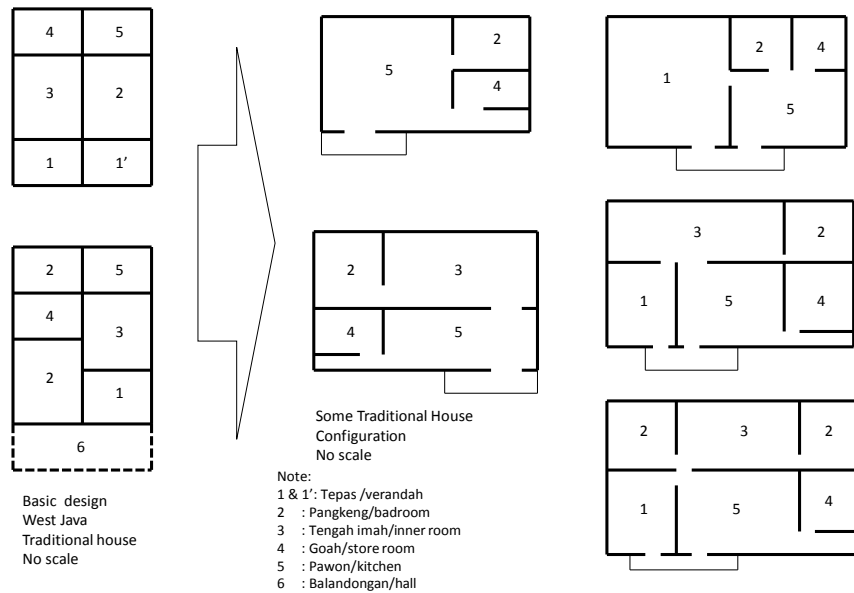
In 1799 the VOC was dissolved due to the high cost of warfare, business loss, heavy debt and also political change in the Netherlands. During the British interregnum (1811-1816), the region of Subang was handed over to the British power with Thomas Stamford Raffles as its leader. The British outlined an agricultural policy to boost the export commodities for the international market. Soon after, due to a financial shortage, the British released the region of Subang to the private enterprises.

After the British Interregnum, the Dutch state took over the VOC possessions. Since 1830, *cultuurstelsel*, a system of forced cultivations and indentured labor was introduced on Java, which brought the Dutch and their Indonesian collaborator's enormous wealth. The cultivation system tied peasants to their land, forcing them to work in government-owned plantations for 60 days of the year. They were obligated to pay exhaustive taxes to the colonial administration, in the form of labor, land, and produce. The system was abolished in a more liberal period after 1870. In 1901 the Dutch adopted the Ethical Policy, which included the expansion of public works (mostly irrigation canals), education, health care, and a cautious move towards a more autonomous and democratic administration (Colombijn, F., 2010:30).

The Ethical policy has opened vast opportunities for private enterprises in the region of Subang to develop their business and for farmers to attain more prosperous life. Some of the farmers managed to acquire significant properties and turned into new landlords, while others played crucial roles as middle-men between peasants and traders. The changing scale and pattern of economic activities in the agricultural sector have gradually changed the landscape of housing and settlement in the region of Subang. Small communal rice-barns to store rice-stock for the community members were replaced by big rice-storages to store rice-stock as an economic commodity. Spatial needs of the peasant family are also growing, to accommodate lodging for seasonal laborers and other related social and cultural activities. To accommodate all these new functions and activities, the farmers found a convenience solution through the provision of a large multipurpose hall right in front of their houses, which is called *balandongan*.

**Traditional Houses of West Java: Typologies and Forms**

Farmers in Kabupaten Subang dwell in traditional houses whose typologies are prevalent amongst the natives of West Java Province (Figure 1& 2). Its spatial arrangement comprises:1) *Tepas/ Emper* or verandah, a room to entertain guests or to socialize with neighbours. 2) *Pangkeng* or bedroom, a bedroom dedicated to the parents. 3) *Tengah Imah* or middle/living room serves as a bedroom for children. 4) *Goah/ Padaringan* or rice storage, a sacred place closely related to the agricultural rituals. 5) *Dapur* or kitchen serves as food preparation quarter and family dining room(Harun, I. B. etals, 2011:39).



Sources: Departemen Pendidikan Dan Kebudayaan (1981/1982) & Dinas Pariwisata Dan Kebudayaan Provinsi Jawa Barat (2011)

Figure.1. Basic floorplan of West Java traditional houses and its development



Figure 2. Typical traditional houses in *Kampung Pulo*

The use of spaces in peasant houses is regulated based on gender division. Female members of the family have an exclusive access to kitchen and *goah*. Male members of the family have an exclusive access to *tepas*. *Tengahimah* is considered as a neutral zone, hence accessible for both female and male. Similar gender division also can be observed in Sundanese traditional housing at Kampung Naga. *Dapur*/kitchen and *goah* are regarded as a female zone, *tepas/teras* as a male zone, and *tengahimah* as a neutral zone (Padma, A. at als, 2001:21). It was a common practice that male youth spend most of their time in *mushola*, an outbuilding dedicated to the male community members and guests for religious activities such as praying, reciting Quran, and mundane activities such as community gathering and lodging. The important function of *mushola* can be seen in the layout of Sundanese traditional village of Kampung Pulo. The *mushola* is situated at the edge of the kampung, between two rows of houses. (Munawar, Z., 2002:26). In some villages with a larger population, *mushola* was then transformed into a small mosque which is called *masigit* (Ponder, H.W., 1990:61).

The architecture of traditional houses in West Java are significantly characterized by their *susuhunan* or roof-forms (Figure 3), which are named according to visual analogy or metaphor that it can stimulate, such as *asjolopong*, *jogo Anjing*, *badak heuay*, *parahu kumereb*, *julang ngapak*.

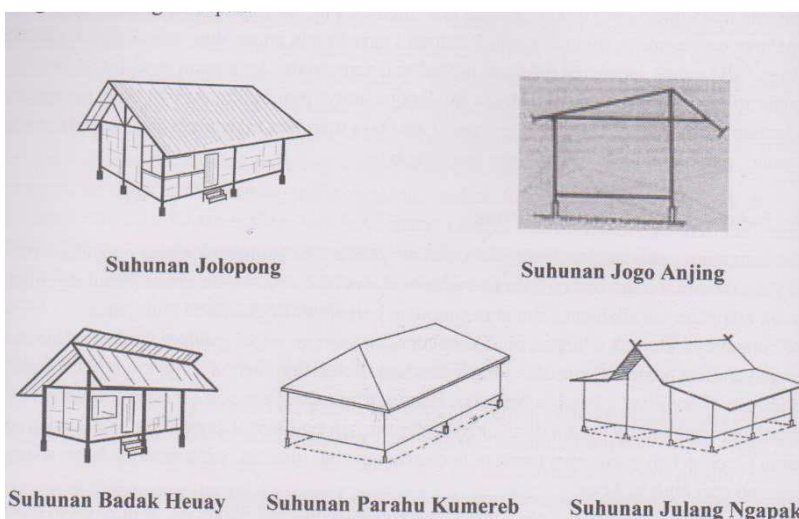


Figure 3. Roof-forms of traditional houses in West Java  
Source: Harun, I.B., 2011

Most of the traditional houses in West Java were originally made of bamboo materials which are locally available, strong and durable (Figure 4). Bamboo materials were vastly used for structural elements, roof frame, and also *bilik*, an interwoven bamboo sheet for wall covering (Ponder, H.W., 1989:38). During the colonial period, to prevent the spread of pest diseases, the government banned the use of bamboo as a building material. Subsequently, people resorted to alternative materials such as wood and masonry, which give more permanent expression to their houses. The abandonment of bamboo as a primary source of building materials has detrimental effects on the local technology and craftsmanship, and to the cooperative spirit of *gotong royong*, as the dwelling unit has become an expression of individual taste and preference, rather than cultural identity and unity.



Figure 4. Bambo materials were used for wall covering

In conjunction with houses as dwelling units, important structures in Sundanese traditional settlement are *lumbung* or rice-barns (Figure 5). The number and size of rice-barns owned by a kampong indicate the welfare of its community members. Each kampong generally also has a number of community *rice-barns* as food reservation in case of natural disasters, famine or harvest failure. During the *cultuurstelsel* period, farmers were obliged to pay tax for the rice harvested and stored in the *lumbung*. The village head was commonly appointed by the Dutch as tax collector. After the Ethical policy, when rice produces has become an economic commodity, not merely as a daily staple, *lumbung* gradually lost its cultural, social and economic role and meaning.



Figure 5. Typical *Lumbung* or rice-barn

The improvement of economic activities and supporting infrastructures after the Ethical Policy significantly transformed the cultural behavior of the peoples and pattern of built environment in the region of Subang. With the economic affluent, desires for luxurious goods such as Chinese porcelain, quality *sarong* and *batik*, and other lavishness germinated among the richer strata of the community. Extensive road systems totally changed the settlement landscape from cluster pattern to linear ribbon development, following the stretch of transportation lines and proximity to the paddy fields, processing sites, and distribution points.

If in the earlier period *lumbung* represented welfare of the village community, starting from the beginning of 20<sup>th</sup>-century *balandongan* represented the prosperity and wealth of a family. Bigger and more pleasant *balandongan* indicates richer and higher status of its owner. *Lumbung* which has lost its symbolic meaning gradually receded to the backyard, hidden from the public view.

## OBJECTIVE AND METHODOLOGY

The objective of this research study is to depict *balandongan* as a distinctive structure in traditional houses of an agricultural community in the Kabupaten of Subang, which emerged and developed along the course of Dutch colonialism and significantly influenced the dwelling culture of the local community until today.

A literature review was conducted to trace the historical development of traditional houses in West Java. Field surveys to record the architectural characteristics of *balandongan* were carried out in the northern part of Kabupaten Subang which is recognized as the largest cultivation area, covering six kampongs, namely Gunung Sembung, Mariuk, Cibogo, Sumur Gintung, Gembor, and Padamulya, followed by interviews with the elders, community leaders and key persons at the village and kabupaten levels, to acquire reliable information pertaining to the origin, function, meaning and role of *balandongan* in daily life of farmers in Kabupaten Subang.

It is interesting to note that *balandongan* as a permanent structure is only exists in the northern part of Kabupaten Subang, where the inhabitants in the majority are from Javanese ethnic. In the southern part, where the inhabitants in the majority are from Sundanese ethnic, *balandongan* or *balai* is only conceived as a temporary building to accommodate festive activities such as wedding celebration and major religious events, to be demolished or dismantled after the occasion concluded.

### The Origin of Balandongan

The term *balandongan* in Sundanese language originally refers to a place to keep or pile, or an open shed to store (Rig, J., 2009:35), or a temporary building to accommodate provisional activities related to family, community, or ruler's affairs. Generally the form of the *Balandongan* is rectangular, with the main structure made from *bamboo* tightened with *ijuk* rope, no wall, with earth floor and stage for performance (Rosidi, A., 2000:90).

*Balandongan* in Kabupaten Subang has *tarub* as its counterpart in Central Java and *wantilan* in Bali. *Tarub* is a temporary structure made of wood or bamboo, built for accidental social and cultural events such as *wayang* performance, wedding, or child circumcision ritual. *Wantilan* is a large public hall dedicated for multipurpose events, such as religious ritual and cock-fighting. Judging from similarities in terms of their function and flexibility, it can be inferred that *balandongan* is an architectural form adapted from *wantilan*.

If the noble families in Central Java adopted *wantilan* and develop it into a *Pendopo*, a permanent building serves as a formal multipurpose hall, the farmers in Kabupaten Subang develop it into a *balandongan*, which also serves as a multipurpose hall. Main distinctions between *pendopo* and *balandongan* are as follows: *pendopo* has a square floor plan, richly ornamented in its columns and ceilings, and has flooring material of high quality (Figure 6), while *balandongan* has a rectangular floor plan, barely unornamented, and has an earthen floor (Figure 7). *Pendopo* in particular is only used for refined and civilized activities, while *balandongan* in particular is used for daily and practical purposes such as storage of agricultural produce and tools.



Figure 6. Typical *pendopo* of noble families in Central Java



Figure 7. Typical *Balandongan* in Kabupaten Subang

### **Balandongan and Its Evolution**

Indisputably, *balandongan* was first constructed by well-off farmers in Kabupaten Subang as an additional structure to provide spaces for rice production activity and its ritual cycles (as confirmed by Abah Uhmar, an informal leader from kampong Keresekek, 2013). Prior to planting activities, *ruwatan*, a ritual dedicated to *Dewi Sri* (the goddess of rice) is performed in *balandongan* to receive her blessing for a good harvest. This ritual is usually followed by *wayang* performance. During the planting season, *balandongan* is used as sleeping quarters for temporary laborers hired by the owner of the house to till the paddy's field. When harvest time comes, *balandongan* serves as a place to store the paddy seeds. During the day time, paddy seeds are dried under the sun and returned to the store in the afternoon or when it rains. After the harvest time, *balandongan* turned into a showcase of wealth, as people passing by can observe how the house owner earned the season, and also as a rice shop where the business transaction with buyers who usually come from nearby cities took place (Figure 8).



Figure 8. *Balandongan* after the harvest

To build a *balandongan*, first of all, a house owner has to perform land purification ritual called *ruwatbumi*, to cast away evil spirits and ask the God Almighty to grant protection and prosperity to the inhabitants. The ritual starts with *wayang kulit* (shadow puppet) performance or *pantun* (poetry) recital, to be followed by *selamatan*, a communal prayer and Quran reading involving family and neighbours. Finally, the house owner plants a *hanjuangtree* and gives offering to symbolize that land purification ritual has ended and the construction of *balandongan* proceed.

There is no standard concerning the size of *balandongan*. Generally, it has 7 m width and 12 m length, 2 m space between columns, and a shield roof-form. Numbers of the rafter is determined based on Javanese belief system, which is consisted of 5 (five) consecutive elements, namely: *Sri* (earth), *Lungguh* (social status), *Dunya* (treasure), *Lara* (sickness), *Pati* (death). The counting system returns to 1 (*Sri*) after 5 (*death*). 1 (*Sri*) is considered as the best number. 4 (*sickness*) and 5 (*death*) are bad numbers to be avoided. Consequently, the best numbers for rafter is 6, giving 12 m as the best length of *balandongan*. People strongly believed that adherence to these principles will determine the good fates of their families. The best day to start the construction of *balandongan* is determined based on its cardinal orientation. Construction of a *balandongan* that faces the west should not be started on Wednesday, that faces the east should not be started on Thursday, that faces the north should not be started on Friday, and that faces the south should not be started on Monday.

In the 1930s, *balandongan* was generally made of bamboo materials for columns and lintels, and *alang-alang* leaf for roof covering. In line with the economic improvement of the community, in the 1940s people began to construct *Balandongan* with woods for columns and lintels, and ceramic for roof tiles. *Balandongan* was also built not only for functional reasons but also to provide comfortable space in the hot and humid tropical zone (as affirmed by Abah Ruslan, an informal leader from kampong Cibogo, 2013).

In the later stage, the prosperous life has allowed farmers to celebrate religious, social and private lives at a bigger scale and more frequent, and hence bring up the need for a bigger hall to accommodate such events. Accordingly, the ritual of life cycles such as child circumcision, pregnancy phases, wedding, and family gathering and their festive activities such as music, dance and *wayang* performances are also carried out in *balandongan*. In certain cases, *balandongan* has also become a venue for the community meeting to discuss public affairs, and also a *dapur umum* or community kitchen in case of emergencies. Hence, *balandongan* began to be associated with a multipurpose hall.

Observation during the field study indicates that *balandongan* nowadays is located rightly in front of the house, facing the street. It is generally made of a wood structure with stone footing and ceramic roof tiles. The size of *balandongan* varies from one to another house, depending on the wealth of the house owner. Bigger *balandongan* generally expresses higher social prestige and economic strata. It is interesting to note that architectural features of *balandongan* are also adopted in the design of several *Kantor kecamatan* or sub-district administration office in Kabupaten Subang (Figure 9).



Figure 9. Administration office (*Kantor kecamatan*) that adopt the architectural features of *balandongan*

*Balandongan* today has become a central part of daily activities of the people, as it provides better thermal comfort in the hot and humid tropical climate. Besides its traditional function as a place to store agricultural produce and tools, *balandongan* can also serve as family room with a set of furniture made of wood or bamboo, as workshop to produce handicrafts such as basket, kitchen utensils, and table mats, as the main kitchen to cook traditional culinary during a festivity, as sleeping area for adult and children at night when the weather is fine, and also as garage for modern agricultural vehicle such as tractor.

### **The Future of Balandongan**

The introduction of modern technologies into the agricultural sector during the last few decades has drastically changed the pattern of rice production. Manual labors are massively replaced by machinery, with the consequence of job loss for many agricultural workers. The way paddy is processed into rice has also dramatically changed. Paddy harvested from the field is directly transported to the rice mills, and consequentl, the original function of *balandongan* as a place to store and process the agricultural product becomes obsolete. Many buyers now have their own rice processing plant that can produce several tons of rice a day. When the harvest time comes, they make a deal with the farmers at the field and afterward directly load the commodities into their trucks. Such business deal is made possible due to the high dependency of the farmers on the buyers, who lend them a certain amount of money as working capital to buy seeds, pesticides, and pay the laborers. These liabilities have to be paid right after the harvest finished. Such business practice is called *ijon*, which is formally made illegal by the government, as it caused negative impacts to the bargaining power and the well-being of the farmers.

In the last two decades, only a few *balandongan* were newly constructed, indicating the decrease of the economic welfare of the farmers in general, caused by several factors. First, the farmers lost many of their potential benefit from the business system of *ijon*. Second, *balandongan* no longer has an economic role in the new way of processing agricultural products, hence it is not considered as the highest priority for the family to build. Third, the family structure and religious law have caused the family heritages (productive land and other properties) to be divided among the offsprings, but not all of the children are successful in managing and developing their business.





Figure 10. *Balandongan* nowadays

Nowadays *balandongan* has undergone various functional expansion. It is no longer exclusively associated with agricultural activities, but also with business, services, and also governmental activities (Figure 10). Many *balandongans* turned into *small-shop*, *automotive repair workshop*, *restaurant*, or even unit of government community development programs, such as *keluarga berencana* (family planning), *posyandu* (mother and child care), pre-school education, etc.

What is the future of *balandongan*? Will it be disappearing or maintaining its existence despite its multiplicity of roles and meanings? That is a question that only time can answer.

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