



THE IMPACT OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF EMMAHAVEN PORT ON THE WEST COAST OF SUMATRA ON NIAS WORKERS, 1887-1920s

Anatona Gulo¹, Ahmad Muhajir², Ana Fitri Ramadani³, Wisewarna Nazara⁴,
Lusia Yus Arimawati Nehe⁵, and Nighel Chelio Febri⁶

^{1,2,3,5,6}Department of History, Faculty of Humanities Universitas Andalas, Padang, Indonesia

⁴Independent Researcher

e-mail: anatona2004@yahoo.com

KEYWORD

Nias Laborers;
Settlement;
Market;
Padang;
Hybrid Economy.

ABSTRACT

One of the important developments on the west coast of Sumatra in the late 19th century was the construction of an international-standard seaport, Emmahaven, now known as Teluk Bayur. Emmahaven was initially intended as a coal export port for coal from Ombilin, Sawahlunto, in the interior of Sumatra. By 1910, the port had developed into an export port for Portland Cement, now known as Semen Padang, and other West Sumatran agricultural products. Emmahaven Harbor Project, which began construction in 1887, required a significant amount of labor, including workers of Nias ethnic background. They were employed by the Dutch colonial government because they were widely recognized for their diligence and tenacity. In addition to their involvement during the construction phase, Nias people were also recruited after the port became operational in 1892 to work as cargo handlers, loading and unloading goods from ships anchored at the pier. The focus of this paper is to analyze the extent to which the construction of Emmahaven Port affected these Nias workers. This paper is written using historical method, by describing and analyzing the Dutch and local data/sources. The findings indicate that employment opportunities at Emmahaven Port and related projects had a significant positive impact on the socio-economic conditions of Nias workers in the diaspora.

INTRODUCTION

The turn of the 19th and 20th centuries was a crucial period in Indonesian history. This period was marked by the implementation of the Open Door Policy (Dutch: *opendeurpolitiek*) by the Dutch East Indies government. Introduced in 1870 to encourage foreign capital investment, the policy had begun to yield promising results. Since then, extensive development initiatives and infrastructure projects have been carried out. Two of the oldest mining and mineral-based industrial enterprises in the Indonesian Archipelago were established in the West Coast Residency of Sumatra: the Ombilin coal mine in Sawahlunto, followed by the cement factory in Indarung, Padang (now known as Semen Padang). The export of these commodities required an international-standard seaport capable of accommodating large oceangoing vessels.

To achieve this objective, the Dutch East Indies government commenced the construction of a seaport in the Brandewijnbaai area in 1887. The area was subsequently renamed Koninginnebaai (Queen's Bay; *Teluk Ratu*). The port was named Emmahaven after Queen Emma (Adelheid Emma Wilhelmina Theresia), who served as Queen Regent of the Netherlands during that period. The designation of Emmahaven as the official name of the port was formally announced in September 1889— 2 years after the commencement of its

construction—by the Governor-General of the Dutch East Indies, who was based in Batavia. The name was adopted only after receiving formal approval from the Kingdom of the Netherlands, under whose authority the Dutch East Indies was administered [1].

The construction of Emmahaven Port was primarily driven by the discovery of the Ombilin coal deposits in the 1860s. Coal is one of the most important energy sources and is highly sought after in international markets. This mining operation generated significant economic benefits. In order to maximize the economic value of this mining enterprises, the Dutch colonial government developed an integrated system comprising three interrelated projects on the west coast of Sumatra. There were three development project activities that were carried out simultaneously: 1) coal mining exploitation; 2) construction of a railway line to transport coal from Sawahlunto to the port; and 3) construction of a representative port to export coal [2].

The construction of these three projects required a large number of laborers. The construction of Emmahaven Port alone involved more than 1,000 workers working on a daily basis [3]. Most of the labor force was recruited from outside the port area. One group originated from Nias, an island in the Indian Ocean off the west coast of Sumatra.

It appears that the Dutch colonial government continued to follow the established pattern. More than a century before Emmahaven was built, the Dutch East India Company (VOC) had recruited many people from Nias as workers in various sectors in the West Coast of Sumatra (*Sumatra's Westkust*), including Padang [4]. This choice was made because people from Nias were considered diligent and well-suited to physically demanding manual labor [5].

The presence of workers from Nias Island in Emmahaven extended not only from the construction phase through its completion and operation, but also continued into the following century. Their labor remained in demand in other sectors, particularly those related to port activities. This paper examines the impacts experienced by Nias workers during their involvement in the Emmahaven Port development project and in the subsequent decades.

METHOD

This paper is written using historical research methods [6]. The initial stage of the historical method is the heuristic phase, involving the identification and collection of relevant data and historical sources concerning the presence of Nias workers during the construction of Emmahaven Harbour. The sources collected comprise primary (contemporary) sources and secondary sources.

Primary sources include travelers' accounts, magazine and newspapers published at the end of the 19th and early 20th centuries. Meanwhile, secondary sources include journal articles, books, and online publications. All data that was collected through the heuristic stage was then selected. All primary and secondary data, after undergoing internal and external criticism, were then analyzed to reveal historical facts. final outcome of this research is presented in the form of a historical narrative, namely historiography [7].

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Building the Port

The construction of Emmahaven Port comprised of five priority projects that were mutually interrelated. First, construction began with the excavation and leveling of the hillside that obstructed the intended harbor entrance. Once leveled, the area became suitable for railway construction and other transport systems used to carry coal from the Ombilin mines in Sawahlunto. The location was later known as *Bukit Putus* (lit., Severed Hill). Second, andesite rock was extracted and transported for breakwater construction, with a portion used for coastal reclamation to deepen the central area for pier development. Third, the construction of a railway station and platform within the port area. Fourth, the construction of a coal storage warehouse within the port area. Fifth, the construction of a port pier, together with supporting infrastructure such as an export-import office, shipping companies, a police station, shipyard facilities, a customs office, post office, health clinic, port administration office, official residence, workers' dormitories, warehouses, restaurants, a cinema, cafés, and other related facilities.

For this work, the Nias workers were put into a team of trained stonemasons. Among them were individuals who had prior experience in carving andesite stone for ancestral worship practices in their place of origin, Nias Island. Through their involvement in the Emmahaven construction project, they gained further expertise in construction methods utilizing modern tools and equipment [8]. In addition, people from Nias possessed traditional knowledge and skills in carpentry. They brought carpentry knowledge derived from Nias Island's indigenous architectural traditions, particularly those associated with the construction of *omo sebua* (main house for the chief of a clan or village) and *omo hada* (traditional houses). The building served not only as a residence but also incorporated earthquake-resistant construction features.

Besides working as masons and carpenters, Nias workers were also employed as blacksmiths, furniture makers, mechanics, and other skilled workers. Outside the port area, they were involved in the excavation and grading of land designated for railway construction. Furthermore, some workers were employed in general labor and maintenance duties, including cleaning work within the port area under the supervision of the BOW (*Burgerlijke Openbare Werken*) service. Despite receiving low wages, the workers developed into a highly capable workforce under effective leadership.

2. Loading and Unloading of Goods on Ships

The construction of Emmahaven Harbour lasted 5 years, from 1887 to 1892. Upon completion of the port, workforce activities were redirected toward cargo handling operations, including the loading and unloading of vessels at the port. As in the construction phase, cargo loading and unloading activities for both exports and imports at Emmahaven Port also required a substantial labor force. The main export commodities included coal, cement, and several plantation products such as cinnamon, rubber, and coffee. Meanwhile, imported goods consisted of weapons, flour, gypsum (used as one of raw materials required in cement production), ceramics, carpets, iron, fertilizer, vehicles, salt, wire, rice, and other commodities.

A number of Nias population, particularly those residing in the vicinity of Emmahaven Harbour, utilized this opportunity. Among them were individuals who had previously worked in port construction. Similar to earlier Nias migrants who settled in the Apenberg area and its surroundings across the Batang Arau River in Padang during the 17th and 18th centuries, Nias laborers commonly engaged in cargo loading and unloading on ships and were paid wages in cash. They work diligently. The wages earned from the work are used for daily living expenses [9].

3. Settlement in the Emmahaven Hills

The Nias population has long been settled in the chain of hills located south of Padang City. They inhabited the area gradually. Their arrival at the end of the 19th century was the umpteenth wave, consisting of Nias people who joined as workers on the Emmahaven development project, including the installation of a railway line to the harbor. Nias workers are documented as one of the labor groups employed by the Dutch in the construction of the project [10].

In the early 1900s, historical records indicate the presence of Nias ethnic families residing on Emmahaven Hill. This community lived in simple houses made of wooden or bamboo poles, with thatched roofs made of palm leaves. These houses were built on hilltops and slopes, both on the eastern side facing the port area and on the western side overlooking Air Manis Village and nearby islands, including Pisang Gadang Island and Pisang Ketek Island [11].

At that time, the population of Nias people residing on Emmahaven Hill remained relatively small. However, following the completion and operation of Emmahaven Port, the number of residents increased. Although no census data were available to determine their exact numbers, this community appears to constitute the majority of the population residing on the hill.

Besides the Nias people, the Emmahaven area was also inhabited by the Minangkabau ethnic group. However, their houses were built on the lower plains around the foot of the hills, still within the harbor area. In general, this Minangkabau community was engaged in trading activities. Some also worked at the port.

There were also other ethnic groups recruited by the Dutch, including Javanese, Sundanese, Ambonese, and Manadonese, serving both as workers and as security personnel. Similar to the Minangkabau ethnic group,

these ethnic groups also lived in the lowlands near the harbor. Some of their residences became the basis for as street names such as Jalan Ambon and Jalan Manado.

The Nias people were so predominant in their settlement on Emmahaven Hill and the surrounding hills that a European writer and photographer who visited Padang in the early nineteenth century described Emmahaven Hill and the surrounding southern hills of Padang as the “Nias people’s hills” (*heuvels der Niassers*) [12].

4. Farming

The availability of relatively extensive land in these hilly areas encouraged the Nias population to engage in agricultural activities. Nias farmers who lived on Emmahaven Hill and its surroundings, such as Karan Hill and Air Manis Hill, used the land for agriculture. They cleared the forest and transformed it into farmland for agricultural use.

The Nias community established and maintained gardens in the area, where they cultivated a variety of plant species. Some plants are perennials, able to survive for years or even decades. The Nias people in Padang referred to these species as “old plants.” Some examples were coconut, durian, kuini (fragrant wild mango), rambutan, nutmeg, bamboo, and others. There were also short-lived plants, commonly referred as “young plants”, which included cassava, sweet potatoes, taro, bananas, and others [13].

A report by Van Carries on a visit to Emmahaven Hill at the end of the nineteenth century, after the completion of Emmahaven Harbour, describes the environment of the hill. He departed from the center of Padang City to Kampung Air Manis and continued to Emmahaven on foot. Carries reports that, before the arrival of the Nias people in Emmahaven, the hills were still covered in dense forest. After the Nias people settled there, the area was gradually converted into agricultural land. Further information about the existence of the Nias people on Emmahaven Hill was written by van Carries in 1899, as quoted below. “Not far from Padang, in the nearby hills behind Air Manis, namely in Emmahaven, Nias people can also be found cultivating mixed crops and working as woodcutters.” [14].

The Nias people who lived in the hilly area of Emmahaven Harbor still cultivated their agricultural land in traditional ways. The activity began with forest clearance. The grass was cleared and the trees were uprooted by cutting them down. When clearing and clearing forests, Nias people in Padang usually did it collectively. After clearance, the land was left for several days until it became partially dry. After that, the weeds and wood were removed and piled up. The usable timber was separated, then cut, split with an axe, and tied into bundles. The wood was sold to residents living around the port as fuel.

Because they lived in the hills with relatively extensive agricultural land, Nias people also raised chickens. For the Nias Padang community, chicken was the main menu at traditional ceremonies. Chicken was an important ceremonial dish, known as *urakha*, which cannot be prepared in the same way as on Nias Island. The people of Padang City, including Emmahaven, were heterogeneous, consisting of various ethnicities and religions. Since the beginning, the Nias people in Padang have demonstrated local wisdom by developing an attitude of tolerance toward fellow urban residents, as reflected in their practice of serving chicken as a main dish [15]. By raising chickens themselves, They no longer needed to obtain chickens from others.

5. Trading at Gaung Market

Over time, the Emmahaven area, both within and outside the harbor, has developed. The area is increasingly visited by residents for work-related purposes. They came from various ethnicities and nationalities. Apart from the Nias and Minangkabau people as the local population, there were also Javanese, Sundanese, Ambonese, Manadonese, Dutch and Chinese people. To meet the daily needs of these residents, a market was established. Previously, they shopped at the main market in the center of Padang City, namely *Kampung Jao* Market, which is 7 km from Emmahaven.

A residential settlement in the Koninginnebaai area, known as Gaung, served as a marketplace. It was located next to Emmahaven harbor, to the northeast. *Gaung* Market was officially established in 1903, or a decade after Emmahaven began operating [16]. The market provided various daily necessities ranging from basic necessities such as rice, chicken eggs, cooking oil, flour, granulated sugar, to vegetables, clothing, snacks,

and others. Gaung Market also functioned as a fish market. Its location was right on the beach giving the fishermen the opportunity to sell various types of fresh fish that they catch in the waters of the Indian Ocean.

Gaung Market held significant importance for the Nias community, especially for farmers residing in the hill range from Emmahaven Hill to Karan, Cimba'u, Lubuk, Mata Air, and Babuai Bridge, including Bukit Putus and its surrounding areas. They regularly visited Gaung Market. They visited quite often and had direct access to this market because it was relatively close to their settlements, which are within a radius of 1 to 3 km.

Apart from buying various daily necessities, the main interest was to sell the agricultural products that they had cultivated. Together with traders residing around Gaung and those from villages such as Parak Lawas, Pampangan, Sungai Beremas, and Bukit Lampu, among others, the Nias people sold their agricultural produce, including cassava, sweet potatoes, taro, nutmeg, betel nuts, vegetables, and fruits, at the market.

Several types of vegetables sold by the Nias people include cassava leaves (Nias: *bulu gowi*; Minangkabau: *pucuk ubi*), papaya leaves (*bulu mbala*; *sampelo* leaves), taro (*gamumu/kamumu*), bamboo shoots (*howu hao/rabuang*), and banana blossoms (*tödö gae/jantuang pisang*). Cassava leaves were in high demand because they were widely used by food stalls and restaurants serving Padang cuisine. So did jengkol bean (stinky bean). Although this plant was not usually consumed on Nias Island, it was popular among the people of this city, including the Nias ethnic community, as one of their favorite vegetable.

The types of fruit that Nias farmers usually sold at Gaung Market were ripened bananas (Nias: *gae soso*), coconuts (*banio*), kuini (a type of fragrant wild mango), rambutan, durian, and others. The types of bananas commonly planted by Nias people in Padang included rock bananas (*gae bo'ole*), *rajo* (*razo*), *bamban*, *jantan* (*siata*), and sweet and sour bananas (*mani asa*). The coconuts sold in the market were mature coconuts whose husks had been removed.

After the goods were sold, usually before midday, it was time to return to their respective homes. However, before going home, they first bought various household necessities using money obtained from selling agricultural products. Some items they bought for daily life include rice, sugar, tobacco, cooking oil, kerosene, chilies, salt, salted fish, and fresh fish, among others.

As for fresh fish caught by local fishermen, those sold at Gaung Market include tuna (*ambu-ambu*), mackerel (*gambolo*, *garigak*, *gambolo Aceh*, *suaso*), mackerel tuna (*tandeman*), anchovies (*bada*, *tobi*), shark, stingray, milkfish (*baledang*), ponyfish (*maco*), shrimp, croaker (*tete*), various reef fish species, and others.

The Nias population in Emmahaven also purchased commonly consumed vegetables such as mustard greens, green beans, cabbage, eggplant, spinach, water spinach (*kako*, *lalidi*), and potatoes (*gowi kata*, *kantang*). These vegetables were not among those cultivated on their farmland. A variety of vegetables were supplied to Gaung Market from the highlands (*Darek*) surrounding Marapi Mount and Singgalang Mount, which are characterized by a cool climate in the Padang Highlands Residency (*Padangsche Bovenlanden*), and from the Alahan Panjang area near Lake Di Atas and Lake Di Bawah, Solok [17].

CONCLUSION

The construction of Emmahaven Port on the west coast of Sumatra had a multifaceted impact on workers of Nias ethnic background. First, the Nias people gained trust and employment opportunities, both at Emmahaven Port and in related sectors such as the construction of the railway line to the port, and others. Second, some Nias workers obtained housing in the Koninginnebaai area in order to be closer to their workplace at the port. Specifically in the hilly area located west of the harbor, the Nias people had been pioneer settlers in the region since the 19th century.

Third, living in the hills with relatively extensive land provided new economic opportunities, particularly in farming. After the port became operational, the Nias people not only worked as stevedores but also used their free time for agricultural activities and the cultivation of crops for subsistence. The agricultural products were used for personal consumption, while the remainder was sold at the market.

Fourth, the nature of these kinds of enterprises indicates a hybrid economic model. On the one hand, the Nias people maintained an agrarian economic system based on subsistence farming. While on the other hand,

they worked as manual laborers in ports and other projects. In this context, they can be considered to have been incorporated into the capitalist economic system. While working on development projects of the Dutch East Indies government, they received salaries in guilders paid in cash. The hybrid economic model of Nias workers during the three decades of the transition from the 19th to the 20th century, supports economic historian J.H. Boeke's dualistic economic theory [18]. With this income, the Nias people supported their families in Padang and even able to sent remittances to their parents and relatives on their home island, Nias Island.

The research is funded through the Non-Tax State Revenue (PNBP) of the Faculty of Humanities, Universitas Andalas, Padang, Indonesia, with Contract No. 10/3044/UN.16.07.D/KPT/XI/2026/12 March 2026.

REFERENCES

- [1] *De locomotief; weekblad gewijd aan de belangen van spoor- en tramwegen*, 11 December 1889.
- [2] R. Amran, *Padang Riwayatmu Dulu*. Jakarta:Yasaguna, 1986.
- [3] G. Asnan, *Dunia Maritim Pantai Barat Sumatera*. Yogyakarta: Ombak, 2007.
- [4] A. Gulo, "Empat abad orang Nias di kota Padang," dalam Dermawan Waruwu, dkk., *Bunga Rampai Buah Pikiran Begawan Nias Indonesia*. Pasaman Barat: Azka Pustaka Bekerjasama dengan Perkumpulan Doktor Nias Indonesia (PDNI), 2021.
- [5] *De krijgsgeschiedenis van Nederlandsch-Indië van 1811 tot 1894*, deel II 1895-1897.
- [6] R. Hester, *Historical Research: Theory and Methods*. ED-Tech Press: United Kingdom, 2018.
- [7] W. L. Neuman, *Social Research Methods: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches*. Essex, Pearson Education Limited, 2014.
- [8] *Sumatra-courant : nieuws- en advertentieblad*, 8 September 1893
- [9] V. Carriers, "Kijkjes langs binnenlanden," *Sumatra-courant : nieuws- en advertentieblad*, 18 Januarij 1899.
- [10] Mededeelingen omtrent werken een de Emmahaven in de Kononginnebaai terminus van den staatsspoorweg ter Sumatra's Westkust", *Sumatra-courant : nieuws- en advertentieblad*, 8 September 1893.
- [11] A. Gulo, *Dari Apenberg hingga Emmahaven: Permukiman dan Aktivitas Ekonomi Orang Nias di Padang Masa Kolonial*. Yogyakarta: Deepublish, 2026.
- [12] P.T.E. Wechel, "Bij de Niasser in het Padangsche: Gezicht op Emmahaven uit het zuiden van de heuvels der Niassers," *Geïlustreerd wekkblad voor Nederland Koloniën*, 3e jaargang No. 142, Juli 1919.
- [13] A. Gulo, *Dari Apenberg hingga Emmahaven: Permukiman dan Aktivitas Orang Nias di Padang Masa Kolonial*. Yogyakarta: Deepublish, 2026.
- [14] V. Carriers, "Kijkjes langs binnenlanden", *Sumatra-courant : nieuws- en advertentieblad*, 18 Januari 1899.
- [15] A. Gulo, Tawanto Lawolo, Adres Lase, dan Yuswar Harefa, *Adat Istiadat Nias Padang: Lintasan Sejarah dan Tata Upacara Perkawinan*, Jilid 1. Yogyakarta: Selfitera Indonesia, 2025.
- [16] *Het nieuws van den dag voor Nederlandsch-Indië*, 3 Februari 1903
- [17] A. Gulo, *Dari Apenberg hingga Emmahaven: Permukiman dan Aktivitas Ekonomi Orang Nias di Padang Masa Kolonial*. Yogyakarta: Deepublish, 2026
- [18] J. H. Boeke, *Prakapitalisme di Asia*, penerjemah Projosiswoyo. Jakarta: Sinar Harapan, 1983.