



LIVESTOCK CULTURE IN RURAL COMMUNITIES: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF TRADITIONAL FARMERS

Sudarto¹, Muhtadin²

Correspondensi e-mail: sudarto@gmail.com

^{1,2} Universitas Muhammadiyah Karanganyar

ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze the cattle-farming culture within traditional farming communities in Boyolali using an ethnographic approach. The research focuses on farming practices, the principle of moral economy, and the negotiation between traditional values and market logic in shaping rural socio-economic transformation. A qualitative method was employed through participant observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation. Informants were purposively selected from small-scale, family-based dairy farmers. The findings reveal that farming practices are not solely oriented toward profit maximization but are grounded in principles of household sustainability, community solidarity, and subsistence security. Modernization through milk quality standards, production technologies, and market integration has influenced production patterns; however, values such as mutual cooperation, family labor, and ecological integration remain preserved. The transformation of farming culture in Boyolali is hybrid and adaptive, where tradition and market rationality continuously negotiate to form a contextual and resilient production system. This study highlights the importance of socio-cultural perspectives in understanding sustainable rural livestock development.

ABSTRACT

Penelitian ini bertujuan menganalisis budaya beternak dalam komunitas peternak tradisional di Boyolali dengan pendekatan etnografi. Fokus penelitian diarahkan pada praktik budaya beternak, prinsip *moral economy*, serta negosiasi antara nilai tradisional dan logika pasar dalam membentuk transformasi sosial ekonomi pedesaan. Penelitian menggunakan metode kualitatif dengan teknik observasi partisipatif, wawancara mendalam, dan dokumentasi. Informan dipilih secara purposive dari peternak sapi perah skala kecil berbasis keluarga. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa praktik beternak tidak semata-mata berorientasi pada maksimalisasi keuntungan, melainkan pada prinsip keberlanjutan keluarga, solidaritas komunitas, dan

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keamanan subsistensi. Modernisasi peternakan melalui standar kualitas susu, teknologi produksi, dan integrasi pasar mendorong perubahan pola produksi, namun nilai gotong royong, kerja keluarga, dan integrasi ekologis tetap dipertahankan. Transformasi budaya beternak di Boyolali bersifat hibrid dan adaptif, di mana tradisi dan logika pasar saling bernegosiasi membentuk sistem produksi yang kontekstual dan resilien. Penelitian ini menegaskan pentingnya pendekatan sosial-budaya dalam memahami pembangunan peternakan pedesaan yang berkelanjutan.

INTRODUCTION

The rural community in Boyolali is widely known as one of the centers of dairy and beef cattle farming in Central Java. Livestock farming activities in this region are not solely positioned as economic activities, but as socio-cultural practices that have been inherited from generation to generation in family structures and village communities. In the context of Javanese agrarian society, economic practices such as livestock farming are always intertwined with the system of meaning, values, and social relations that live in the daily life of the community (Geertz, 1963). Therefore, the culture of livestock farming in Boyolali not only reflects a livelihood strategy, but also a representation of social identity and a symbol of the sustainability of local traditions.

Sociologically, traditional farmers in Boyolali show the characteristics of the moral economy as stated by Scott (1976), namely the orientation on family survival, social solidarity, and subsistence security rather than capital accumulation alone. The practice of mutual cooperation in the construction of cages, information sharing systems on livestock health, and involvement in village milk cooperatives show that livestock farming activities are a space for social interaction that strengthens community cohesion. In this context, livestock is not just an economic asset, but also part of a symbolic system that influences social status and kinship networks in rural areas.

However, the dynamics of modernization of agriculture and livestock have brought significant changes in the production patterns and social relations of the Boyolali community. Intensification of production, penetration of feed and reproductive technology, and integration of the national dairy market encourage the transformation of livestock business orientation (Rigg, 2001). The FAO report (2018) shows that the modernization of the global livestock sector tends to emphasize efficiency, economies of scale, and standardization of production. At the local level, these changes have the potential to affect the way farmers interpret livestock and shift traditional values that have historically underpinned the social sustainability of communities.

The research gap research lies in the tendency of livestock studies in Boyolali which more highlight technical-productive aspects, business management, milk quality improvement, and agribusiness economic analysis. Studies that explore the cultural, symbolic, and social construction dimensions of traditional livestock farming practices are relatively limited. In fact, the ethnographic approach allows researchers to understand livestock practices from an empirical perspective—how farmers themselves interpret their jobs, livestock, risks, and social changes (Spradley, 1980). The absence of this study shows the need for an in-depth exploration of the culture of livestock farming as a system of meaning in the rural community of Boyolali.

The urgency of this research is getting stronger in the context of sustainable rural development. The traditional livestock culture in Boyolali contains local wisdom values such as prudence in resource management, community solidarity, and ecological adaptation based on empirical experience. Chambers (1994) emphasizes the importance of a people-centered development approach, which recognizes local knowledge as the foundation of policy. By understanding livestock culture ethnographically, this research is expected to make a conceptual

and practical contribution in formulating livestock policies that are not only oriented towards productivity, but also on the social and cultural sustainability of the community.

Theoretically, this study enriches the study of rural sociology and economic anthropology by presenting a contextual analysis of traditional livestock practices in Boyolali as a meeting space between tradition and modernity. Practically, the results of this research can be a basis for consideration for regional policy makers, farmer cooperatives, and community facilitators in designing empowerment programs that are sensitive to local cultural values. Thus, an ethnographic study of livestock culture in the rural community of Boyolali becomes relevant and urgent to be carried out.

METHODS

This research is a qualitative research with an ethnographic research type. Ethnography is used because the focus of research is to understand the cultural practice of livestock farming as a system of meaning that lives in the traditional pastoral community in Boyolali. This study does not aim to test hypotheses or quantitatively measure the relationship between variables, but rather to describe, interpret, and understand the social meaning of livestock farming activities based on the perspective of the perpetrators (emic perspective).

The research was carried out in the rural area of Boyolali Regency, which is known as one of the main centers of dairy and beef cattle farming in Central Java. Geographically, Boyolali is located on the slopes of Mount Merapi and Mount Merbabu which have agroecological conditions that support family-based livestock businesses.

Socially, the rural people of Boyolali still maintain a traditional livestock farming pattern with a cage system in the yard of their houses, family-based business management, and active involvement in village milk cooperatives. The practice of mutual cooperation in the construction of cages, forage, and exchange of livestock health information is still part of the social life of the community. This location was chosen because:

- 1) It has a tradition of breeding that has been passed down from generation to generation.
- 2) Integrate local cultural values in economic practices.
- 3) Undergoing transformation due to the modernization of livestock, it is relevant to see the dynamics between tradition and social change.

Specifically, the research focused on dairy center villages that have active livestock groups and dairy cooperatives, thus allowing observation of cultural practices, social structures, and economic relations of farmers in the community.

Research Subjects and Informants

The subject of the study is a traditional cattle farmer who has been running a livestock business for at least two generations. Informants are selected purposively based on the following criteria:

1. Farmers are active with traditional or semi-traditional maintenance systems.
2. Community leaders or leaders of livestock groups.
3. Village milk cooperative manager.
4. Family members involved in livestock farming activities.

The snowball sampling technique is used to expand the network of informants based on recommendations from the initial informants, so that in-depth and comprehensive data is obtained.

Data Collection Techniques

Data collection is carried out through:

1. Participatory observation, namely the direct involvement of researchers in the daily activities of farmers such as feeding, milking, and livestock care to understand cultural practices contextually.
2. In-depth interviews to explore the meaning, values, and perceptions of farmers regarding livestock farming activities, social change, and community relations.
3. Documentation, in the form of field records, photos of livestock activities, and documents of livestock groups or cooperatives as supporting data.

Data Analysis Techniques

Data analysis was carried out in stages following the interactive analysis model of **Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014)**, which includes:

- 1) Reduksi data (data condensation)
- 2) Data display
- 3) Conclusion drawing and verification

In the ethnography context, analysis is carried out by identifying cultural patterns, main themes, and symbolic meanings that emerge from livestock farming practices. The interpretation of the data was carried out reflectively by considering the social, economic, and cultural context of the Boyolali community.

Data Validity

The validity of the data is maintained through the triangulation technique of sources (farmers, community leaders, cooperatives), triangulation methods (observation, interviews, documentation), and member checking to ensure the suitability of the researcher's interpretation with the experience of the informant.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. A cultural practice of livestock farming that develops in the traditional farming community in Boyolali

Ethnographic research conducted in traditional pastoralist communities in Boyolali shows that the cultural practice of livestock farming does not stand as a purely economic activity, but is integrated into the social system, values, and structure of rural family life. The majority of informants are small-scale dairy farmers with ownership of 2-6 cows, managed in a family manner with a cage system in the yard of the house. Field data shows that 78% of informants stated that the livestock business is inherited for at least two generations, so the activity is seen as a "parental legacy" that must be maintained. This pattern of inheritance reinforces the findings of **Geertz (1963)** that the rural economic system of Java is intertwined with the cultural structure and family traditions.

In daily practice, livestock farming activities start early in the morning, especially in dairy farmers who milk twice a day (morning and evening). The milking process is not just a technical routine, but a family interaction room. The children help provide forage feed, while the wives are involved in the process of filtering and delivering milk to the cooperative. Observational data show that family-based division of labor occurs collectively, without a formal contract, but based on an awareness of shared responsibility. This pattern reflects the principle of moral economy as stated by **Scott (1976)**, where the

main orientation is not the expansion of capital, but the survival of the family and social stability.

The culture of mutual cooperation is still strong in the farming community. The informant called the practice "cage rewang", which is working together in the construction or repair of the cage. In addition, the exchange of information on livestock diseases and feed quality is carried out informally through livestock group meetings and interactions at village patrol posts. Around 65% of the informants are active in livestock groups or village milk cooperatives. This engagement not only functions economically, but also strengthens social solidarity. These findings are in line with **Chambers' (1994)** view that community-based rural development depends on the power of local social networks.

The meaning of livestock for traditional farmers in Boyolali is also symbolic. Livestock is seen as a "life saver" that can be sold when there is an urgent need such as education costs, marriage, or health needs. As many as 82% of the informants stated that cows are safer than keeping money in the bank because they are considered "visible and guarded". This perspective shows that livestock has a social and psychological security dimension, not just an economic asset. Within the framework of economic anthropology, cattle serve as a symbol of family stability and honor in rural communities.

However, the cultural practice of livestock farming in Boyolali has experienced dynamics due to modernization. The introduction of artificial insemination technology, factory concentrated feed, and milk quality grading systems from the processing industry has affected production patterns. Interview data shows that 70% of farmers are starting to rely on commercial supplementary feed to increase milk production. Despite this, most informants maintained traditional practices such as independent forage search and the use of simple cages based on local ingredients. This transformation shows a negotiation between traditional values and modern market logic, as **Rigg (2001)** explains about rural change in Southeast Asia.

Ecologically, traditional livestock farming practices in Boyolali still show an integrative pattern with agriculture. Cow dung waste is used as organic fertilizer for family farmland. Around 60% of the informants stated that they use manure for their own rice fields or gardens. This practice shows a form of ecological adaptation based on local experiences that is in line with traditional sustainability concepts. **FAO (2018)** emphasizes that small-scale livestock systems have the potential to be sustainable if integrated with local agricultural systems.



Figure 1. Cultural practices of livestock farming

Overall, the results of the study show that the culture of livestock farming in Boyolali is a system of practices that combines economic values, social solidarity, symbolic meaning, and ecological adaptation. The practice is passed down from generation to

generation and maintained through community social networks. Although modernization has brought changes in production techniques, basic values such as mutual cooperation, family orientation, and sustainability principles remain the foundations of traditional livestock culture. Thus, the culture of livestock farming in Boyolali cannot be understood only as an agribusiness system, but as a social construction that lives and continues to negotiate with the changing times.

2. The principle of moral economy affects the production patterns and social relations of traditional farmers

The transformation of the rural economy does not necessarily eliminate social values that have long been rooted in people's lives. In the traditional farming community in Boyolali, livestock farming activities show that production practices are not entirely driven by market logic, but rather by a set of social norms that regulate the balance between economic interests and community cohesion. Field findings show that the decisions of production, distribution, and social cooperation of farmers are greatly influenced by the principles of moral economy, namely the orientation to subsistence security, solidarity, and social sustainability as explained by [Scott \(1976\)](#). This principle became the unwritten foundation that guided the economic actions of farmers in their daily lives.

The results of the study show that the production pattern of traditional breeders in Boyolali is more oriented towards family survival than aggressive business expansion. Around $\pm 72\%$ of the informants stated that the main purpose of livestock farming is to meet household needs and maintain the continuity of family businesses. The decision to maintain a small scale (2–6 cows) was chosen so that management remained in family control without a major reliance on outside labor or high-risk capital loans. This pattern reflects the principle of safety first in moral economics ([Scott, 1976](#)), where stability takes precedence over maximum profit potential.

In the aspect of distribution of production products, loyalty to village milk cooperatives is a manifestation of collective value. Around $\pm 68\%$ of the informants continue to sell milk through cooperatives even though there are alternative buyers with higher prices. The decision is based on considerations of solidarity and a sense of responsibility for the sustainability of the common institution. This economic relationship shows that the economic actions of farmers are embedded in the social network of the community ([Granovetter, 1985](#)). In other words, social considerations are often more dominant than rational calculations alone.

The principle of moral economy is also seen in the practice of mutual cooperation and mutual assistance. When difficulties arise, such as a shortage of feed or sick livestock, community members provide assistance without formal contracts or direct rewards. Field data shows that $\pm 64\%$ of informants have been involved in the practice of non-monetization assistance. This reciprocity norm strengthens social cohesion as well as a mechanism for collective protection against economic risks.

In the face of fluctuations in milk prices and rising feed costs, farmers tend to opt for conservative adaptive strategies, such as reducing the use of concentrated feed and increasing the search for independent forage. This strategy suggests that long-term sustainability orientation takes precedence over momentary profit speculation. This phenomenon is in line with the findings of [Rigg \(2001\)](#) that rural communities in Southeast Asia negotiate with the logic of the market without completely abandoning traditional values.

Overall, the results of the study show that the moral economy functions as a normative framework that regulates the production patterns and social relations of traditional farmers in Boyolali. This principle limits high-risk expansion, strengthens community solidarity, and maintains family economic stability. Thus, the practice of

livestock farming in Boyolali cannot be understood only through the perspective of market economy, but must be seen as a socio-moral system that supports the sustainability of rural communities.

3. The negotiation between traditional values and market logic shapes the transformation of livestock culture

The transformation of livestock culture in the traditional farming community in Boyolali does not take place linearly from traditional to modern, but through a dynamic negotiation process between local values and market logic. The modernization of livestock is characterized by the penetration of the dairy processing industry, the quality grading system, the use of artificial insemination, and the concentrated feed of manufacturers does not necessarily eliminate traditional practices. Instead, breeders make selection, adaptation, and adjustments based on family social and economic considerations.

The results of the interviews showed that $\pm 74\%$ of the informants admitted that there was an increase in milk quality demands from the processing industry. Standards of fat content, hygiene, and production volume are the main indicators in the price system. This condition encourages farmers to adopt certain technologies such as hygienic milking tools and the use of additional concentrates. However, at the same time, 69% of informants still maintain a traditional cage system based on the home yard and family work patterns. This shows that transformation occurs in a hybrid manner combining modernity and tradition in one production practice.

In the context of value, livestock is still interpreted as a "life saving" and a symbol of family security. Although market logic encourages a production orientation based on efficiency and profitability, farmers remain cautious about expanding their businesses. Around $\pm 61\%$ of informants refused to significantly increase the number of livestock despite the availability of credit access, fearing the risk of fluctuations in feed and milk prices. This attitude reflects the sustainability of the moral economy principle (Scott, 1976), which limits the penetration of capitalistic rationality completely.

Negotiation is also seen in the social relations of the community. On the one hand, competition for milk quality has increased due to the cooperative grading system. On the other hand, the practice of mutual cooperation and information exchange continues. Farmers realize that individual success remains dependent on the stability of the community. This phenomenon shows that economic relations remain inherent in the social structure (embeddedness) as stated by Granovetter (1985).

Ecologically, the transformation of livestock culture also shows selective adjustment. The use of concentrated feed increased ($\pm 70\%$ of informants), but the practice of independent forage and the use of manure for rice fields was maintained ($\pm 63\%$). That is, modernization does not completely replace traditional integrative practices, but rather complements them.

To clarify the form of negotiation between traditional values and market logic, here is a summary of the field findings:

Aspects	Traditional Values	Market Logic	Form of Negotiation
Scale of Efforts	Family-based small-scale	Expansion for increased production	Maintain moderate scale with improved quality
Production System	Yard enclosure, family work	Hygiene & Quality Grading Standards	Modernize the tool without changing the family structure
Economic Orientation	Subsistence & family security	Profit & efficiency	Production is increased without taking huge risks

Aspects	Traditional Values	Market Logic	Form of Negotiation
Social Relations	Mutual Cooperation & Solidarity	Quality & price competition	Competition remains within the framework of cooperative collectives
Waste Management	Manure for agriculture	Production cost efficiency	Traditional integration is maintained

Table 1. Negotiation of Traditional Values and Market Logic in Livestock Culture in Boyolali

The table shows that the transformation of livestock culture in Boyolali is not substitutive, but adaptive and integrative. Farmers adopt modern elements that are considered to increase income, while still maintaining basic values such as solidarity, family security, and ecological integration.

Theoretically, these findings reinforce the view of **Rigg (2001)** that rural modernization in Southeast Asia often results in hybrid economic forms that blend tradition and markets. The transformation of livestock culture in Boyolali is not a process of losing tradition, but a process of reconstructing values in the context of market pressure. Thus, the negotiation between traditional values and market logic forms a model of livestock culture that is adaptive, resilient, and contextual to regional economic dynamics.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the culture of livestock farming in the traditional farming community in Boyolali is a socio-economic system formed through the dynamic interaction between traditional values and market logic. The practice of livestock farming is not solely oriented towards maximizing profits, but rests on the *principles of moral economy* that emphasizes subsistence security, family sustainability, and community solidarity. Modernization of livestock through quality standards, production technology, and market integration does encourage changes in production patterns, but it does not completely shift the local values that have taken root. Instead, farmers conduct adaptive negotiations by adopting relevant modern elements without abandoning family-based social structures, mutual cooperation, and ecological integration. Thus, the transformation of livestock culture in Boyolali shows a hybrid and resilient character, where traditions and markets interact with each other to form contextual, sustainable, and still rooted production practices in rural social identity.

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