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Contemporary Society of Eastern Java's Horseshoe: A Field Study of Valley and Coastal Community Civilization

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Abstract :

This study examines the social, cultural, and economic dynamics of communities in the East Java Horseshoe region, encompassing both valley and coastal areas. Previous research has rarely examined the interrelations among these communities, particularly in the context of globalization and modernization, underscoring the need for this study. The purpose of this research is to identify differences in lifestyle, interaction, and economic interdependence between agrarian, collective-based valley communities and coastal communities that are more receptive to modernization. Using a qualitative ethnographic approach, data were collected through participatory observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation, and analyzed descriptively and interpretively. The findings reveal fundamental differences: coastal communities demonstrate openness to modern technology, while valley communities preserve traditional values, and both are bound by reciprocal economic dependence in the trade of agricultural and marine products. These findings highlight the necessity of a valley–coastal synergy to support sustainable development. Practical recommendations include developing ecotourism grounded in local wisdom, providing cultural education for younger generations, and conserving the environment through prudent resource management. This research contributes strategically to local policy-making and serves as a reference for understanding community adaptation to global changes.

Keywords: *Contemporary Society, East Java Horseshoe Region, Valley and Coastal Communities, Sustainable Development, Local Wisdom*

Abstrak :

Penelitian ini mengkaji dinamika sosial, budaya, dan ekonomi masyarakat di wilayah Tapalkuda Jawa Timur, yang mencakup kawasan lembah dan pesisir. Penelitian sebelumnya jarang mengkaji keterkaitan di antara masyarakat-masyarakat ini, terutama dalam konteks globalisasi dan modernisasi, sehingga menyoroti pentingnya penelitian ini. Tujuan penelitian ini adalah untuk mengidentifikasi perbedaan dalam gaya hidup, interaksi, dan saling ketergantungan ekonomi antara komunitas lembah berbasis agraris dan kolektif dengan komunitas pesisir yang lebih terbuka terhadap modernisasi. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan etnografi kualitatif, data dikumpulkan melalui observasi partisipatif, wawancara mendalam, dan dokumentasi, serta dianalisis secara deskriptif dan interpretatif. Temuan-temuan tersebut mengungkap perbedaan mendasar: masyarakat pesisir menunjukkan keterbukaan terhadap teknologi modern, sementara masyarakat lembah mempertahankan nilai-nilai tradisional, dan keduanya terikat oleh ketergantungan ekonomi timbal balik dalam perdagangan produk pertanian dan hasil laut. Temuan-temuan ini menyoroti pentingnya sinergi antara lembah dan pesisir untuk mendukung pembangunan berkelanjutan. Rekomendasi praktis meliputi pengembangan ekowisata yang berakar pada kearifan lokal, penyediaan pendidikan budaya bagi generasi muda, serta pelestarian lingkungan melalui

pengelolaan sumber daya yang bijaksana. Penelitian ini memberikan kontribusi strategis bagi pembentukan kebijakan lokal dan berfungsi sebagai acuan untuk memahami adaptasi masyarakat terhadap perubahan global.

Kata kunci: *Masyarakat Kontemporer, Wilayah Tapal Kuda Jawa Timur, Masyarakat Lembah dan Pesisir, Pembangunan Berkelanjutan, Kearifan Lokal*

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Introduction

East Java's Horseshoe area, comprising Jember, Bondowoso, Situbondo, and Banyuwangi, is geographically unique due to its blend of mountainous and coastal environments. This geography fosters dynamic relations between agricultural and maritime communities, making it an important natural laboratory for studying how geographical interaction shapes cultural identity and social structure (Nurhidayat et al., 2022). Historically, the region has significant value, serving as a trade route across Hindu-Buddhist, Islamic, and Dutch colonial eras, contributing to a diverse society with preserved traditions such as manuscript reading and megalithic heritage (Purnamasari, 2022; Sumarno et al., 2023). However, modernization and globalization bring economic shifts, cultural disruptions, and environmental challenges that threaten this balance (Pradipta, 2021; Ramadhan, 2024). These factors create a complex context for research relevant to today's developments.

Existing literature extensively documents the region's agricultural adaptations, cultural heritage, environmental issues, and socio-economic dynamics. Studies highlight local farming practices shaped by geography (Nurhidayat et al., 2022), the preservation of megalithic culture (Purnamasari, 2022), and the impacts of environmental degradation on coastal and valley communities (Ramadhan, 2024). Moreover, research explores socio-economic transformations influenced by modernization, including financial accessibility and fisheries productivity (Pradipta, 2021). Educational research underscores local-based learning models as a means to sustain cultural awareness (Wardani, 2023). While these studies contribute valuable insights, most focus on isolated themes, and comprehensive interdisciplinary analyses remain limited.

A critical gap exists in understanding the interdependence between valley and coastal communities within globalization's broader frame—specifically, how local wisdom mediates adaptation between traditional practices and modern economic pressures (Tang, 2025). The nuanced relationship between these communities' economic exchanges and social structures under development pressures remains insufficiently analyzed (Sáez-Navarrete, 2025). Furthermore, the role of cultural

preservation amid rapid technological and ideological changes warrants deeper examination (Blayone & Mykhailenko, 2025). This research aims to fill these gaps by emphasising socio-economic interrelations and cultural sustainability in the face of globalisation's challenges, with a focus on the Horseshoe area's distinctive valley-coast dynamic.

This study's rationale stems from the urgent need to balance sustainable economic development, environmental conservation, and cultural preservation in a region vulnerable to exploitation and social inequity (Akorio, 2024). Scientifically, it supports an integrative understanding of how geographical and cultural factors shape community resilience. In practice, it informs policies that promote inclusive participation from communities, governments, and the private sector to enhance welfare and identity sustainability (Vélez, 2023). Addressing modernization's threats while leveraging local wisdom offers a pathway to resilient, equitable regional development.

The study's purposes are to (1) identify social, cultural, and economic characteristics of the valley and coastal communities; (2) analyze geographic interaction influences on life patterns; (3) uncover factors driving civilizational changes; and (4) propose recommendations to support cultural sustainability and community welfare based on local wisdom. These objectives aim to produce actionable knowledge for supporting the region's adaptation to contemporary challenges while preserving its cultural and environmental legacy.

Method

This study uses a qualitative design with an ethnographic approach to deepen understanding of the life patterns, social dynamics, and culture of people in the valleys and coastal areas of the East Java Horseshoe. This design allows researchers to directly explore various aspects of people's lives to interpret their culture, traditions, and social interactions in a natural context. Through participatory observation and in-depth interviews, this research aims to document how society confronts contemporary challenges, including modernization, globalization, and environmental degradation. As Yusanto explains, the qualitative approach effectively describes complex, context-specific social phenomena, focusing on a deep understanding of social realities that are difficult to measure quantitatively (Yusanto, 2020).

A qualitative approach was chosen to explore complex, contextual phenomena, including the geographical relationship between the valley and coastal areas and their impact on changes in human civilization. The data obtained in this study are descriptive and interpretive, providing a deeper, more thorough understanding of the issues under study. Mulyadi stated that qualitative descriptive research aims to understand social changes, which aligns with the focus of this research on the social dynamics of valley and coastal communities.

As a research framework, ethnography offers an advantage in analyzing socio-

cultural dynamics holistically, especially in the context of interactions between the valley and coastal areas. This approach is also relevant to exploring local wisdom, which is the basis for context-based recommendations. Firdaus and Sukmawan revealed that ethnography can capture cultural nuances and local values that cannot be quantified, yielding rich, meaningful data (Firdaus & Sukmawan, 2021).

This study provides specific, relevant recommendations for local community development based on in-depth observation and interviews. The reason is that qualitative methods, as noted by Helaluddin (2019), aim to describe phenomena and generate deep contextual insights. Evidence includes observation guides capturing valley-coastal dynamics (spatial, economic, cultural) and open-ended interviews with traditional and community leaders on local values and modernisation, supported by visual documentation (photos, videos, archives), as emphasised by Nuryami (2024) and Nugroho & Purwati (2019). In conclusion, the research not only advances academic understanding but also offers practical, context-grounded strategies tailored to the Horseshoe area's unique social and cultural needs.

The data analysis process follows a systematic qualitative approach. Analysis begins with organizing field records from observations and interviews (Firman, 2018). Systematic organization minimizes interpretation bias and ensures consistency. Triangulation across multiple sources—observations, interviews, and documentation—is conducted, and data from various informants are compared to verify reliability. Thus, the analytical framework ensures that findings on valley and coastal community dynamics in the Horseshoe region are both relevant and reliable.

Results and Discussion

Result

This section presents the core findings from our fieldwork in the Horseshoe region of East Java. We move beyond mere description to dissect the intricate reality of how valley and coastal communities coexist, adapt, and face the future. The results are organized to unpack the phenomenon through its manifestations, drivers, and far-reaching consequences.

1. The Landscape of Difference and Interdependence: Manifested Forms

Our immersive study reveals two distinct worlds within one geographical arc, bound by a silent pact of mutual need. The character of each community is profoundly shaped by its immediate environment.

In the verdant, terraced valleys, life unfolds with a rhythm tied to the land and seasons. Here, social cohesion is paramount. We observed that approximately 70% of the workforce is engaged in agriculture, practicing techniques passed down through generations, with only marginal use of modern machinery. Another 15% are involved in animal husbandry (see Table 1). Decision-making often involves community elders, and cultural ceremonies related to planting and harvest remain vibrant. The landscape itself—a patchwork of family plots and communal forests—reflects a collective

relationship with nature.

Conversely, the coastal communities pulse to the tides and the market. Openness and pragmatism define their social fabric. As our data shows, 60% of coastal residents rely on fishing, but unlike in the past, many now employ GPS devices and synthetic nets. A significant 30% are engaged in trade, acting as crucial links to regional and even national markets (Table 1). Social structures are more fluid, shaped by the dynamics of fishing crews and trade networks that extend far beyond the local bay.

The most compelling finding, however, is the invisible thread of economic symbiosis that stitches these two worlds together. It is not a formal market but a deeply embedded practice: valley trucks laden with rice, corn, and fruits regularly journey to the coast, returning with crates of fresh fish, salt, and other marine products. This exchange is the lifeblood of both economies, a practical interdependence forged by geography.

Table 1. *Comparative data on the main activities of the community*

Region	Primary Sectors	Percentage
Valley	Agriculture	70%
Valley	Farm	15%
Shore	Fishing	60%
Shore	Trade	30%

Source: compiled by researchers in 2024

Table 1 offers a straightforward snapshot of how work is divided between the two communities. In the valley, agriculture alone accounts for 70 per cent of the workforce, while animal farming accounts for another 15 per cent. That means fully 85 percent of valley residents earn their living directly from the land. Along the shore, the picture flips: fishing employs 60 per cent of the coastal workforce, while trade provides income for 30 per cent. Together, these two sectors account for nine out of every 10 jobs on the coast. The numbers make clear that neither community has a mixed economy. Each leans heavily on one or two activities tied to its immediate environment—growing food in the valley, harvesting the sea and exchanging goods on the shore.

Looking beyond the raw percentages, three quieter tendencies begin to surface. *First*, the valley shows almost no occupational variety. With 85 per cent of workers employed in agriculture and animal farming, there is little room for specialists such as traders, repair workers, or teachers. This suggests a society where survival depends on land-based routines passed down through generations rather than on individual career choices. *Second*, the coastal community reveals a different logic: fishing and trade are not separate worlds but two halves of a single livelihood. A fisherman may sell part of his catch directly at the dock, and a trader often owns a small boat. This tight overlap between production and exchange explains why coastal life feels more

fluid and market-driven. *Third*, neither community has developed a service sector worth mentioning. Unlike in industrial or post-industrial regions, you find almost no full-time shopkeepers, mechanics, or clerks outside the food system. Taken together, these tendencies point to a fragile but functional balance: the valley cannot trade without the coast, and the coast cannot eat without the valley. Their differences are not weaknesses. They are the very reason the two worlds hold together.

2. Uneven Currents of Change: Critical Influencing Factors

What shapes these dynamics and their ongoing evolution? We identified three powerful, interlinked forces that act upon the two communities with differing intensity.

First, geography is destiny, but not a static one. The mountains that cradle the valleys provide fertile soil but also create a buffer, slowing the influx of new ideas and goods. The coast, by its very nature, is a permeable boundary. This fundamental geographical fact explains the initial divergence in livelihood and now dictates the differential speed of change. Our interviews with coastal fishermen revealed how smartphone weather apps have revolutionized their planning, while valley farmers still largely rely on traditional signs to predict rain—a practice their own children view with growing scepticism.

Second, the wave of globalization does not crash evenly on the shore. It hits coastal communities with full force, bringing not just technology but also new consumer desires and economic pressures that can undermine traditional resource management taboos (pamali). In the valleys, globalization arrives as a trickle-down effect—often through returning migrant workers or television—and is frequently met with resistance as a threat to the communal fabric. A village elder in the highlands poignantly asked us, "If we all work for ourselves like they do on the coast, who will maintain our irrigation canals or organize our ceremonies?"

Third, the fraying shield of local wisdom plays a contradictory role. In the valleys, this wisdom—encompassing sustainable farming rituals, forest conservation rules, and conflict resolution customs—remains a robust, living system that provides resilience. On the coast, however, this shield is cracking. The economic imperative to maximize catch often overrides ancient prohibitions on fishing in certain sacred zones (huma laut), leading to localized depletion. The mediating power of tradition is thus stronger inland, leaving coastal communities more directly exposed and vulnerable to the shocks of modernization.

3. Toward a Synergistic Future: Transformative Implications

These findings are not merely academic; they carry urgent implications for the region's trajectory. They point to a critical crossroads and suggest a necessary pivot towards integrated resilience.

The socio-cultural implication is clear: without intervention, we risk drifting apart. The coastal identity may become deracinated, while the valleys may retreat into a defensive traditionalism. The transformative opportunity lies in fostering a two-way

cultural dialogue. Imagine coastal traders learning and applying valley-based subak principles of water cooperation to manage their fishing territories, or valley youth programs that include apprenticeships in sustainable marine tech managed by coastal communities. This moves beyond preservation to active, shared reinvention.

Economically, the existing trade symbiosis is a golden foundation, but it is fragile. The transformative step is to evolve this exchange into a branded, circular green economy. This means moving from trading raw commodities to co-creating value. For instance, valley organic spices could be used by coastal communities to produce unique, sustainably-caught smoked fish products. These could then be marketed as a "Horseshoe Heritage" brand through a cooperative ecotourism platform that offers valley homestays and coastal fishing expeditions as a single package. This adds value, incentivizes sustainable practices, and distributes benefits more equitably.

Ultimately, this demands a new governance paradigm. Generic development policies will fail. The transformative implication for policymakers is the need for place-based, synergistic planning. This involves creating multi-stakeholder forums that bring valley farmers and coastal fishers to the same table with government agencies. Priorities must include: (1) co-designing integrated ecotourism corridors that physically and narratively link valley and coastal attractions; (2) developing shared infrastructure, like cold storage chains powered by renewable energy, that benefits both agricultural and marine product preservation; and (3) reforming local education curricula to teach both the valley's agricultural calendar and the coast's maritime ecology as interconnected parts of one regional heritage. The goal is to transform the inherent interdependence from a tacit practice into the conscious, strategic core of the region's sustainable development.

Discussion

The ethnographic findings from the East Java Horseshoe region paint a vivid portrait of two distinct socio-ecological systems bound by a functional symbiosis. As detailed in the results, the valley communities are characterized by strong adherence to traditional, collective lifestyles (Diartho, 2024; Thakar & Dave, 2026; Vélez, 2023), with an economic foundation rooted in agriculture (70%) and animal farming (15%) (see Table 1). In stark contrast, coastal communities exhibit greater dynamism and individual pragmatism (Malindine, 2017; Zainuddin, 2023), with economies centred on fishing (60%) and trade (30%), facilitated by the adoption of modern technologies such as GPS (Table 1). The most critical finding, however, is the deeply embedded, albeit informal, exchange network where valley agricultural products are traded for coastal marine resources (Mariko et al., 2022; Tian & Wang, 2019; Zheng et al., 2023). This interdependence reveals the region not as two separate entities but as a single, integrated socio-economic organism in which geographical specialization creates mutual dependency.

In the daily social life of the Horseshoe community, these findings are reflected

in the increasing migration of coastal youth to the city, while in the valley there is growing resistance to modern agricultural technology. This highlights an urgent social need for intervention. The emergence and persistence of this dynamic can be traced to a confluence of powerful forces. Primarily, geography acts as the fundamental architect, not only shaping initial livelihood patterns but also modulating the flow of external influences (Ellis, 2000; Niehof, 2004; Wang et al., 2019). The mountains provide the valleys with fertile soil but also serve as a cultural buffer, while the coastline's inherent openness makes it a direct conduit for global currents (Setten, 2004; Walsh & Döring, 2018). This geographical fact critically explains the differential pressure of modernization; coastal communities are subjected to the full force of globalization, which introduces new technologies and market pressures that often conflict with traditional values (Zainuddin, 2023). Conversely, in the valleys, these forces are filtered and perceived more as a threat to social cohesion than an opportunity, leading to cultural tension (Asmal & Latief, 2023; Poiger, 1999; Sarastika, 2021). Consequently, the role of local wisdom as an adaptive mechanism becomes uneven; it remains a robust, governing system in the valleys but shows significant erosion on the coast, where economic imperatives increasingly override ecological taboos.

The consequences of these interacting forces point to two divergent regional futures. The first is a pathway of socio-cultural and economic fragmentation. The continuous, asymmetric pressure risks widening the gap between communities: coastal identities may become homogenized and detached from local ecological knowledge, while valley communities may retreat into defensive isolationism, viewing change solely as a threat (Aliskhanova, 2023). This trajectory would ultimately weaken the very economic symbiosis that sustains the region, making both communities more vulnerable to external shocks. The alternative, transformative pathway is one of deliberate synergy. This study posits that the inherent interdependence is not a relic but a strategic asset (Putra et al., 2023). The functional exchange of goods can be elevated into a circular, value-added green economy, and the differing adaptive strengths—valley resilience and coastal innovation—can be shared through cross-community dialogue and joint management initiatives.

This study both aligns with and extends the existing body of literature on the region. Prior research has effectively documented isolated aspects: the sustainability of valley agriculture (Nurhidayat, Sundari, & Rudiyanto, 2022), the preservation of coastal megalithic heritage (Purnamasari, 2022), and the threats of environmental degradation to each zone (Ramadhan, 2024; Pradipta, 2021). However, these works often treat the valley and coast as separate subjects of study. Our findings challenge this siloed approach by empirically demonstrating the lived interconnection between them. While Wardani (2023) emphasizes locally based learning for cultural awareness, our research specifies that such education must be integrative, teaching the valley's agricultural calendar and the coast's maritime ecology as part of a shared heritage.

Similarly, where Pramono and Lemy (2019) discuss community-based ecotourism generally, our data provide a concrete model for synergy-based ecotourism that physically and narratively links the two zones into a single destination experience.

To catalyze the synergistic pathway, this study proposes integrated recommendations spanning the conceptual, methodological, and policy realms. Conceptually, regional development must adopt a "Horseshoe Bioregion" framework that officially recognizes and plans for the valley-coast symbiosis as the core unit of analysis and intervention, moving beyond administrative boundaries (Alonso-Muñoz, Medina-Salgado, & González-Sánchez, 2022). Methodologically, future research should employ transect-based participatory action research, where interdisciplinary teams work sequentially and comparatively across valley and coastal communities to co-design solutions, ensuring that knowledge generation is itself a synergistic process (Rodríguez‐Rivero & Ortiz‐Marcos, 2022). For policy, a multi-pronged approach is essential: (1) establishing Valley-Coastal Synergy Forums as formal platforms for joint decision-making on resource management and tourism development (Dosinaen, 2023); (2) incentivizing the development of "Horseshoe Heritage" branded value chains that process and market combined agricultural and marine products (Sapkota, 2024); and (3) mandating the integration of cross-community environmental curricula in local schools to foster a shared stewardship identity from a young generation (Huang, 2024). Ultimately, the goal is to transform the tacit, informal interdependence into the conscious, strategic foundation for equitable and resilient development.

Conclusion

Our journey through the East Java Horseshoe reveals a fundamental truth: this is not one region, but two worlds in a delicate, essential embrace. The valley communities, with their deep roots in agriculture and collective tradition, and the coastal communities, propelled by fishing, trade, and technological adaptation, are defined by their stark differences. Yet, they are inextricably linked by a silent, daily pact of economic symbiosis—the unceremonious exchange of mountain harvests for ocean bounty. This research crystallizes the core tension of contemporary life here: a powerful, geography-forged interdependence is simultaneously strained by the uneven pressures of globalization, which erode coastal local wisdom faster than its valley counterpart, threatening the cultural and ecological balance of the entire system. The central finding is that sustainability cannot be pursued in isolation; the future of the valleys is fundamentally tied to the fate of the coasts, and vice versa.

Conceptually, this study moves the needle by rigorously framing the Horseshoe not as a collection of separate administrative zones, but as a single, interconnected socio-ecological organism. This bioregional lens is our primary contribution, challenging fragmented policy approaches and arguing that resilience is a property of the relationship between the valley and coast. Methodologically, the ethnographic approach proved indispensable. It allowed us to move beyond statistics to capture the

lived reality—the tension in a valley elder's voice questioning modernity, the pragmatic glint in a fisherman's eye as he checks his GPS. This methodological choice validated the use of deep, contextual qualitative inquiry to understand complex adaptive systems in which numbers alone cannot explain the erosion of a pamali (taboo) or the strength of a handshake agreement over a truckload of goods. Theoretically, the work bridges environmental determinism with globalisation theory, showing how geography sets the stage, while global forces direct the play at different tempos for different actors.

However, this study is not without its limitations, which clearly chart a course for future research. First, our ethnographic snapshot, while rich, captures a moment in a dynamic process. A significant weakness is the lack of longitudinal data tracking how specific exchange relationships or cultural attitudes evolve over a decade. Future studies must commit to extended temporal frameworks to understand the true pace of change and the long-term efficacy of adaptive strategies. Second, our focus on community-level dynamics could be productively scaled. We did not quantitatively measure the economic volume and supply chain efficiency of the valley-coast trade. A mixed-methods follow-up study that quantifies this exchange—mapping its routes, valuing its transactions, and modeling its vulnerabilities—would provide powerful, actionable data for economists and planners. Finally, while we highlight synergy, we did not prototype it. The next critical step is participatory action research (PAR) that actively convenes valley and coastal stakeholders to co-design and pilot one of our proposed solutions, such as a shared "Horseshoe Heritage" brand or a joint ecotourism itinerary. This would move the research from insightful analysis to direct catalyst, testing the very synergy we propose in the real, complex world we have described.

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