

BETWEEN TRADITION AND THE CAPITALISM: DIALECTICAL FORMATION OF WELL-BEING IN INDONESIAN INDIGENOUS PEOPLE COMMUNITY

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Submission Date: 08 September 2025 | Revision Date: 18 October 2025 | Acceptance Date: 11 December 2025 | Publication Date: 31 December 2025

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.51200/jurnalkinabalu.v3i1.7136>

ABSTRACT This paper aims to demonstrate the dialectical process within indigenous communities regarding their aspiration for socioeconomic well-being and the necessity of preserving their customary values. This study is based on research conducted in the Marena indigenous people community in Enrekang Regency, South Sulawesi, Indonesia, in 2024. The findings reveal that indigenous communities often face a dilemma. On one hand, they seek to improve their standard of living through economic opportunities shaped by market systems and capitalism; on the other hand, they feel compelled to maintain their unique cultural values that form the foundation of their collective identity. This tension creates a dynamic interplay where traditional norms serve both as a moral compass and as a limitation to full integration into capitalist structures. While participation in the market economy system offers material benefits, it frequently risks eroding the social cohesion and cultural distinctiveness of the community. The research highlights that the Marena community navigates this tension through selective adaptation, combining customary practices with strategic engagement in market activities. Such a hybrid approach enables them to achieve a degree of economic improvement while safeguarding their cultural heritage. This dialectic illustrates the broader challenge faced by many indigenous groups in the globalized era, where the pursuit of well-being often intersects with the pressures of cultural preservation and the transformative forces of capitalism.

Keywords: Indigenous People, well-being, capitalism, cultural preservation, Marena community

INTRODUCTION

Studies on indigenous communities in Indonesia reveal the complex relationship between cultural continuity and socio-economic transformation. In the context of globalization and the growing dominance of capitalist market systems, many indigenous groups face challenges in sustaining their livelihoods while simultaneously preserving their traditions (Li, 2014; Tsing, 2005). The Marena community in Enrekang Regency, South Sulawesi Province, Indonesia, serves as a significant example for understanding this dialectical process.

Modernization is often perceived as an inevitable process in societal development, marked by the shift from traditional values toward rationality, efficiency, and market orientation (Giddens, 1990). It is inseparable from the logic of capitalism, which emphasizes economic growth, capital accumulation, and the penetration of market relations into diverse aspects of social life (Harvey, 2005). For indigenous communities, this situation produces a profound dilemma. On the one hand, modernization expands access to resources, education, and economic opportunities and on the other hand, it risks eroding the socio-cultural foundations that sustain collective identity (Eisenstadt, 2000).

The economic orientation of everyday life has increasingly been shaped by the principles of capitalism and the market, where competition, consumption, and productivity become the main indicators of well-being (Polanyi, 2001). For communities such as Marena, engagement with the market offers the potential to improve household income, yet it simultaneously carries the risk of marginalization when market mechanisms disregard communal values and traditional solidarity (Scott, 1976). Thus, research on indigenous peoples must critically examine how they negotiate the forces of modernization and capitalism without fully abandoning customary heritage, which remains central to their social sustainability.

This paper seeks to demonstrate how the Marena community negotiates two simultaneous imperatives: the pursuit of material well-being and the preservation of customary practices. By highlighting their selective adaptations, this study contributes to academic debates on indigenous resilience, hybrid modernities, and the politics of cultural preservation (Escobar, 2011; Kahn, 2017).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Modernization is widely regarded as an inevitable trajectory of social development. It is marked by structural transformations in the social, economic, and cultural spheres, oriented toward rationality, efficiency, and material growth (Giddens, 1990). In classical modernization theory, this transition toward modern society is considered a universal path to progress and prosperity (Rostow, 1960). However, such processes are believed to have profound implications for indigenous communities. Modernization entails not only technological and economic transformations but also the penetration of individualistic values and market competition, which may gradually displace the communal principles that underpin indigenous life (Eisenstadt, 2000). This tendency is inseparably linked to capitalism, which is often perceived as the driving force behind modernization.

Capitalism as the foundation of modernization, operates through the logic of capital accumulation, market expansion, and the commodification of everyday life (Harvey, 2005). Within this framework, well-being tends to be defined by material achievements, consumption, and participation in market mechanisms (Polanyi, 2001). Consequently, lifestyles undergo significant changes as community needs become increasingly shaped by global market forces rather than local norms or subsistence practices. At this juncture, indigenous peoples face a profound dilemma: while modernization offers improved access to material welfare, it simultaneously threatens the erosion of communal values due to the dominance of capitalist logic (Li, 2014).

This dilemma may produce several consequences. First, intergenerational tensions may arise when younger members of the community adopt individual economic aspirations over collective traditions, thereby widening the generational gap (Appadurai, 1996). Second, cultural fragmentation may occur as consumerist values and modern lifestyles undermine the legitimacy of customary institutions as sources of social norms (Tsing, 2005). Third, the penetration of markets and commodification of local resources can create economic dependency on external actors, ultimately weakening indigenous sovereignty over land and natural resource

management (Harvey, 2003). Such dynamics may also spark internal conflicts when some community members prioritize material gains while others remain committed to cultural sustainability.

This situation reflects a broader shift in modes of livelihood. As Scott (1976) demonstrated, agrarian societies traditionally prioritized moral economies based on solidarity and subsistence security rather than profit maximization. By contrast, modern capitalism increasingly erodes subsistence-oriented practices, replacing them with the rationality of efficiency, productivity, and competition. Parallel to this shift, dominant development discourses have equated well-being with capitalist indicators such as economic growth, consumption, and global market integration (World Bank, 1997; Stiglitz, 2002).

Such perspectives position capitalism and markets as the primary instruments of prosperity, often stigmatizing non-market ways of life as backward. Escobar (2011), however, critiques this paradigm, arguing that capitalist development has monopolized the definition of well-being while marginalizing locally rooted alternatives. Similarly, Tsing (2005) and Kahn (2017) highlight that indigenous communities are not merely passive victims of capitalist logic; rather, they selectively appropriate market mechanisms to sustain their livelihoods without fully abandoning communal values. Thus, the dialectic between capitalism and indigenous worldviews demonstrates an enduring tension. On one side, capitalism and markets are celebrated as the dominant path to welfare; on the other, indigenous societies highlight alternative conceptions of well-being rooted in solidarity, ecological balance, and socio-cultural continuity. This debate is crucial for understanding how communities such as the Marena negotiate welfare under modernization shaped by the pervasive logic of capitalism.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative approach with a case study method, focusing on the Marena indigenous community in Enrekang Regency, South Sulawesi. A qualitative approach was chosen as it allows for an in-depth exploration of the dialectical dynamics between economic needs and the preservation of customary values within the community. Data collection was conducted through in-depth interviews with seven key informants from customary leaders, community members, and local stakeholders. The interviews results with historical records and customary regulations became the important data to be analyzed.

The data were analyzed using a thematic approach to identify patterns in the dialectic between community engagement in capitalist market mechanisms and their commitment to maintaining cultural identity. To strengthen the analytical framework, this study adopts the perspective of political ecology, which emphasizes the interconnections between power, political economy, and local cultural practices in the context of modernization (Bryant & Bailey, 1997). In addition, legal pluralism theory is employed to examine how customary norms and formal capitalist mechanisms coexist and negotiate with one another (Sukri, 2018; Merry, 1988).

Furthermore, the concept of hybrid modernity (Eisenstadt, 2000; Kahn, 2017) is applied to analyze the Marena community's selective adaptation strategies in combining customary practices with market participation. This theoretical framework highlights that indigenous communities are not entirely dominated by the logic of capitalism but are able to create autonomous spaces through the reinterpretation of customary values within the modern economic context. The validity of data was ensured through triangulation of sources, methods, and time, thereby producing a comprehensive understanding of the adaptive strategies that enable the Marena community to balance material well-being with the preservation of cultural identity.

RESULTS

The analysis of the Marena indigenous community reveals that their understanding of well-being is not solely measured by material attainment or income increase, as assumed within the capitalist logic. For them, well-being encompasses the continuity of customary values, the preservation of social harmony, and the safeguarding of environmental sustainability. This perspective resonates with Escobar's (2010) argument that indigenous peoples often conceptualize development differently from the dominant narrative of global capitalism, where social relations, cosmology, and nature are seen as inseparable components of well-being. In this context, the Marena community seeks to maintain their value system while selectively adopting external economic opportunities. As one of the Marena elder mentions,

“...dalam kondisi saat ini kebutuhan masyarakat semakin banyak sehingga kami membutuhkan biaya besar untuk membiayai kebutuhan sehari hari. Karena itu masyarakat disini biasanya bekerja termasuk menjadi karyawan pada pertanian bawang merah dan lainnya agar mendapatkan tambahan penghasilan. Tapi kami juga harus tetap menjaga nilai-nilai orang marena meski kami butuh uang untuk membiayai kehidupan sehari hari termasuk membiayai sekolah anak-anak (In the current situation, the community's needs are increasing, so we need money to cover our daily needs. Therefore, people here usually work, including as employees on onion farms and others, to earn extra income. But we must also maintain the values of the people because we need money to cover our daily living expenses, including our children's school fees).”

Furthermore, efforts to sustain the continuity of traditional customs in Marena face additional challenges, as younger generations increasingly prioritize formal education and employment to meet their livelihood needs. Consequently, many young people devote less attention to certain customary values and practices. Moreover, the elder says,

“...memang, kita menghadapi situasi yang cukup sulit karena saat ini banyak anak muda kita yang memilih bekerja dan bersekolah di luar daerah karena tuntutan ekonomi untuk hidup lebih baik, yang tampaknya tidak lagi terlalu memperhatikan adat istiadat (indeed, we are facing a rather difficult situation, as many of our young people are now choosing to study and work outside the region in response to economic pressures for a better livelihood, and they appear to be paying less attention to local customary traditions).”

Based on that, the thematic analysis identified a distinct dialectical pattern between the economic pressures experienced by the Marena indigenous community and their sustained commitment to cultural identity preservation. The first issue, selective integration into market mechanisms, illustrates how community members have increasingly engaged in market-based economic activities such as the commercialization of agricultural produce and cultural tourism while continually negotiating the conditions of participation to prevent conflicts with customary norms. The second issue, normative tension, captures the dilemmas that arise when urgent economic needs risk reorienting priorities away from customary obligations, particularly regarding the scheduling of ritual events and the allocation of labor for collective activities. The third issue, cultural reproduction strategies, demonstrates how the Marena community actively reinterprets and adapts customary practices including ceremonial traditions, kinship symbols, and systems of cooperation to ensure their continued relevance and coherence within a shifting economic environment that tends closed to the capitalism.

A dilemma emerges when capitalism, embedded in daily life, positions money as the primary symbol of well-being. For the Marena, money is indeed important as a medium of

exchange and a means of fulfilling basic needs, but it is not entirely equated with happiness or social honour. Honor is instead determined by adherence to customary rules, social solidarity, and the ability to balance individual needs with communal sustainability. This finding aligns with Tsing's (2005) research showing that indigenous communities worldwide experience global market interaction as both an opportunity and a threat to their social bonds and traditions.

Environmental sustainability also plays a central role in the Marena's notion of well-being. Natural resources are viewed not merely as instruments of economic production but as inherited legacies that must be preserved for future generations as part of a philosophy of living in harmony with nature. In interviews, customary leaders emphasized that "the condition of nature is part of the philosophy and fundamental values of life and must always be protected." This perspective contrasts with the capitalist logic that commodifies nature, while for the Marena, the environment represents their living space and existential foundation. Thus, environmental sustainability is not only an ecological concern but also a moral and spiritual imperative, echoing Dove's (2011) observations on indigenous ecological adaptation practices.

The Marena community's strategies reveal practices of hybridity, such as maintaining ritual traditions within agricultural production or using market-generated income to support collective village activities. Here, customary rules function as a "filter" that limits the full penetration of capitalism while directing economic activities toward collective welfare. In other words, well-being is not understood as individual accumulation but as the preservation of social harmony. This pattern suggests that the Marena community is constructing an alternative interpretation of modernity open to change yet firmly rooted in local values.

In the long term, the dialectical tension between pursuing modern economic welfare and preserving traditional cultural values may generate several possible outcomes. First, if capitalist pressures intensify and indigenous communities fail to develop balanced adaptive mechanisms, gradual cultural erosion may occur. This is evident in the phenomenon of "cultural commodification," where traditions are retained only in symbolic form for tourism markets or identity politics, while their philosophical and social meanings weaken or even disappear (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2009). Second, if the Marena successfully manage this dialectic selectively, they may construct a model of cultural hybridity (Bhabha, 1994), where traditional values remain the moral foundation while engagement in the modern economy is strategically directed toward collective welfare. In this scenario, indigenous communities not only survive but also emerge as actors capable of articulating alternative, locally grounded, and sustainable development models. Third, internal tensions may also arise. Younger generations exposed to modern economic systems may increasingly embrace materialistic notions of well-being, while older generations remain committed to traditional values. If unmanaged, these differences could generate social fragmentation and undermine the cohesion that has long characterized the community (Geertz, 1973).

Therefore, the long-term implications of this dialectical process may range from threats to cultural sustainability to opportunities for constructing more inclusive social spaces, depending on how the Marena community and external actors (state, market, NGOs) interact in managing the dynamics between tradition and modernity. In certain scenarios, economic modernization within indigenous communities could weaken traditional solidarity if capitalist logic dominates social relations (Li, 2014). However, if communities successfully negotiate cultural adaptation, modernity can instead serve as a medium to strengthen collective identity by creating new spaces for youth participation, the advancement of women's rights, and economic diversification rooted in local knowledge (Sahlins, 1999; Tsing, 2005).

DISCUSSION

The dialectical condition experienced by the Marena indigenous community reflects broader dynamics faced by many indigenous groups globally when navigating between cultural sustainability and the pressures of capitalist modernization. This situation demonstrates that tradition and modernity should not be conceived as binary opposites but rather as interrelated fields of negotiation (Sahlins, 1999). The Marena experience highlights three critical implications: socio-cultural resilience, economic adaptation, and theoretical contribution.

First, at the socio-cultural level, the persistence of customary values signifies that *adat* serves not only as an inherited tradition but also as a social mechanism for regulating community interactions with external forces. This role of *adat* affirms Gaonkar's (2001) notion of "alternative modernities," where modernity in indigenous contexts is shaped through the blending of local wisdom and global demands. The Marena's emphasis on solidarity and collective ethics illustrates that local modernity does not necessarily follow a Western trajectory, but rather can evolve into indigenous modernities (Clammer, 2012).

Second, from the economic dimension, the Marena community demonstrates selective participation in the market system. This strategy represents an adaptive mechanism to avoid the exploitative tendencies of capitalist markets while preserving social cohesion. Their economic involvement functions as a pragmatic necessity, not as full integration into capitalist logic. In this regard, the Marena present an alternative model of development rooted in community values, ecological sustainability, and social justice, aligning with Sen's (1999) critique of narrow growth-centered paradigms. Such practices resonate with Escobar's (1995, 2010) call for post-development thinking, where well-being is measured not by GDP or individual accumulation but by community-based ethics and ecological harmony.

Third, at the theoretical level, the Marena case confirms the relevance of legal pluralism and cultural hybridity in analyzing indigenous experiences (Merry, 1988; Sukri, 2018). The coexistence of customary rules and capitalist norms creates an arena of continuous negotiation. This hybridity supports Bhabha's (1994) notion that cultural identity in globalized contexts is produced through ambivalence and negotiation, rather than fixed boundaries. It also demonstrates that indigenous peoples are not passive victims of globalization, but active agents reshaping modernity according to their values.

Nevertheless, the dialectical process also contains ambivalent possibilities. On one hand, access to modern economic opportunities may enhance material welfare, education, and political bargaining power. On the other hand, rapid adaptation to capitalist systems risks accelerating cultural erosion, particularly if consumerism and individualism displace communal ethics (Li, 2007; Comaroff & Comaroff, 2009). Moreover, generational differences may exacerbate this tension: while younger generations are more exposed to modern economic systems and thus lean toward materialistic views of well-being, older generations maintain strong commitments to traditional values. If not managed properly, this divergence may generate social fragmentation and weaken the very cohesion that sustains indigenous identity (Geertz, 1973).

In the long run, the outcomes of this dialectic may vary. If capitalist pressures dominate without effective negotiation, gradual cultural commodification may occur, reducing *adat* to symbolic performances for tourism or identity politics. Conversely, if the Marena succeed in selectively managing hybridity, they may develop a culturally grounded and sustainable model of indigenous modernity that not only preserves identity but also provides alternative pathways for development (Tsing, 2005). Thus, the long-term trajectory depends not only on internal community strategies but also on the quality of interactions with external actors, state, market, NGOs, and broader society (Li, 2014).

Ultimately, the Marena experience highlights that indigenous well-being cannot be reduced to material prosperity alone. Instead, it must be understood as a holistic integration of culture, ecology, and community solidarity. This offers valuable insights for rethinking development paradigms beyond growth metrics and toward inclusive, locally rooted forms of modernity.

CONCLUSION

This study reveals that the Marena indigenous community lives within a dialectical condition between the necessity to engage in capitalist economic systems to improve material well-being and the commitment to preserve cultural values as the foundation of their collective identity. While modernization and capitalist market penetration provide access to economic opportunities, education, and resources, they simultaneously pose risks of cultural erosion, weakened solidarity, and threats to social and ecological harmony. The findings demonstrate that the Marena are not passive recipients of capitalist logic but active agents who selectively adapt by integrating customary practices into modern economic activities. This adaptive strategy illustrates the creation of an alternative modernity that does not entirely submit to capitalism but instead blends local wisdom with global demands. The implications of this dialectical condition are the emergence of new social spaces where tradition and modernity are not viewed as opposing binaries but as productive arenas of negotiation. However, the sustainability of the Marena's existence depends on their capacity to maintain this balance. If preserved, they may serve as a model of resilience and locally rooted sustainable development. If not, they risk experiencing double marginalization losing their cultural values while failing to compete in the global capitalist system. In conclusion, the Marena case underscores the importance of recognizing indigenous peoples not merely as cultural legacies but as active agents in shaping hybrid modernities and advancing development pathways that are just, sustainable, and consistent with their identities.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

We would like to express our gratitude to Hasanuddin University for funding the research conducted through LP2M which underlies this paper. We would also like to thank the entire research team from the Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, Hasanuddin University, Indonesia. In addition, we would also like to thank the entire Pasang indigenous community, the Enrekang Regency Government, the AMAN-Maspul institution, and other parties who have contributed to helping us collect data so that this paper can be realized.

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