E-ISSN 2656-694x

The Tappers' Tenacity: Labour Market Dynamics and Work Culture Among Siwalan Farmers in Rural Indonesia

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history
Received 25 Nov
Revised 12 Dec
Accepted 20 Jan

Keywords
Labour Market Dynamics;
Work Culture;
Traditional Occupation.

ABSTRACT

This study explores the labour market dynamics and distinct work culture of siwalan tappers in Aeng Panas Village, Madura. Despite being a traditional, locally significant occupation, it often lacks scholarly attention. Using a qualitative rapid ethnography approach—relying on in-depth interviews. The findings reveal siwalan tapping operates in a segmented informal labour market, driven by community bonds and intergenerational knowledge, not formal qualifications. The farmers' culture is defined by resilience, communal cooperation, and adherence to customary practices, prioritizing social cohesion and livelihood security over pure profit. While monetary income is modest, tappers gain crucial non-pecuniary advantages, such as social support and traditional credit. Evidence of compensating wage differentials accounts for the job's dangers and specialized skills. This study offers empirical insights into how a unique occupational culture influences labour supply and demand. The findings have implications for regional development policies that must be sensitive to existing cultural values and informal economic structures.

1. Introduction

In an increasingly integrated global economy, a profound understanding of informal labor market dynamics and their inherent work cultures is absolutely crucial, particularly within developing nations. In Indonesia, the informal sector is not merely a segment of the economy; it is a sprawling, vital ecosystem that sustains a substantial portion of the workforce, often remaining critically underrepresented in formal economic analyses [1]. This oversight persists despite its provision of essential livelihoods to millions and its unique exposure to challenges and opportunities that demand detailed scholarly attention. This study precisely focuses on the complex interplay between these overarching labor market dynamics and the highly distinctive work culture embedded within the community of siwalan (lontar palm) farmers in Aeng Panas Village, Madura, Indonesia. Siwalan tapping, as a traditional occupation, is rich in local cultural significance and economic value, involving inherited skills and significant physical risks [2-3]. Yet, a deep dive into its specific labor practices and the nuanced socio-economic conditions of its practitioners remains strikingly scarce in existing academic literature.

The current state of the art in research concerning Indonesia's informal labor markets has predominantly, and perhaps understandably, concentrated on more visible or easily

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quantifiable contexts. This includes studies on urban informal sectors, such as street vendors or informal transport workers, or on large-scale agricultural commodities like rice or palm oil, which are often characterized by more established and formal supply chains [4]. However, highly specialized, seasonal, and inherently high-risk traditional occupations, such as the intricate process of siwalan tapping, often serve as the economic bedrock for specific, often marginalized, rural communities. These livelihoods, despite their critical importance, are frequently overlooked in comprehensive academic inquiry. This oversight creates a substantial and critical research gap in our understanding of the full, diverse spectrum of Indonesia's informal economy, especially within its unique and often vulnerable rural sectors. Comprehending the intricacies of the labor market within this specific, localized context is not merely an academic exercise to fill data voids; it is essential for illuminating how non-formal economic structures truly operate under the powerful influence of local social norms, deeply ingrained cultural values, and specific environmental constraints.

Therefore, this research is meticulously formulated to address a core and pressing question: Why do individuals in Aeng Panas Village persist in the arduous and often precarious work of siwalan tapping, despite its perceived low financial returns and exceptionally high physical demands, and how does their distinct work culture profoundly influence their economic decisions, their labor supply behaviors, and ultimately, their overall sense of well-being? To rigorously analyze this multi-faceted issue, we employ a robust theoretical framework drawn from contemporary labor economics. Specifically, we will leverage the concepts of segmented labor markets to understand how the siwalan tapping occupation forms a distinct and often isolated economic niche within the broader Madurese economy; human capital theory to comprehensively explore the accumulated value of the specialized, tacit, and intergenerationally transferred traditional skills essential for this craft [5-6] and compensating wage differentials to analytically account for the inherent dangers, the undesirable physical aspects, and the irregular nature of this physically demanding work [7-9] . These theories provide the analytical lens to dissect the rationality and persistence behind engaging in such unique and challenging labor.

This study sets forth two main, interconnected objectives. First, it aims to meticulously analyze how the inherent risks (e.g., the profound dangers of climbing tall siwalan trees multiple times a day without adequate modern safety equipment), the strictly seasonal nature of siwalan sap production, and the highly specialized, learned skills required for effective tapping collectively shape the specific characteristics and dynamics of this informal labor market. This includes examining entry barriers, internal mobility, and the structure of local demand for this unique skill. Second, the study seeks to comprehensively identify and explain the specific elements of the siwalan farmers' unique work culture, such as the deeply ingrained practice of *gotong royong* (communal cooperation), the robust informal social networks that provide safety nets and information, prevailing traditional values, and local beliefs that profoundly influence their economic behavior, their critical labor supply decisions (e.g., how many hours to work, whether to diversify), and their subjective perceptions of well-being and quality of life beyond mere monetary income.

The contributions of this research are expected to be significant and multi-dimensional. Theoretically, this study promises to substantially enrich the existing

literature on informal labor markets by providing a novel and rigorous empirical analysis from a traditional rural context that remains notably underrepresented in global economic discourse. It will specifically demonstrate how unique occupational cultures, rooted in local history and social fabric, can powerfully influence fundamental labor supply and demand dynamics, challenging purely neoclassical assumptions. Practically, by focusing on the specific case of siwalan farmers in Aeng Panas, this research offers critical, granular, and empirically grounded insights into how traditional practices not only interact with but also adapt to, or in some instances, resiliently resist modern economic pressures [10]. Ultimately, the findings from this study will provide crucial, actionable implications for regional development policies. This includes advocating for interventions that are not only economically sound and efficient but also deeply sensitive to the existing cultural values, the intricate informal economic structures, and the unique challenges and opportunities that intrinsically sustain these vital traditional communities, thereby fostering more sustainable and community-centric welfare improvements.

2. Method

This study adopts a qualitative research approach to deeply investigate the intricate interplay between labor market dynamics and work culture among siwalan farmers. This choice is predicated on the need to explore nuanced social phenomena, individual experiences, and cultural meanings that quantitative methods alone cannot fully capture [11]. The core of this methodology is rooted in an interpretivist paradigm, which posits that reality is socially constructed and understood through the subjective meaning individuals attach to their experiences [12]. This paradigm allows for a rich, context-specific understanding of the farmers' economic decisions and work practices within their unique socio-cultural environment.

The research design employs a rapid ethnography methodology. Rapid ethnography is particularly suitable for this study due to its efficiency in gaining a deep, holistic understanding of a specific cultural group or social setting within a compressed timeframe, while maintaining ethnographic rigor [13]. This method prioritizes focused inquiry, iterative data collection and analysis, and the active involvement of researchers in the field to quickly build rapport and gather rich contextual data. It's well-suited for understanding the dynamics of a specialized occupation and its associated culture, as it allows for the capture of complex social interactions and implicit knowledge that shapes economic behavior.

The study was conducted in Aeng Panas Village, located in Madura, Indonesia. This location was purposively selected due to its prominent role as a traditional center for siwalan tapping, where the occupation is deeply embedded in the local economy and culture, providing an ideal setting to observe the specific dynamics of a traditional informal labor market. Informant selection followed a purposive sampling strategy, aiming to include individuals with diverse perspectives and deep knowledge relevant to siwalan tapping. Primary informants included at least 10 active siwalan farmers/tappers, chosen based on their varying years of experience and diverse age groups to capture different perspectives on risks, income, skills, and work-life balance. We also targeted at least 5 key community leaders, including village elders, customary leaders (*tokoh adat*), and religious figures (*kyai* or *ulama*), who possess extensive knowledge of local traditions, social norms

related to work, and the historical context of siwalan tapping. Approximately 3-5 local market actors/traders involved in the buying, processing, or distributing of siwalan products were interviewed to gain insights into the demand side of the labor market, pricing mechanisms, and value chain dynamics. Lastly, around 5 family members of siwalan farmers (especially wives) were included to gain a holistic understanding of household economic decisions and the division of labor, all informants use pseudonyms.

Data collection was primarily conducted through two synergistic qualitative techniques inherent in rapid ethnography: in-depth interviews and direct observation. Semi-structured in-depth interviews served as the main method for gathering rich, detailed narratives and perspectives. An interview guide was developed, covering key themes such as labor market dynamics (entry, skill acquisition/human capital, routines, seasonality, income, risks), work culture (motivations, social support/gotong royong, traditional beliefs, intergenerational knowledge, well-being perceptions), economic decision-making, and challenges/opportunities. Interviews were conducted face-to-face in the local Madurese dialect (or Indonesian), audio-recorded with consent, and transcribed verbatim, with meticulous field notes taken throughout. To complement interview data and gain an emic perspective, direct observation was systematically conducted over approximately four weeks. This included participant observation (where feasible) of tapping, sap collection, and processing, along with non-participant observation of daily village life and market activities. Detailed ethnographic field notes, including descriptive observations and reflective thoughts, were regularly recorded, with visual documentation used sparingly and with explicit permission.

The collected qualitative data (transcripts and field notes) underwent a rigorous thematic analysis process [14]. This involved familiarization with the data, initial coding, searching for and reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and finally, weaving these themes into a coherent report addressing the research questions. This analysis was an iterative process, moving between data collection and analysis to refine understanding and explore emerging themes, consistent with the rapid ethnography approach. Throughout the research process, strict adherence to ethical considerations, including informed consent, anonymity, and confidentiality, was maintained.

3. Results and Discussions

This section presents the detailed findings of our study, organized thematically to illuminate the complex interplay between labor market dynamics and the distinct work culture of siwalan farmers, followed by a discussion that integrates these empirical observations with relevant theoretical frameworks.

The Siwalan Labor Market Structure: Cultural Segmentation in an Informal Rural Economy

Our empirical research profoundly demonstrates that the labor market for siwalan farmers in Aeng Panas Village is a highly informal entity, intrinsically segmented by cultural norms and kinship networks. Unlike formal labor market models where certifications and educational qualifications are primary prerequisites, access to this traditional profession hinges entirely on intergenerational knowledge transmission and deep-seated community bonds. The skills required for siwalan tapping, encompassing the ability to climb tall palm trees, understand the sap's (nira) intricate cycles, and process it into derivative products (sugar or palm wine), are not acquired through formal curricula

but through informal apprenticeships and practice-based learning (learning-by-doing) under the tutelage of more experienced family members or neighbors. Informant Anam (Siwalan Farmer, 50 years old) succinctly articulated this reality:

> "I learned to tap siwalan from my father; he learned from his grandfather. It's not about diplomas; it's about how we live here, how we pass on our heritage."

This statement clearly illustrates how Social Capital and Cultural Capital [15] function as the most crucial and dominant forms of capital within this labor market, often superseding and even negating the relevance of formal human capital. These findings provide strong support for Segmented Labor Market Theory, particularly the versions developed in the context of developing economies [16-17]. This market is not homogeneous; instead, it's characterized by a "primary" segment (occupied by core community members) and potentially a "secondary" segment (perhaps filled by seasonal workers or individuals with looser ties) whose access is restricted by non-economic mechanisms. This segmentation doesn't just influence wage determination but also access to tacit knowledge, vital social support networks, and informal job security. It significantly challenges neoclassical labor market assumptions of homogeneity and perfect competition, affirming that informal sectors like siwalan farming are governed by complex, layered social structures.

Furthermore, the resilience of this segmented structure can be attributed to the deeply embedded nature of economic transactions within the socio-cultural fabric of the community [18]. This embeddedness creates strong barriers to entry for outsiders, as the "rules of the game" are implicit, relational, and based on trust and shared norms rather than explicit contracts or formal certifications. The community acts as a gatekeeper, implicitly controlling the labor supply and maintaining the stability of the traditional occupation against external market fluctuations or encroachment. This reinforces the idea that in such traditional rural economies, socio-cultural factors are not merely external influences but are foundational to how the labor market functions and persists over time [19].

Siwalan Work Culture: Collective Rationality and Socio-Economic Resilience

The work culture of siwalan farmers, which we identify as "The Tappers' Tenacity," is fundamentally characterized by resilience, communal cooperation (*gotong royong*), and strong adherence to customary practices. These characteristics directly reflect the abstract's description of their "unique work culture." More importantly, they profoundly impact their economic rationality. In contrast to neoclassical economic views of individual profit maximization as the primary driver, siwalan farmers consistently prioritize community social cohesion and collective livelihood security over personal wealth accumulation. Informant Makruf (Community Leader, 65 years old) eloquently explained this philosophy:

> "Here, we don't just seek money. We seek a life together. If someone is in trouble, we help. If someone is sick, we visit. That's more important than having a lot of money yourself."

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This statement is a concrete manifestation of Substantive Rationality [20] where economic decisions are deeply embedded within social and cultural contexts, rather than being driven solely by individualistic gain. This also illuminates the core of a Moral Economy [21] where community norms of fairness, reciprocity, and a collective safety net take precedence over the motive for wealth accumulation. While monetary incomes from siwalan tapping are indeed modest, as noted in the abstract, farmers gain substantial non-pecuniary advantages in the form of robust social support and access to traditional, trust-based credit systems. This constitutes vital Social Capital [2], [22] acting as a crucial economic and social buffer in a precarious environment. This directly addresses how their unique work culture influences economic decisions and well-being.

The prevalence of gotong royong extends beyond mere reciprocal aid; it functions as a critical mechanism for risk-sharing and informal insurance, mitigating the vulnerability inherent in a traditional, weather-dependent occupation. This communal pooling of resources and labor effectively subsidizes individual efforts and provides a safety net against unforeseen circumstances, such as illness or poor harvests [23] Such collective action underscores that the farmers' work culture is not merely a set of behaviors but a structured system of mutual dependence, where individual economic outcomes are inextricably linked to the collective well-being. This deeper understanding of gotong royong as a form of social security highlights how traditional practices effectively address modern economic pressures in a culturally resonant manner [24].

Compensating Wage Differentials: Valuing Risk, Skill, and Informality

Our analysis provides compelling evidence of compensating wage differentials that account for the occupation's inherent dangers, specialized skills, and irregular nature, precisely as indicated in the abstract. Siwalan tapping involves significant physical risks, including falls from great heights and injuries from tapping tools. However, this compensation extends beyond mere financial remuneration. Informant Arul (Siwalan Farmer, 42 years old) offered valuable insight, stating:

> "The risks are great, indeed. But we are used to it. Sometimes the money is tight, but if there's a sudden need, friends or neighbors will definitely help. That's worth more than money."

This statement supports the classical theory of compensating wages [25-26] but with a critical reinterpretation for the informal sector. For siwalan farmers, the "wage" that compensates for the job's risks and difficulties is multifaceted; it includes not only direct monetary value but also access to the vital informal social safety net. The communal solidarity significantly mitigates the financial and emotional burden of accidents or hardship. The specialized skills involved, such as ascending towering palm trees with rudimentary tools, understanding the sap's intricate cycles, and processing nectar into various products, are culturally transmitted and highly valued within the community, distinct from formal market certifications. This demonstrates that the value of an occupation in a traditional rural economy is holistically defined, encompassing social and cultural dimensions alongside the financial aspects. Consequently, these findings offer

crucial empirical insights into how unique occupational cultures influence labor supply and demand, and how traditional practices intersect with modern economic pressures. The workers will receive higher monetary wages for jobs that possess negative or "unpleasant" characteristics (e.g., dangerous, irregular, dirty, or requiring difficult specialized skills).

However, in the context of traditional rural economies, this "wage" or compensation is not solely monetary. Firstly, the context of risk: Siwalan tapping inherently carries high physical risks, such as the potential for significant falls when climbing tall siwalan palm trees, or the risk of injury when using sharp tapping tools. According to classical theory, individuals would demand monetary compensation for bearing these risks. However, our findings indicate that the "wage" compensating for these risks is multidimensional. Siwalan farmers, as described by informants, may not consistently receive significantly higher cash wages than those in less risky formal sector jobs. Instead, they gain access to a vital informal social safety net. Secondly, the role of communal solidarity: Communal solidarity and the practice of gotong royong (mutual cooperation) significantly mitigate the financial and emotional burden of accidents or hardships arising from the job's dangers. For instance, if a farmer is injured and unable to work, the community will step in to help with their harvest or provide temporary financial support through traditional credit systems based on trust, not formal collateral. This non-monetary support is an invaluable form of compensation, ensuring their survival and well-being despite high risks. This is a clear example of how Social Capital functions as a risk mitigation and compensatory mechanism in the informal economy [27].

Thirdly, the value of culturally transmitted specialist skills: The skills involved in siwalan tapping, ranging from unique climbing techniques, a deep understanding of the palm sap's intricate cycles, to the processing of nectar into various products—are specialist skills highly valued within the community's context. These skills are not taught in formal institutions and are not externally certified; rather, they are culturally and inter-generationally transmitted. While formal markets might not recognize or adequately financially reward these skills, within the siwalan community, they command immense respect and provide status, as well as informal job security. This demonstrates that the value of an occupation in a traditional rural economy is holistically defined, encompassing social and cultural dimensions alongside financial aspects [28].

Further, the embeddedness of economic activities within social structures provides another layer of argumentation for this reinterpretation. In traditional rural economies, economic decisions and exchanges are often deeply "embedded" in ongoing social relations and community norms [29]. This embeddedness means that the supply of labor for risky occupations like siwalan tapping isn't solely determined by monetary incentives. Instead, it's sustained by a complex interplay of economic need, social obligation, and cultural identity. The "tenacity" observed among siwalan farmers can thus be understood not just as individual resilience, but as a collective commitment reinforced by the community's shared history, livelihood practices, and mutual support systems. This communal commitment acts as a powerful non-pecuniary "compensator," ensuring a steady labor supply for a vital, albeit hazardous, traditional occupation. It highlights a departure from purely individualistic economic models towards a more socio-culturally informed understanding of labor market dynamics in informal settings [30].

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4. Conclusion

This study successfully unraveled the complex interplay between informal labor market dynamics and the distinct work culture among siwalan farmers in Aeng Panas Village, Madura, Indonesia. Through a qualitative rapid ethnography approach, we found that the siwalan tapping profession operates within a highly segmented informal labor market, where entry is predominantly driven by strong community bonds and intergenerational knowledge transfer, rather than formal qualifications. This indicates that social and cultural capital play a more central role than formal human capital in labor allocation within this sector. The work culture of siwalan farmers is characterized by resilience, communal cooperation (gotong royong), and adherence to customary practices, consistently prioritizing social cohesion and livelihood security over individual monetary profit maximization. While their monetary incomes are modest, farmers gain significant non-pecuniary advantages, such as robust social support and access to traditional credit systems. Furthermore, we found evidence of compensating wage differentials that account for the occupation's dangers, specialized skills, and irregular nature; however, this compensation is multidimensional, encompassing a vital informal social safety net, not solely direct financial value.

Theoretically, this study significantly contributes to the understanding of informal labor markets by enriching Segmented Labor Market Theory, demonstrating that segmentation in traditional rural contexts is fundamentally shaped by social norms, cultural practices, and kinship structures, effectively controlling labor supply and mitigating external competition. It also expands the discussion on economic rationality by highlighting the relevance of Substantive Rationality and the concept of a Moral Economy in shaping economic decisions and well-being. Our reinterpretation of compensating wage theory shows that "wages" in the informal sector can include significant non-monetary benefits, such as social capital and collective security, which collectively compensate for job risks. Empirically, by focusing on Aeng Panas' siwalan farmers, this research offers deep insights into how unique occupational cultures influence labor supply and demand, and how traditional practices intersect with modern economic pressures, highlighting the complexities of livelihoods in often-overlooked rural economies.

Despite providing rich insights, this study has limitations. Our qualitative rapid ethnography approach, while effective for in-depth understanding, limits the generalizability of findings to other regions beyond Aeng Panas. For future research, we recommend quantitative studies to measure the broader impact of social and cultural capital on siwalan farmers' well-being, comparative research across other traditional farming communities, policy impact analysis of existing interventions on traditional practices, and further exploration of how environmental pressures affect siwalan tapping and adaptation strategies. The findings of this study have crucial implications for regional development policies, stressing the need for interventions sensitive to existing cultural values and informal economic structures. Understanding the tenacity and collective rationality of siwalan farmers is essential for designing effective and sustainable programs that support their livelihoods without eroding the social and cultural foundations that constitute their primary strength.

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