

# Tradition and Social Identity Formation in Society

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## ABSTRACT

*This article examines the role of cultural traditions and rituals in shaping individual and group social identities in a changing society. Tradition is understood as a symbolic system that functions to transmit values, strengthen social cohesion, and create identity boundaries that distinguish between groups. Through a literature study with an interpretative qualitative approach, this research examines the contribution of tradition in the process of internalizing social norms, status recognition, and the formation of meaning structures that guide social action. The results of the research show that traditions not only maintain the continuity of values, but also have the capacity to adapt to modern social dynamics, including globalization, social mobility, and the development of information technology. Traditions that are capable of undergoing symbolic reinterpretation prove more effective in maintaining their social relevance and in shaping identities that are contextual to contemporary life. Active participation in cultural rites strengthens personal and collective narratives that shape a sense of belonging and social legitimacy. This research recommends the need for an interdisciplinary approach in understanding tradition as a complex social process, as well as the importance of cultural education in nurturing the continuity of a humanized and reflective identity.*

## INTRODUCTION

Tradition is an essential part of the formation of social meaning in human life. They do not exist simply as rituals or seasonal celebrations, but as symbolic systems that are passed down between generations. In each society, the form and content of traditions reflect collectively held values, norms and perceptions of the world. Tradition becomes the foundation that sustains social identity because through symbolic repetition, individuals learn to recognize who they are within the broader fabric of social relations (Giles, 2018).

In many regions, cultural rituals such as birth, marriage and death ceremonies not only affirm the social roles of individual society members, but also shape collective perceptions of the norms that must be followed. Every symbol, narrative and gesture in tradition holds an ideological message that organizes the position of individuals in the social structure. Social identity is not created in a vacuum, but through interactions that are organized and given meaning by the cultural framework inherent to a society (Yadgar, 2013). This framework shapes individuals' perceptions and their daily actions.

The existence of tradition serves as a medium for forming value orientations for the group, as well as a tool for distinguishing between 'us' and 'them'. Tradition becomes the main medium in shaping the social character of a group, as well as setting moral standards that distinguish acceptable and unacceptable behavior. This boundary is important in the formation of social cohesion as well as the filtering of outside influences that are deemed to disrupt the internal balance of the society. In tradition, individuals find their place - whether as part of a family, ethnic society or nation. When tradition is displaced or fragmented by modernization, identity tensions become inevitable (Noyes, 2009).

The research of tradition and social identity is becoming increasingly important in the context of globalization, as the world today is characterized by high human mobility, intensive cultural exchange, and widespread penetration of information technology. While some traditions experience revitalization, others face erosion of meaning. This situation creates an academic need to dig into how traditions shape, maintain, or even reconstruct social identities in the landscape of contemporary society (Graburn, 2000).

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One of the crucial issues that arise in the relationship between tradition and social identity is when cultural symbols are reduced to commodities or simply tools of political legitimacy. This phenomenon is often seen in cultural festivals, traditional symbols, or traditional clothing displayed decoratively for the purpose of tourism promotion or political campaigns. In this case, tradition is no longer seen as a living process of meaning, but rather as a showcase that is detached from people's daily lives. As a result, the noble values contained in these cultural symbols are impoverished and detached from their historical and social contexts. Hobsbawm and Ranger (1992) mention that many traditions are reinvented for certain ideological interests, thus creating an illusion of cultural continuity that is actually artificial. The reduction of tradition to a political tool or market commodity not only obscures authentic meaning, but can also create identity tensions in society.

Some societies experience a dilemma between maintaining ancestral traditions and the pressure to conform to global values. In this process, social identities become fragmented, even uprooted from the cultural roots that once gave a sense of belonging. This dilemma gave rise to inner conflicts within the society, especially when the younger generation began to doubt the relevance of their ancestral culture in modern life. Traditions that were once the basis of identity and solidarity are now considered outdated or even a social burden. Eriksen (2001) points out that in this situation, identities are often reproduced in symbolic forms that no longer represent authentic social experiences. This leads to collective alienation that leads to uncertainty of value orientation. In the long-term, this can lead to social crises, such as a decreased sense of solidarity, increased conflict between identities, and a loss of pride in one's own culture.

Another problem that arises is the lack of understanding of the symbolic function of tradition itself. Many cultural policies prioritize preservation, but fail to explain the relationship between tradition and the social identity structures that are shaped by it. As Handler and Linnekin (1984) note, the concept of tradition is not static, but the result of constant negotiation between the past and the interests of the present. This lack of reflection often leads to a narrowing of the meaning of culture in public life. When people are only invited to "preserve" without being invited to "understand" the tradition, there is a separation between cultural heritage and daily life. Traditions become mere identity slogans without strong emotional or ideological ties.

Studying the relationship between tradition and social identity is important because it touches on the most essential aspects of human existence in social space. Identity is inseparable from the shared narrative instilled through rites, symbols and norms preserved in tradition. Tradition becomes a pedagogical tool that introduces individuals to the history of their society, as well as forming a framework of meaning that becomes a reference in behaving and interacting with the outside world. When tradition is eroded or decontextualized, identity risks a crisis of meaning. The study of tradition focuses on the preservation of external forms and understanding the formation of individual psychological and social structures.

This study is also important as a basis for understanding the dynamics of the tension between continuity and change in society. We find social mechanisms that maintain the continuity of values. In reality, these values are always faced with change. Changing lifestyles, exposure to outside cultures, and shifting political-economic systems have left people in a dilemma between maintaining their cultural roots and keeping up with modernization. Looking at how tradition shapes and articulates identity in a fast-moving world provides new insights into social dynamics and cultural sustainability.

This research aims to explore how cultural traditions and rituals work as instruments of social identity formation. The main focus lies on symbolic understanding, social relations, and the process of value reproduction that takes place in cultural practices. By digging into these dimensions, the research is expected to make a conceptual contribution to the development of social and cultural identity studies, as well as opening up space for critical reflection on the values inherited in the traditional structure of society.

## RESEARCH METHOD

This research uses a literature study approach as the main method to examine the role of tradition in the formation of individual and group social identities. This approach allows the exploration of theories that have been developed by social scientists as well as a review of various previous research results. The study of literature not only provides a broad conceptual understanding, but also allows the digging of narrative dynamics that are formed in cultural and social spaces. As Merriam (1998) explains, literature study is suitable for understanding abstract and contextual social concepts such as identity, cultural meaning, and value structures.

The analysis was conducted by referring to academic sources such as scientific books, ethnographic journals and social theory articles that highlight the relationship between cultural rites and identity construction. This approach follows a systematic pattern that includes the stages of data classification, interpretation of symbolic meaning, and synthesis between classical thinking and contemporary findings. Bogdan and Biklen (2007) state that the literature-based qualitative research process demands the researcher's sensitivity in reading cultural narratives recorded in texts. This study not only aims to find the common thread between tradition and identity, but also to understand how these meanings are reproduced through a developing symbolic system.

## **RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

In society's lives, cultural heritage does not merely exist as a remnant of the past, but as a social construction that is actively maintained and renewed through repeated practice. Tradition becomes a collective space where past and present generations meet, bringing together memories and hopes in a series of meaningful symbols. It is a process of tacit learning, where values are absorbed, norms are shaped and social structures are introduced to individuals early on without having to be explicitly explained (Valecillo, 2016). Cultural practices such as traditional ceremonies, local languages, or patterns of social relations are not just forms of cultural expression, but means of internalizing values and norms that function to shape the social orientation of individuals. Cultural heritage is not just knowledge that is passed down, but also a value system that is brought to life through organized collective actions.

Rituals, oral stories and social procedures passed down from one generation to the next hold traces of knowledge that govern the way individuals interact within their social sphere. Every action in a traditional space carries historical weight that strengthens solidarity among society members. By following the patterns set by their ancestors, individuals gain a sense of identity and a reference point for behavior that is in line with the values of their society. Tradition becomes a cultural map that guides the direction of living together, especially in societies that emphasize social harmony (Fuentes, 2018). Traditions not only give meaning to everyday actions, but also serve as the foundation for the stability of society. Tradition is not just a legacy, but a system of navigating life together that is continually updated contextually by the societies that live it.

Most societies do not define themselves through theory, but through daily practices that have been embedded in tradition. Symbols such as traditional ceremonies, language structures, and kinship relations systems become a means of representing collective identity. In these symbols, there are ideas about what is considered right, proper and noble in a society. Through these symbols, society can reaffirm what is considered right and proper, and provide boundaries regarding the social norms that must be lived by. Traditions not only explain the past, but also set the moral map and social orientation for the present and future (Ashworth, 2011). Traditions set social standards that provide orientation towards values that should be maintained, and direct decisions and behaviors in daily life. Tradition thus functions as an instrument that establishes a moral and social framework, maintains cultural continuity, and directs society in facing future challenges.

The sustainability of social identity depends largely on how the symbols in tradition are consciously managed and passed on. In many societies, especially those with strong cultural roots, tradition is not considered a historical burden, but a dialectical space where values are reinterpreted without losing their basic meaning. Tradition is not just something static and forgotten, but a living practice that is continually renewed and reflected upon according to contemporary needs and challenges. The values embodied in traditions are preserved, but the way they are lived and applied can change with the social dynamics at hand. This process makes tradition a flexible living structure, allowing social identity to grow together with change, without being uprooted from its roots (Adam, 2020). The continuity of social identity is assured by cultural heritage and the ability of people to creatively transform these symbols.

In agrarian societies, planting patterns, harvest seasons and celebratory rites are often carried out to a rhythm that is directly connected to the collective belief system. These activities are not only economically meaningful, but also create a shared momentum that reinforces a sense of shared existence. Social cohesion in such society's rests on the presence of rites that unify feelings, clarify roles and affirm hierarchies in ways that are acceptable to all. Traditions establish and clarify social roles, emphasize the responsibilities of each member, and affirm the prevailing hierarchy in society. Tradition in this sense is not ornamental, but functional in sustaining the social order. Tradition not only serves as a decoration of social life, but also as a pillar that sustains the stability and continuity of the society in the face of changing times and the challenges of living together.

Tradition is a symbolic system that functions as an instrument of value transmission in society. Through tradition, society instills a structure of thinking and patterns of behavior that are consistent between generations. In this framework, social identity is formed not statically, but through a repeated and structured process of internalization of norms. Geertz (1973) emphasized that cultural symbols such as ceremonies, ancestral narratives, or religious rites, work as “blueprints of behavior” that allow individuals to understand their position in the social fabric. This allows them to situate themselves within the larger social structure, with an awareness of the responsibilities, obligations and rights attached to the role. In agrarian societies, for example, harvest season traditions are not merely ceremonial, but rather a collective vehicle in affirming society cohesion and social hierarchy. Traditions not only define individual behavior patterns, but also maintain the continuity of the social order and support the stability of society.

Every cultural rite has a performative dimension that brings participants into a shared structure of meaning. In rituals of passage, such as birth, adult initiation, and marriage, individuals undergo a collectively recognized transformation of social status. Turner (1969) refers to this as a liminal process, a moment when individuals are on the threshold between their old and new statuses. In this stage, identity is not only acquired, but also negotiated in a symbolic social space. This process places the individual in an ambiguous position and outside the established social order. Tradition is not only the preservation of norms, but also an arena for the reshaping of identity through repeated symbolic participation. Tradition becomes more than just a reminder of the past, it becomes a medium for the formation and affirmation of social identities that are relevant to the dynamics of the times.

Cultural rituals reinforce group identity boundaries through symbolic affirmation of who is “in” and who is “out”. Traditional ceremonies, clothing symbols, local languages and kinship systems are elements that build a sense of membership and social differentiation. For example, in many societies, traditional dress and customary rituals not only symbolize social or religious status, but also make a bold statement about a particular group's affiliation. Barth (1969) points out that identity boundaries are not always determined by cultural substance, but rather by the way groups articulate difference in social interaction. In plural societies, traditions function as identity navigation tools that allow individuals to maintain internal cohesion while distinguishing themselves from other groups.

In a world of constant social change and high mobility, tradition undergoes a process of rearticulation. Lifestyle changes, urbanization and migration force societies to adapt traditional forms of expression to new realities. This process reflects the ability of tradition to adapt to change without losing its essence. Hobsbawm and Ranger (1992) identify this process as the “invention of tradition”, where old cultural elements are modified to address contemporary social needs. This is because tradition, by its very nature, is not only a legacy of the past, but also a tool for constructing meaning in an ever-changing social life. For example, the once communitarian tradition of marriage is now practiced in a more personalized format while retaining the symbols that mark membership of a particular culture. Although the form has changed, the core of the tradition has been retained.

Modern societies tend to reconstruct identities based on symbolic choices rather than deterministic inheritance. Individuals have greater freedom to choose symbols and narratives that they deem relevant and appropriate to their lives. In this case, tradition remains relevant as it provides flexible symbolic raw materials. Traditions provide a foundation that allows individuals to relate to their history, culture and social group, while giving them space to reflect on and adapt their identity to changing conditions. Giddens (1991) states that in the global era, identity becomes a reflexive project built through narratives of choice and value selection. Tradition provides a narrative that can be reelected to answer existential questions: who am I and where do I belong in the social society. While the form changes, the symbolic substance in tradition remains an important reference in identity formation.

The role of tradition in the formation of social identity is not only symbolic, but also structural. It organizes social space and divides social roles in predictable patterns. In indigenous societies, for example, inheritance systems, division of labor and leadership structures are determined based on traditional values. This creates a social order that is not only determined by formal structures, but also understood and accepted by every member of the society based on long-established norms. Bourdieu (1990) sees these structures as *habitus*, which are social dispositions embedded in individuals' bodies and ways of thinking. Identity in this framework is not just a label, but a way of acting, feeling and responding to the surrounding world conditioned by tradition. Tradition is not simply a symbolic legacy that is followed without deep understanding, but rather something that is embedded in individuals, influencing the way their view the world and interact with others.

The effectiveness of tradition as an identity shaper faces challenges in the era of modernity. Traditions that were once the main source of symbolic legitimacy and social norms are now competing with various forms of identity expression that are global and fast-changing. The spread of information technology and global pop culture has shifted sources of symbolic legitimacy that were previously exclusive to traditional societies. These changes have resulted in the erosion of the authority of tradition in determining what is considered right, proper or noble in the eyes of the community, especially among the younger generation who are more exposed to global narratives than local values. Hall (1996) asserts that identity in contemporary society is fragmented, as individuals now access a variety of cross-cultural narratives that are sometimes contradictory. Under these conditions, tradition must compete with other sources of identity such as political ideology, consumption orientation, and digital identity. This process requires creativity in re-articulating traditional values to keep them alive in contemporary social experience.

Traditions that survive are usually those that are able to undergo reinterpretation without losing their core values. Reinterpretation of tradition often takes the form of revitalization with new social content. Societies that revitalize traditions often reconnect old rites with new social interests. For example, some urban societies have begun to revive local festivals as a form of resistance to cultural homogenization. Such activities not only strengthen community identity, but also make tradition a means of social solidarity and collective participation. These revitalized traditions are often combined with modern agendas such as tourism promotion, cultural education or environmental campaigns, thus acquiring a more contextual double meaning. This reconstruction shows that social identities formed through tradition are not reactive, but active in managing the pressures of change.

At the individual level, participation in traditions enables the formation of personal narratives that reinforce a sense of social existence and worthiness. Through their involvement in collective ceremonies, symbols and practices, individuals experience integration into the broader community narrative. This process provides social legitimacy to their existence and role in society. MacIntyre (1981) states that individuals can only understand their lives meaningfully if they can narrate themselves as part of the society narrative. In cultural rites, individuals experience a moment of recognition that makes their identity recognized and valued by the society. Without this narrative, individuals will experience a void of meaning in an increasingly complex social life.

It is important to note that tradition also has the potential to be used hegemonically to maintain unjust social structures. When cultural values and practices are passed down without critical evaluation, they can become a means of perpetuating the dominance of a particular class, gender or ethnicity. In this case, tradition can become a tool of control rather than liberation. Gramsci (1971) reminds us that cultural hegemony works through the symbolic consensus formed in cultural practices. In examining the relationship between tradition and identity, it is needed to be alert to the possibility that tradition is used to legitimize inequality hidden in cultural symbols that are considered sacred.

Traditions are not standalone entities, but are always linked to power, interests and negotiations. Social identities formed through tradition are also not neutral, but are the result of a tug-of-war between social structures and individual agency. In Jenkins' (1996) view, identity is a social process that involves simultaneous recognition by self and by others. Tradition provides a space where this process occurs repeatedly and takes shape in socially recognizable collective patterns. Understanding tradition as part of the dynamics of social identity requires us to see it as a field of interaction between established social structures and constantly moving human initiatives.

While the social world is constantly changing and developing, tradition retains its adaptive capacity as an identity-forming tool. It moves from inheritance to inspiration, from repetition to reconstruction. The social identity formed through tradition is not static or closed, but rather a construction that is always in a process of negotiation between the past and the needs of the present. Tradition remains a place where people learn to be part of something bigger than themselves.

## CONCLUSION

Social identity in society is the result of a symbolic, repeated, and meaningful process within an inherited cultural framework. Cultural traditions and rituals have proven to have the power to shape, strengthen and renew the social fabric that binds individuals to their societies. Through cultural symbols, values and practices that are preserved and lived, individuals find a foothold in understanding themselves as part of a wider social structure. Tradition provides a space for collective identity transformation, both in the form of status recognition, value internalization, and in the process of distinguishing oneself from other entities outside the group. Tradition is not just an artifact of the past, but an active part in shaping contemporary social dynamics.

In the conceptual realm, this discussion reinforces the view that symbolic structures instilled through traditions have complex social functions, ranging from maintaining continuity of values, shaping group boundaries, to guiding the moral orientation of individuals in society. This research shows that despite ongoing social change, tradition has not lost its relevance. Instead, it has become an important medium in responding to the pressures of globalization, changing values, and the challenges of identity pluralism. Adaptive traditions have a greater chance of survival and provide the foundation for a healthy and balanced process of social integration.

Continuing the findings that have been described, it is recommended that the research on tradition continues to be developed interdisciplinary and across regions. Traditions not only contribute to cultural documentation, but also to the strengthening of social foundations in the face of rapid global change. The government, educational institutions and cultural societies need to build policies and programs that are not only symbolic preservation, but also facilitate the transmission of values that are contextual to current social realities. Cultural education, revitalization of local societies, and intercultural interaction platforms are strategic spaces to strengthen social identity through meaningful traditions. Emphasis on society participation and authentic narratives need to be prioritized in designing future cultural programs.

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