

Negotiating with Modernity: Smooth but Selected Changes in the Benda Kerep Village of Cirebon in 1990-2010

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Abstract

This paper examines the evolving dynamics within the traditional community of Benda Kerep, Cirebon, as they navigate the pressures of modernization. Employing a qualitative methodology with a descriptive-analytical approach grounded in historical perspective, the study undertakes the following steps: topic selection, heuristics (data collection), source criticism (verification), interpretation (data analysis), and historiography (writing). Findings reveal that the residents of Benda Kerep maintain a strong commitment to their ancestral teachings, customs, and traditions. However, since the 1990s, they have also selectively integrated modern ideas and technologies. For instance, they have embraced modern education systems alongside traditional pesantren-based learning and utilized contemporary technologies in their rituals and ceremonies, such as Muludan, Haulan, and Shawalan. This duality highlights their adaptive strategies in preserving cultural heritage while engaging with modernity.

Keywords

Benda Kerep Village, Cirebon, Customs, Modernization, Traditions.

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Introduction

Modernization has brought significant social changes to societies worldwide, including traditional ones. Understanding these social transformations is essential, as modernization is intricately linked to shifts in societal structures and dynamics. Societies, as dynamic systems, are perpetually evolving—whether progressively or regressively, extensively or in limited ways, and at varying paces. Social changes in people’s lives are natural phenomena, driven by the diverse interests and interactions of individuals. This process, which alters the structure and functioning of social systems, is referred to as social change (Rosana 2015; Ramia 2020).

Social change can also be understood as a shift in lifestyles influenced by factors such as geographical changes, cultural dynamics, ideology, or new discoveries within society (Mandaville 2020). Despite the pervasiveness of modernization, certain groups continue to steadfastly uphold their customs and traditions. These communities, often referred to as indigenous societies, maintain distinct rules and lifestyles that set them apart from mainstream society. Customary law governs their daily lives, preserving their unique identity and heritage (Sukmayadi 2018a, 2018b).

Amid the backdrop of modernization, the community of Benda Kerep, a remote village in Cirebon, West Java, exemplifies the tension between tradition and modernity. Despite their proximity to the more modernized parts of Cirebon, the residents of Benda Kerep remain deeply committed to the traditional values passed down through generations.

This study explores how the residents of Benda Kerep negotiated between traditionality and modernity during the period from 1990 to 2010. To provide context and depth, this research builds upon prior studies. One notable work is “The Impact of Modernization on the Life of the Residents of Kampung Benda Kerep Kota Cirebon in 1980–2000” by Fatih Sukamdani Saputro (Saputro 2017), which examines similar themes. While Saputro’s study focuses broadly

on the Benda Kerep area, this research hones in on the interplay of modernization with social life, education, and traditions, while also identifying factors driving social change.

Another relevant study is “The Orientation of the Salafiyah Pesantren Education: A Case Study of Pesantren Benda Kerep Cirebon” by Ta’rif (Ta’rif 2012), which provides insights into the pesantren-based education system in Benda Kerep. This research complements Ta’rif’s work by emphasizing broader social changes while briefly touching upon pesantren education.

Additionally, Kairin Toha’s “The Historicity and the Tradition of Pesantren Benda Kerep” (Toha 2017) sheds light on cultural and social conditions in the village. This research aligns with Toha’s exploration of traditions while focusing on the community’s negotiation of modern influences. Comparative insights are also drawn from “Traditionality, Modernity, and Leadership at Pesantren Al-Hamidiyah, Depok City, West Java” by Adhitia Wardani Fauzyyah et al. (Fauzyyah, Apipudin, and Machmudi 2019), which examines the coexistence of tradition and modernity in another context, providing a valuable framework for understanding similar dynamics in Benda Kerep. Abdul Jalil and Siti Aminah’s “Tradition’s Resistance to Modernity” (Jalil 2019) further contributes to the discussion by exploring the interplay between traditional and modern societies. Finally, Meilani & Iqbal (2023) explores the Pesta Tebu tradition in Cirebon, West Java, highlighting how its rise and decline are influenced by technological advancements in sugar production at local factories. It concludes that modernization does not destroy tradition but can contribute to its survival and adaptation, demonstrating a complex relationship where industrialization impacts cultural practices differently across communities.

Given this context, it is interesting to delve deeper into the dynamics of indigenous life in Benda Kerep Village. This study, therefore, observes the social transformations within the community of Benda Kerep between 1990 and 2010, a period that is missing from the relevant existing studies. This timeframe is chosen because

it represents a pivotal period for Benda Kerep, marked by significant changes. For instance, in 1990, electricity was introduced for the first time in the village, where this program initially met with resistance from the locals. However, through persuasive measures, electricity was eventually accepted, although its widespread usage remains uncertain. In 2006, the village and city governments initiated a program to construct a bridge over the river that had since the inception separated the Benda Kerep from neighboring villages. Yet they failed, as no bridge has been built since.

Moreover, formal schooling programs were introduced, albeit again faced with resistance from local residents maintaining the already long existing pesantren (Toha 2017). In the pesantren, students learn religious subjects under the direct guidance of the *kyai*, supreme leaders whose genealogical linkage with Mbah Sholeh Zamzami, the founder of the Benda Kerep village in the mid-19th century. Each *kyai* has their own dorm for students, but students may also move from one to another existing *kyai* for different subjects not taught in their own dorm. As such, there are numerous dorms linked to the *kiyais*, but all are under the same banner of the foundation of the Pesantren Benda Kerep (Ta'rif 2012).

Despite these efforts, Benda Kerep remains relatively insulated from the full currents of modernization, making it an essential case study for understanding how traditional communities navigate social change. Therefore, this research aims to analyze the social transformations within the Benda Kerep community, focusing on the interplay between tradition and modernity in their social life, education, and rituals.

The Life Pattern of the Benda Kerep Village

Benda Kerep Village is located on the outskirts of Cirebon, specifically in the Argasunya sub-district, Harjamukti district, Cirebon City, approximately 10 kilometers south of downtown Cirebon in West

Java Province. Geographically, it is situated at 108.330° East Longitude and 6.610° South Latitude. The village lies on a plateau in the Cirebon region, covering an area of 33 hectares. Based on data from the Argasunya Village Office map (January 20, 2022) detailing the geographical location of Benda Kerep, the village is administratively part of Cirebon City. It is bordered by several areas: Cikali Village to the west, Kebon Wetan to the east, Sumur Wuni Village to the north, and Balong Salak to the south (ANRI 2014).

The historical roots of Benda Kerep Village and the Benda Kerep Pesantren are deeply intertwined with the political upheavals that plagued the Cirebon palaces during the 19th century. The political schism of the late 17th century had already invited colonial interference in the internal affairs of Cirebon's three palaces, exacerbating internal conflicts (Fitri Meliani, Andewi Suhartini, and Hasan Basri 2022). The situation worsened in the 19th century with the introduction of Western-style education and the spread of Christianity by the Dutch colonial administration. This interference not only deepened palace rivalries but also led to the displacement of palace residents and their families. Among those who left were prominent religious figures, including Mbah Muqoyyim, who founded the Pesantren Buntet as a refuge. Following in his footsteps was his great-grandson, KH. Sholeh Zamzami, widely known as Mbah Sholeh (Toha 2017).

The founding of the Pesantren Benda Kerep is attributed to Mbah Sholeh, a respected and humble cleric born around 1832. Although the exact date of his birth remains uncertain due to the lack of historical records, oral traditions passed down through generations suggest this approximate year. Mbah Sholeh initially succeeded his father as the caretaker of Pesantren Buntet. However, the leadership of Pesantren Buntet was later passed to his younger brother, Kyai Abdul Jamil, while Mbah Sholeh eventually established the Pesantren Benda Kerep (Figure 1).

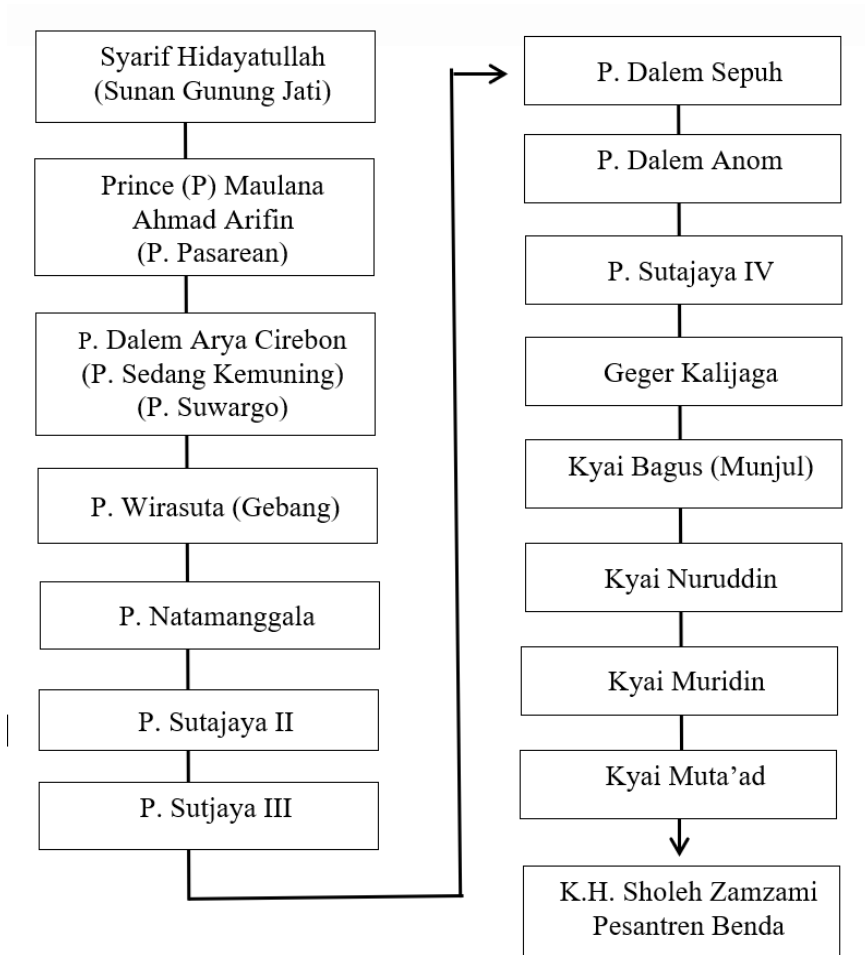


Figure 1

The Genealogy of Kyai Sholeh Zamzami to Sunan Gunung Jati (Farihin, Syafaah, and Rosidin 2019).

Before founding the Pesantren Benda Kerep in 1862, Mbah Sholeh had previously established several pesantrens, including one in Situ Patok, Mundu District, in collaboration with Kyai Anwarudin (Kyai Kriyan), and another in Gegung Village, Sumber District,

Cirebon Regency (Sopidi 2011). However, he eventually decided to move to the Cimeuweuh area, now known as Kampung Benda Kerep, where he became the supreme leader (interview with KH Miftah Faqih, April 17, 2022).

Upon his arrival in the Cimeuweuh area, Mbah Sholeh renamed it Benda Kerep. The name was inspired by the abundance of “kerep” (breadfruit) trees in the area, where “kerep” symbolizes dense growth. Geographically, Benda Kerep spans approximately 30 hectares, bordered by the Kalijaga River. Initially, the land was under the jurisdiction of the Kanoman Palace in Cirebon but was later granted to Mbah Sholeh by Sultan Zulkarnaen of the Kanoman Palace (interview with Farihin, June 1, 2022).

Sultan Zulkarnaen’s decision to entrust the land to Mbah Sholeh was likely influenced by his exceptional charisma, humility, profound religious knowledge, moral integrity, and reputed mystical abilities. His magnetic personality drew students and followers from Cirebon and beyond, eager to learn religious teachings under his guidance. To accommodate the growing number of students, Mbah Sholeh constructed a simple dormitory at Benda Kerep (interview with KH Miftah Faqih, April 17, 2022). This aligns with Max Weber’s theory that in traditional societies, charismatic figures play a pivotal role in establishing and expanding authority (Weber 2005).

Mbah Sholeh’s charisma and authority continue to resonate in Benda Kerep, enduring through changing times. The residents of Benda Kerep consciously maintain their traditions as a tribute to their founder. While not entirely isolated from the outside world, they deliberately distance themselves from modern influences. Simplicity remains central to their lifestyle, reflecting their devotion and piety. For example, the use of electronic devices such as televisions, radios, and loudspeakers—perceived as conduits of external cultural influences—is strictly prohibited in the village (interview with Dimas, November 21, 2021).

The residents also adhere to traditional clothing practices. Men typically wear a *peci* (skullcap) and sarong, avoiding modern attire like trousers. Women consistently wear the hijab, covering their *aurat* (modesty). Observations in Benda Kerep reveal that nearly all women wear the hijab, except for pre-pubescent girls and some elderly women. This dress code extends to both students and community members and is mandatory not only during prayers and religious activities but also in daily life. Even visitors are required to wear traditional attire, such as sarongs and skullcaps, provided by the Pesantren Benda Kerep's management (interview with Markhum, January 20, 2022).

This commitment to preserving tradition is further evident in the prohibition of motorized vehicles and bicycles within the village (Ruyadi 2010). Additionally, electronic devices such as televisions, radios, and loudspeakers are strictly banned, as they are considered incompatible with their cultural heritage (Lutfatulatifah 2020; Toha 2017). These practices underscore the community's steadfast dedication to their ancestral values amidst the pressures of modernization.

Traditions and Culture of the Benda Kerep Villagers Between 1990-2010

The residents of Benda Kerep Village, like many communities in Indonesia, have experienced inevitable social changes as modernization influences their way of life. These changes are reflected in shifts in mindset, modifications to building patterns, and the adoption of modern materials such as minimalist tiles—clear indicators of a gradual embrace of modernization.

Traditionally, societal responses to such changes can be categorized into two perspectives: pessimistic and optimistic. The pessimistic view emphasizes the economic and social disruption these changes bring, including challenges for industries, affected sectors, and the community's traditional expertise. Conversely, the

optimistic perspective focuses on the opportunities these changes present, viewing them as a chance for growth and adaptation (Dejica, Eugeni, and Dejica-Cartis 2020).

In the case of Benda Kerep, the community appears to align with the latter, more optimistic stance. However, the acceptance of modernization is not automatic; it involves a deliberate process of discernment known as *sowan*. During *sowan*, individuals seek guidance from the kyai at the Pesantren Benda Kerep. The kyai plays a pivotal role in evaluating and advising which aspects of modern values and culture align with the community's traditions and are appropriate to adopt (Interview with KH Miftah Faqih, April 17, 2022). This selective approach ensures that modernization complements rather than disrupts their cultural and religious values, demonstrating the community's resilience and adaptability in preserving their identity amidst change.

A clear demonstration of the Benda Kerep community's adherence to the guidance of their kyai is seen in their stance on transportation access to the Pesantren Benda Kerep. When Argasunya local officials proposed constructing a bridge to improve access to schools in neighboring villages and allow modern vehicles into the area, the community unanimously rejected the idea. They believed that building such a bridge would introduce foreign cultural influences and significantly disrupt the social fabric of both their students and the community as a whole (Toha 2017).

Interestingly, this steadfast resistance to modernization has drawn people from surrounding areas and even distant locations to visit Benda Kerep, seeking what they call *ngalap berkah* (seeking blessings) from the kyai. Many visitors hold the belief that blessings come from faithfully following Islamic teachings under the kyai's guidance. Conversely, they fear that deviating from these teachings could result in misfortune both in this life and the hereafter (Interview with Usman, June 3, 2022).

Another way the Benda Kerep community responds to modernization is evident in its approach to architecture. Before

1990, the village was renowned for its traditional architectural style, including mosques and residential buildings. For instance, the Benda Kerep Mosque has retained its original architectural features since its initial construction, despite undergoing several renovations. The mosque's design closely resembles the architectural style of mosques within the Cirebon palaces (Farihin, Syafaah, and Rosidin 2019).

Observations in the village and interviews with experts on the mosque's elements and ornaments reveal that its dome is crafted from teak wood, a material that has endured for centuries. This feature, along with other traditional elements, enhances the mosque's historical and cultural ambiance, symbolizing the community's dedication to preserving its heritage amidst changing times (Rosidin, Saefullah, and Sa'dudin 2022).

In housing construction, the residents of Benda Kerep adhere to a principle of self-sufficiency, utilizing local materials to build their homes. They predominantly use locally sourced wood rather than relying on external supplies. Observations conducted on May 7, 2022, revealed an abundant supply of wood readily available within the area. Additionally, bamboo is frequently used to create room partitions, roofs, or walls for houses and dormitories, further demonstrating the village's commitment to traditional values. This approach reflects a sustainable use of natural resources, significantly reducing the cost of building homes in the Benda Kerep community.

However, the preservation of traditional practices does not imply a complete rejection of change. Field observations on June 4, 2022, highlighted subtle but steady shifts toward modern trends. For instance, while the interior structure of the mosque remains unchanged, iron installations have been added to enclose its courtyard, signaling a cautious embrace of modernity.

In contrast, changes in residential architecture are more pronounced. The houses in Benda Kerep have gradually adopted modern designs, prioritizing functionality and incorporating minimalist architectural styles. This transformation, which began in the 2000s, reflects a shift in aesthetic and practical preferences

influenced by modernization. Houses near the river, in particular, exhibit more contemporary designs due to easier access to modern construction materials. The use of materials such as minimalist tiles demonstrates a departure from traditional building methods and highlights the growing influence of modern construction techniques (Firmansyah 2014; Rosana 2015).

These changes indicate evolving mindsets within the community, showcasing a selective adaptation of modernization. While residents integrate certain modern elements, they remain deeply committed to preserving their cultural and religious heritage. This dual approach allows them to maintain traditional values while embracing aspects of modernity that align with their principles (Soewarno, Septianto, and Hasim 2016).

Perspectives on Formal Education: Pros and Cons among Benda Kerep Community

Modernization is a double-edged sword, offering progress while also presenting challenges. Before the onset of modernization and the accompanying social changes, the Benda Kerep community strongly discouraged formal education, such as elementary, junior high, or high school, for their children. Their primary focus was on religious education within Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*).

Social changes in today's world are unavoidable, driven by rapid technological advancements that reshape mindsets and propel societies toward modernity while aligning with contemporary scientific developments. Even within the traditionally rooted Benda Kerep community, there is an increasing awareness of the value of formal education. This shift reflects an adaptive response to the demands of the times and the necessity of embracing modernity by fostering new perspectives and approaches (Sztompka 2004).

Before modernization, the Benda Kerep community adhered strictly to the guidance of their elders and kyai regarding education. They resisted formal education, including the state-owned elementary

school (Sekolah Dasar Negeri or SDN), which was introduced by the local government in 2006. This resistance stemmed from the belief that such education contradicted the principles of the pesantren and represented a form of defiance against Dutch colonial rule, whose policies were viewed negatively by the community (Indraddin and Irwan 2016).

In contrast to this historical context, KH Miftah Faqih of Benda Kerep asserts that we now live in an era free from colonialism in Indonesia (Interview on April 17, 2022). He welcomes changes that promote societal betterment and himself earned a bachelor's degree from a private university in Semarang. Nonetheless, he aligns with the residents of Benda Kerep who continue to reject formal education within their pesantren, striving to maintain their identity as a Salafiyah Traditional Pesantren (Yusuf and Taufiq 2020). Interviews with Benda Kerep residents reveal that the village has long adhered to its distinct educational system, which diverges significantly from the government's formal education framework.

Despite their objections to the establishment of formal education within their pesantren, the Benda Kerep community is open to sending their children to formal schools outside the village. They have begun to recognize the strategic value of formal education, viewing it as essential for teaching children critical skills such as reading, writing, and arithmetic—skills that are crucial for their future success. In today's rapidly changing world, mastering technology is vital for leading an advanced life; however, this must be balanced with a strong foundation in religious knowledge. In an interview with KH Miftah, he emphasized that the establishment of formal schools outside the village was motivated by a moral imperative to equip future generations with technological skills (Rindanah 2016; Ta'rif 2012). Another significant factor influencing this shift was the introduction of electricity in Benda Kerep in 1988, which began to transform residents' mindsets by exposing them to new perspectives. Observations and interviews with Benda Kerep residents indicate that parents now feel their children are free to pursue formal education,

provided it contributes positively to society and does not lead to negative consequences (Fauzyyah, Apipudin, and Machmudi 2019).

However, not all residents of Benda Kerep support adapting to changes; some still view formal education as unsuitable for their children. They believe that formal education is part of a well-orchestrated plan by Dutch colonial powers to persuade the community to abandon their traditional values (Fitri Meliani, Andewi Suhartini, and Hasan Basri 2022). Historically, the Benda Kerep community has resisted formal education, and many parents remain hesitant to enroll their children in formal schools. They fear that such an education may lead to lifestyle changes that could erode long-standing traditions. Field observations and interviews with various community members reveal that, even today, some parents do not advocate for their children to pursue formal education or attend formal schools.

The opposing views primarily originate from the older generation, or *kaum tua*, led by Iyai Ismail, while the more progressive perspective is represented by the younger generation, or *kaum muda*, led by Kyai Miftah Faqih. According to Ma'arif, these generational shifts have resulted in differing mindsets and attitudes (Ma'arif 2023). Field surveys and interviews indicate that formal education has significantly benefited the *kaum muda* of Benda Kerep, providing them with general knowledge and fostering a mindset more aligned with modernity.

It has been observed that “clashes’ occur between the Islamic model of reality mediated within it and reality itself. The intrusion of technological scientific modernity into Islamic civilization has intensified the crisis in Muslim education.” By maintaining the *pesantren* system while simultaneously introducing formal education, the residents of Benda Kerep are expected to navigate the complexities of balancing tradition and modernity. This approach allows them to preserve local wisdom while relying on the guidance of Mbah Sholeh as a foundational element in their decision-making process.

The contrasting views within the community reflect an evolving mindset, particularly among local leaders and kyai. Some now support formal education, marking a significant departure from their previous opposition. This transformation is consistent with field observations regarding the pro-education segment of the community. In an interview with a proponent of formal education, it was emphasized that participation in government programs promoting compulsory nine-year education hinges on one's intentions (KH Miftah Faqih, Nuraisah, and Ilham, 2022). When the intention is positive and aimed at fostering a more advanced mindset, formal education is regarded as beneficial for the residents of Benda Kerep. Education plays a crucial role in securing a prosperous future, especially in light of rapid technological advancements that demand proficiency in technology (Rosana 2015). Furthermore, education is viewed as a more promising approach than coercive measures to promote the Islamization of life (Mandaville 2020).

While children in Benda Kerep engage in formal education, it is important to highlight that they continue to receive religious instruction and uphold the traditional values cherished by the community for generations. Local customs, such as Shawalan, Sha'banan, Ash-Shuro, Muharraman, and Rojaban, have remained largely unchanged. Even amidst the waves of modernization, these traditions are preserved in their original form, maintaining their cultural significance and essence. This dual approach allows children to benefit from modern educational opportunities while staying rooted in their rich heritage.

The residents of Benda Kerep remain deeply committed to their traditions, which they believe are enriched by the blessings of their revered kyai, Mbah Sholeh. The villagers continue to uphold social and religious customs that have been passed down through generations, making these traditions an integral part of the village's identity. This adherence reflects the historical development of traditional communities like Benda Kerep and is closely tied to demographic changes and the economic evolution within the

community. As modernization progresses, the preservation of these customs serves as a vital link to their heritage, allowing the residents to navigate contemporary challenges while maintaining their cultural essence.

All of the above phenomena illustrate how society responds to the changes brought about by modernization and globalization. This presents a significant challenge for traditional communities, not only in Benda Kerep but also in other areas. Kampung Naga community, for example, has adopted a modern lifestyle while successfully preserving its customs and traditions. The residents possess a forward-thinking mindset, enriched by profound philosophical teachings and values that emphasize adherence to social norms, as well as socio-cultural principles derived from religious deliberations and adat decisions. Thus, this society is neither an isolated tribe nor a primitive community (Harashani 2018; Siswanto, Sunarmi, and Soewarlan 2024; Fairuzahira, Rukmi, and Agusta 2020).

Modernity has similarly impacted the Sunda Community of Kanekes in Banten—popularly known as “Suku Baduy”—particularly the Outer Baduy, who are experiencing change as visitors frequently come to their community, bringing gadgets and new information (Aprianti et al. 2024; Elan and Solihati 2022; Asteria et al. 2021). The traditional knowledge of the Kampung Dukuh community has been studied for its role in regulating interactions among residents and with nature. This knowledge holds significant social and cultural value, serving as a foundation for cultural preservation. Safeguarding this delicate area is crucial for protecting indigenous knowledge from threats to its longevity, especially in the context of advancing technology that includes the diffusion of technological acceptance and innovation (Hilman and Hendriawan 2018; Syukur and Qodim 2016). In Kampung Cireundeu, advancements in contemporary technology have transformed agricultural practices; tractors have replaced oxen for plowing, and the use of chemical fertilizers has decreased. This shift has led to greater efficiency in farming tasks for the Cireundeu Traditional Village. However, this reliance on modern

technology has also created a dependency among residents (Graha, Malihah, and Andari 2022; Fajarini and Handayani 2021).

Conclusion

This study has explored the intricate relationship between tradition and modernity in Benda Kerep Village from 1990 to 2010. Deeply rooted in Islamic teachings, Benda Kerep has long served as a guardian of ancestral traditions and customs. The village's way of life is characterized by a steadfast commitment to religious values and a resolute rejection of external cultural influences, even in the face of pervasive modernization. Benda Kerep stands as a sanctuary for traditional Islamic teachings, with its educational framework firmly anchored in Islamic boarding schools. The villagers maintain their rich customs and traditions while the majority earn their livelihoods through farming, agricultural labor, and trade.

Before 1990, Benda Kerep preserved its traditional materials and architectural styles while resisting formal education. However, significant changes unfolded between 1990 and 2010. This era saw the introduction of electricity to the village, as well as the emergence of modern building materials and architectural styles in select homes. The community gradually embraced electricity and modern construction methods while increasingly accepting formal education. Additionally, technology began to play a role in traditional observances such as *muludan*, *hulan*, *shawalan*, *rojaban*, and *muharraman*.

This study highlights the delicate balance between preserving cherished traditions and adapting to the challenges posed by a rapidly modernizing world. Benda Kerep Village exemplifies how a community can navigate this complex landscape while safeguarding its cultural heritage. The story of Benda Kerep serves as a testament that amid the relentless march of modernity, the echoes of the past continue to resonate, guiding us toward a harmonious coexistence of old and new. Ultimately, Benda Kerep imparts the wisdom that

tradition and modernity need not be adversaries; rather, they can coexist as harmonious partners, weaving a tapestry where the threads of heritage seamlessly intertwine with strands of progress.

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