AGRIEKONOMIKA
http://journal.trunojoyo.ac.id/agriekonomika
Volume 15, Nomor 1, 2026
DOI: https://doi.org/ 10.21107/agriekonomika.v15i1.31193

Agriekonomika has been accredited as a scientific journal by the Ministry of Research-Technology and Higher Education Republic of Indonesia: ***No. 23/E/KPT/2019*** *SINTA 2*

The Labor Culture of Madurese Siwalan Farmers: Morality and Attitude

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Received: December 2025; Accepted: January 2026; Published: April 2026

ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explores the labor culture of siwalan farmers in Madura, Indonesia, highlighting how religious values and prayer practices are integrated into daily agricultural routines. Departing from conventional productivity metrics, it examines how adherence to Islamic principles particularly respecting prayer times defines work ethic and productivity within this community. Based on in-depth interviews and observations, the study reveals how spirituality shapes decision-making, work schedules, and attitudes toward labor. The findings emphasize the role of religious commitment in guiding agricultural activities, suggesting that spiritual fulfillment is central to productivity and well-being. This research contributes to a nuanced understanding of indigenous work cultures in Indonesia, especially how religious frameworks shape perceptions of labor beyond economic measures. Insights from this study are also valuable for policymakers and development practitioners engaging with agricultural communities, and they enrich broader academic discussions on the intersection of religion, work, and economy in non-Western contexts.

Keywords: labor culture, productivity, work ethic, Indonesian Farmers

INTRODUCTION

The most significant cultural norm shaping the peasant way of life is the unbroken inheritance of the family farm (Bray 2023; Sutherland et al. 2023). Ownership forges strong emotional bonds between the family and the land Possession both reinforces and justifies family strategies aimed at ensuring the farm's continuity, and these strategies, in turn, strengthen the ties between the land and the family. This dynamic creates significant responsibilities for upholding the land's status and honor within the community and across generations. This emphasis on intergenerational continuity in farming, a phenomenon observed across various agrarian societies (Cassidy, Srinivasan, and White 2019), raises complex issues regarding internal family dynamics, the organization of agricultural labor ((Ma et al. 2019), and the intricate relationships between farmers and the land (Maja and Ayano 2021), nature and the environment.

This article explores farmer narratives related to their work and their connection with nature. A key tension revealed in the data lies in the divergence between farmers' interpretations of the environmental risks of farming and scientific evidence: farmers tend to minimize or negate the negative environmental consequences of their farming practices, even as they adopt modern, efficient, and industrial

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p-ISSN 2301-9948 | e-ISSN 2407-6260

methods. This dissonance, where farmers often describe their work as a harmonious and respectful collaboration with nature, despite evidence to the contrary, appears to be heavily influenced by a production-oriented farming strategy. However, the value of preserving the family land, a value closely aligned with the ideal of continuity, remains an important consideration alongside productionist goals.

Drawing on the framework of productionist agriculture (Van der Ploeg 2019), this article examines farmers' narratives within a specific socio-cultural context to deepen the understanding of the tension between productivity-oriented farming strategies and moral–religious interpretations of human–nature relations. Rather than treating productionism solely as an economic orientation, this study situates it within local cultural meanings, revealing how religious values mediate farmers' engagement with land, labor, and environmental responsibility.This article draws upon the framework of the productionist agricultural (Van der Ploeg 2019), this article examines farmer narratives within a specific socio-cultural context to further understand this tension. The Indonesian context is particularly salient for this examination. In Indonesia, where the agricultural sector is a cornerstone of the national economy and deeply embedded within the socio-cultural fabric, local traditions and belief systems, including a strong adherence to Islam, often intertwine with farming practices (Oktarina, Kurniawan, and Lukito 2025; Sebastian and Alkaff 2024). This intertwining is evident in Siwalan farmers (Madura-Indonesia), a region with a distinct cultural heritage and strong adherence to Islamic traditions (Kristina, Jumali, and Kamsin 2025), making it a compelling site to examine the interplay between these values and agricultural labor. Understanding these dynamics is crucial, particularly as Indonesia navigates the complexities of agricultural modernization while seeking to preserve its rich cultural heritage. Moreover, the insights from this study have broader relevance for understanding similar dynamics in other agrarian societies where religious beliefs and cultural values play a significant role in shaping agricultural practices (John et al. 2023; Kostis and Kafka 2023).

To further contextualize this examination of agricultural labor in Madura, it is important to consider the existing scholarly work on the broader Indonesian context, and its limitations. Existing literature on agricultural labor in Indonesia has predominantly focused on economic efficiency (Otsuka 2021), technological adoption (Mariyono 2019), and socio-economic determinants of productivity (Liu et al. 2020). While these studies offer valuable insights into the material aspects of farming, they often provide a limited understanding of the intrinsic motivational factors and cultural nuances, including religious piety, that shape farmers' attitudes towards their work. Specifically, the role of religious piety and the integration of worship practices into the daily rhythms of agricultural labor remain largely underexplored. This oversight is significant, as religious beliefs often provide a moral compass and a framework for understanding one's place and purpose in the world, potentially influencing how work is perceived and executed (D'Cruz et al. 2022). In contrast to this prevailing focus, this study seeks to address this gap by employing a qualitative approach, centered on farmer narratives, to reveal the intricate connections between their religious beliefs, their relationship with the land, and their engagement in agricultural practices within the specific socio-cultural context of Siwalan's farmer in Madura. This approach allows for a nuanced understanding of the cultural values that

underpin agricultural practices and contribute to the sustainability of farming communities in the region.

The central issue that this research aims to address is the intricate relationship between Islamic worship, particularly the observance of Salat (the five daily prayers), and the perceived productivity and work ethic among Siwalan farmers in Madura, Indonesia. Contrary to purely quantitative measures of output, this study posits that adherence to religious duties and the embodiment of Islamic values, such as amanah (trustworthiness), ikhlas (sincerity), and tawakkal (reliance on God), may serve as salient, albeit often unquantified, indicators of a farmer's commitment and diligence. Investigating how farmers reconcile the temporal demands of agricultural work with their spiritual obligations offers a unique lens through which to understand their labor culture. Furthermore, exploring the manifestation of these Islamic ethical principles within their farming practices and communal interactions can provide deeper insights into the moral underpinnings of their work (Nursanty and Wulandari 2023; Rifat, Toriq, and Ahmed 2020). This focus on the intersection of religious practice and work ethic contributes to a growing body of literature that examines the influence of belief systems on economic behavior (Astrachan et al. 2020).

The identified research gap lies in the limited qualitative inquiry that specifically examines the lived experiences and perspectives of Indonesian farmers regarding the integration of their religious beliefs and practices into their daily agricultural labor. While anecdotal evidence and general observations may suggest the importance of faith in rural communities, rigorous empirical studies that delve into the emic perspective of farmers on this issue are scarce. This study aims to fill this void by employing a qualitative approach, specifically through in-depth interviews and ethnographic observation in agricultural contexts, to capture the nuances of their beliefs and practices. The novelty of this research resides in its explicit focus on religious observance and moral values as central tenets in understanding the labor culture and conceptualization of productivity among Indonesian farmers in a specific cultural context. By providing an in-depth, qualitative analysis of this phenomenon in Siwalan Farmers, this study aims to contribute to a more nuanced and culturally sensitive understanding of agricultural labor in Indonesia, potentially informing more effective and culturally congruent development interventions (Cipta et al. 2024), and enriching the broader academic discourse on the sociology of work and the anthropology of religion in economic contexts (Nye 2019). Moreover, this research offers a methodological contribution by demonstrating the value of qualitative methods in elucidating the complex interplay of faith, culture, and economic practice in agricultural communities.

METHODS

This study employs a qualitative ethnographic approach to explore the work culture of farmers in Desa Aeng Panas, Sumenep, Madura, Indonesia. Ethnography was chosen for its capacity to reveal the cultural meanings, social practices, and participant perspectives within their natural context (Andreassen, Christensen, and Møller 2020; Lim 2025). The research aims to understand how religious values and worship practices are integrated into farmers' daily work lives and how they shape their perceptions of productivity and work ethic.

The study focuses on farmers and their wives in Desa Aeng Panas, Sumenep, Madura, a predominantly agrarian community with strong Islamic

traditions. These farmers are directly involved in daily agricultural activities, such as planting, cultivating, and harvesting crops. Farmers' wives are also crucial informants due to their roles in supporting family farming activities. Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure variation in age, farming experience, and crop type. Key characteristics sought in informants included: in-depth knowledge of local farming practices, active engagement in religious activities, strong communication skills, and openness to sharing information. The number of informants was determined by data saturation.

Data were collected through prolonged participant observation, in-depth interviews, and document and artifact analysis. Participant observation was conducted over multiple agricultural cycles, focusing on daily farming routines, prayer practices in the fields, work interruptions during prayer times, and collective labor arrangements during planting and harvesting seasons. The researcher observed both individual and group work activities, as well as informal interactions among farmers and their families.

In-depth interviews were semi-structured and conducted face-to-face with farmers and farmers' wives at their homes, fields, and community gathering spaces. Interviews explored perceptions of work, productivity, religious obligations, risk, and human–nature relations. Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and was audio-recorded with participants' consent. Follow-up interviews were conducted when clarification or deeper exploration of emerging themes was required.

Document and artifact analysis included personal farming notes, simple financial records, prayer schedules posted in homes or mosques, farming tools, and locally used symbols related to religious practice. These materials provided contextual insights into how religious values were materially embedded in everyday agricultural life.Data were collected through participant observation, in-depth interviews, and the analysis of documents and artifacts. Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis to identify and interpret patterns within the data (Braun et al. 2019; Lochmiller 2021; Sundler et al. 2019).

Ensuring Research Rigor and Trustworthiness

Research rigor was ensured through multiple qualitative validation strategies. Data triangulation was achieved by comparing findings across observations, interviews, and documents, as well as across different informants (farmers and their spouses). This process allowed the researcher to cross-check interpretations and reduce single-source bias. Member checking was conducted by sharing preliminary interpretations and thematic summaries with selected informants. Participants were invited to confirm, clarify, or challenge the interpretations, ensuring that the findings accurately reflected their lived experiences and meanings.

An audit trail was maintained throughout the research process, documenting methodological decisions, interview guides, coding processes, and analytical memos. This transparent documentation allows the research process to be traced and evaluated for consistency and credibility. Reflexivity was practiced continuously, with the researcher maintaining reflective notes to examine personal assumptions, positionality, and potential influence on data interpretation. This reflexive practice helped ensure that the analysis remained grounded in participants' perspectives rather than the researcher's preconceptions.

Research rigor was ensured through data triangulation, member checking, audit trails, and reflexivity. The

study adhered to strict ethical principles, including informed consent, confidentiality, and anonymity. Through this rigorous methodological approach, the research aims to provide a valid and significant contribution to the understanding of farmers' work culture and the role of religion in the agricultural context.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The ethnographic analysis reveals that the work culture of farmers in Siwalan, Madura, is deeply imbued with religious values and Islamic worship practices. This study identifies several key themes that highlight how farmers integrate their religious beliefs into their daily work lives, which in turn shapes their understanding of productivity and work ethic. These findings challenge conventional understandings of productivity that are dominated by economic metrics, and highlight the importance of socio-cultural and spiritual factors in shaping work ethic. For clarity and consistency, all informants are presented using pseudonyms. Pak Ahmad (45 years old) is a Siwalan farmer, and Bu Fatimah (42 years old) is his wife. Other informants include Pak Budi (55), Pak Hasan (57), Pak Rahman (50), Pak Karim (60), Bu Aisyah (48), and Bu Aminah (46), all of whom are either farmers or farmers' spouses actively involved in agricultural and religious practices. Each direct quotation is clearly demarcated with quotation marks to indicate its beginning and end.

Religious Temporality in Agricultural Work

Adherence to prayer times functions not only as a marker of spiritual duty but also as a temporal framework that governs the rhythm and structure of agricultural work. Farmers routinely adjust their activities to accommodate prayer times, reflecting the priority given to religious observance over worldly demands. This is exemplified in the words of Pak Ahmad, a 45-year-old, who stated:

Pak Ahmad stated *"Prayer is paramount. Work can wait, but prayer cannot. We organize our schedule in the fields so as not to interfere with prayer times. When the time for Zuhur prayer comes, we stop and go to the nearest mosque or prayer house to perform congregational prayer"*

Bu Fatimah added " Similarly, Bu Fatimah, a farmer's wife, explained: "My husband always tries to be home before Maghrib. He doesn't want to miss the Maghrib prayer at the mosque. This has been our habit for a long time."

This adjustment is evident in the flexibility of work schedules, where farmers often begin work earlier or continue after prayer, and in the selection of work locations that are close to places of worship. Thus, prayer is not seen as an interruption but as an integral part of the daily routine that guides the workflow in the fields. Further observations revealed that during the harvest season, when the pressure to complete work is high, farmers often work in groups, taking turns to go to the mosque for prayer, ensuring that the work continues while spiritual obligations are fulfilled. In line with (Blanza and Paborada Jr 2024) emphasis on collective memory, religious practices such as prayer help shape a shared understanding of time and social rhythm among Siwalan farmers. In this context, prayer functions as a time marker that binds the farming community, coordinates their activities, and imbues their daily routines with meaning.

Amanah and Ikhlas as Principles of Work Ethic

The concepts of amanah (trustworthiness) and ikhlas (sincerity) emerge as key moral principles underpinning Siwalan farmers' work ethic. These farmers perceive their work as a God-given responsibility and strive to carry it out with honesty, diligence, and dedication. Pak Budi (55 years old), a seasoned Siwalan farmer with 20 years of experience, articulated this sense of amanah, stating,

"We believe that this land is a gift from Allah, and we are entrusted to take care of it and cultivate it to the best of our ability. This is not just about making a living; it's about fulfilling our duty to God."

This responsibility extends to daily farming practices, where Pak Budi emphasizes the importance of preserving the land for future generations, an act he sees as part of his amanah. The value of ikhlas, or sincerity, further reinforces this sense of responsibility in their work. Bu Aisyah, a wife Siwalan farmer explained:

"We work not only for ourselves but also to provide for our families and contribute to the community. We strive to do our work with a pure intention, without expecting praise or recognition from others. What matters most is that Allah knows our efforts."

This emphasis on ikhlas is reflected in their meticulous attention to detail in farming tasks, their willingness to help fellow Siwalan farmers, and their avoidance of practices that could harm the land or exploit others. For instance, Pak Budi described how he refused to use cheaper but harmful pesticides, despite economic pressures, because it would violate his amanah towards the land and his ikhlas in providing wholesome food. Moreover, these concepts are not confined to work in the fields. Siwalan farmers also apply them in their communal interactions and economic transactions. Trust in fellow farmers, based on a shared belief in amanah and ikhlas, enables strong cooperation and mutual support. As observed, Siwalan farmers frequently assist each other during harvest time or when facing difficulties, without expecting immediate rewards. This reinforces social bonds and a sense of community among them. In short, amanah and ikhlas are not merely individual virtues but deeply ingrained principles in the collective work culture of Siwalan farmers, shaping their farming practices, social relationships, and understanding of themselves as both workers and people of faith.

Furthermore, the emphasis on amanah (trustworthiness) and ikhlas (sincerity) as principles of work ethic reflects a value system that has some similarities with what (Swindell 2019) referred to as the Protestant work ethic, albeit with a different religious foundation. While the Protestant work ethic emphasizes hard work and the accumulation of wealth as signs of divine calling, the Siwalan farmers' work ethic emphasizes moral responsibility and devotion to God in every action. Farmers do not merely work to meet economic needs but also to fulfill religious obligations and attain spiritual blessings (Rademaker and Jochemsen 2019; Spaling and Vander Kooy 2019).

Tawakal and Attitude towards Uncertainty

The concept of tawakal (reliance on God) profoundly shapes Siwalan farmers' attitudes towards the inherent challenges and uncertainties of agricultural work. While they are diligent and exert their best efforts in cultivating their land, farmers readily acknowledge the presence of factors beyond their control, firmly believing that the ultimate outcome rests in God's hands. This perspective was clearly articulated by Pak Hasan (57 years old), who explained:

"We work hard, we plan, we plant, but at the end of the day, it is Allah who

determines whether we have a good harvest or not. We put our trust in Him."

This tawakal does not imply passivity; rather, it fosters a sense of resilience and acceptance in the face of adversity. Bu Aminah, a wife farmer who has experienced both bountiful harvests and crop failures, further elaborated on this point:

"Of course, we do everything we can to ensure a good yield. We take care of the land, we irrigate, we fertilize. But we also know that there are things like the weather, pests, and diseases that we cannot control. When these things happen, we do not despair completely, because we know that Allah is with us. We accept it as a test, and we learn from it."

This attitude of tawakal allows farmers to cope with the unpredictable nature of their work, reducing anxiety and fostering a sense of inner peace. Moreover, tawakal influences farmers' decision-making processes. While they carefully consider various factors and make informed choices, they also recognize the limits of human knowledge and control. Pak Rahman (50 years old), shared his perspective:

"We learn about the best ways to farm, we use technology when we can, but we also pray for guidance and blessings. We know that knowledge and technology are gifts from Allah, and we use them responsibly, but we also trust in His wisdom."

In essence, tawakal provides Siwalan farmers with a framework for understanding and responding to the uncertainties of their livelihood. It is not a passive resignation but an active trust in God's plan, which empowers them to persevere through challenges, maintain their work ethic, and find meaning and contentment in their labor, regardless of the outcome.

Reciprocal Human-Nature Relationship in Religious Perspective

These findings can be further understood through the lens of ecotheology, which emphasizes the moral and spiritual responsibility of humans toward nature as part of divine creation. In the context of Siwalan farmers, land stewardship is not merely an economic obligation but a theological mandate rooted in Islamic teachings that frame humans as khalifah (stewards) of the earth. This ecotheological perspective reinforces sustainable farming practices, ethical restraint in resource use, and accountability beyond immediate material outcomes. The growing discourse on ecotheology in Indonesia highlights how religious worldviews can serve as powerful ethical foundations for environmental sustainability, particularly in agrarian communities where faith remains deeply embedded in daily life.

A profound understanding of the interconnectedness between humans and nature prevails among Siwalan farmers, wherein they view themselves as stewards of the land entrusted to them by God. This belief fosters sustainable farming practices and a deep respect for the environment. As Pak Karim (60 years old), a farmer who has inherited his land for generations, explained:

"We do not see ourselves as owners of this land, but as its caretakers. It is a gift from Allah, and we have a responsibility to preserve it for our children and grandchildren. We must treat the land with respect, as it provides for us."

This sense of stewardship is deeply ingrained in their cultural and religious worldview. Bu Halimah, who practices

traditional farming methods, further elaborated on this interconnectedness:

"Everything is connected. The soil, the water, the plants, the animals, and us humans – we are all part of one creation. If we harm one part, we harm ourselves. That is why we avoid using chemicals that can damage the soil and pollute the water."

This holistic perspective shapes their approach to farming, influencing their choices of cultivation techniques, resource management, and interactions with the ecosystem. However, it is important to note that the work of a Siwalan farmer is not without its risks. Climbing the tall Siwalan trees to harvest the fruit can lead to serious accidents, even death. The farmers are aware of these dangers, but they believe that they must accept these risks as part of their responsibility to provide for their families. This belief further reinforces their sense of dedication to their work and their reliance on God. The farmers' sense of responsibility extends beyond their immediate surroundings. Pak Karim emphasized that,

"We know that our actions can have consequences for others, even those far away. So we try to farm in a way that does not harm the environment. We believe that we will be accountable to God for how we treat His creation."

This awareness of the wider impact of their practices reinforces their commitment to sustainability.

In essence, Siwalan farmers' view of themselves as stewards of the land, guided by their religious beliefs, promotes a harmonious relationship with nature. This is manifested in their adoption of sustainable practices, their respect for the interconnectedness of all living things, and their concern for the well-being of future generations and the wider environment. This profound perspective is rooted in care ethics within their farming culture. This ethical framework moves beyond purely economic or utilitarian considerations, prioritizing relationships, responsibility, and the well-being of all involved – including the land itself. For these farmers, the land is not merely a productive asset or a commodity to be exploited for maximum personal gain. Instead, it is seen as an integral part of God's creation, imbued with sacred value, and thus something that must be preserved and sustained for future generations, out of reverence and a sense of divine responsibility. This perspective stands in stark contrast to the dominant "productionist paradigm" of modern agriculture. The productionist approach, deeply influenced by industrial models and neoliberal economic thought (Howell 2019; Neilson 2020), primarily emphasizes maximizing output, efficiency, and profit. It often relies heavily on technological inputs (synthetic fertilizers, pesticides, genetically modified crops) and industrial processes (e.g., monoculture, large-scale machinery) to achieve economies of scale and optimize yields. Within this paradigm, land is frequently viewed as a factor of production, a resource to be managed instrumentally, often with less emphasis on its ecological health or long-term sustainability beyond immediate productivity. This difference is evident in the sustainable farming practices employed by Siwalan farmers, such as the use of traditional methods, avoidance of harmful chemicals, and respect for biodiversity. Farmers possess a deep understanding of "local wisdom" that has been passed down through generations, and they consider it an integral part of their cultural and spiritual identity (Kurnia et al. 2022; Nagal 2025).

The research highlights a critical need to move beyond purely positivistic understandings of work that

predominantly focus on quantifiable economic factors and individual rationality. Traditional sociological approaches to work, particularly those influenced by modernization theories, often analyze labor through the lens of efficiency, productivity metrics, wage incentives, and the rational decision-making of individuals aiming to maximize utility (Sunny, Jeronen, and Lan 2024). This perspective tends to abstract work from its broader social, cultural, and spiritual moorings. In stark contrast, this study demonstrates convincingly that for the Siwalan farmers, work is deeply embedded in their socio-cultural and religious contexts. The meaning of their labor, their motivations, their perception of success, and even their daily rhythms are inextricably linked to their deeply held beliefs and values. Their work is not merely a means to an economic end but is imbued with spiritual significance, intergenerational responsibility, and a sense of stewardship towards the land and community. This necessitates a shift in the sociology of work towards methodologies that prioritize qualitative insights, cultural interpretations, and the subjective experiences of workers, recognizing that "rationality" itself can be culturally defined and is not solely economic. Understanding work in this embedded manner allows for a richer analysis of labor practices, job satisfaction, and resilience within traditional communities.

CONCLUSION

This qualitative study makes a significant contribution to our understanding of work, productivity, and rural development by delving into the unique labor culture of Siwalan farmers in Madura, Indonesia. By exploring the profound integration of religious values and worship practices into their daily routines, the research moves beyond conventional, often reductionist, productivity metrics. The study's core contribution lies in demonstrating how adherence to prayer times and the embodiment of Islamic values are not peripheral to work, but rather serve as fundamental indicators of productivity and work ethic within this agricultural community. Through the farmers' lived experiences, we see that spiritual fulfillment and commitment to religious principles are considered integral to their productivity and overall well-being, manifesting in their work schedules, decision-making processes, and attitudes toward labor.

The findings offer a more nuanced understanding of indigenous work cultures in Indonesia, highlighting the critical role of religious values in shaping agricultural practices and the perception of productivity beyond purely economic measures. This challenges traditional economic and sociological analyses of labor, which often overlook the profound spiritual and cultural embeddedness of work in many non-Western contexts. Furthermore, this research provides invaluable insights for policymakers and development practitioners. It underscores the necessity of acknowledging and respecting the deeply embedded cultural and religious frameworks that govern farming practices and farmers' perceptions of success. Development interventions that fail to be sensitive to these intrinsic values risk not only inefficiency but also unintended negative consequences for the communities they aim to serve. Ultimately, this study enriches the broader academic discourse on the sociology of work and the critical intersection of religion and economic activity in diverse global contexts.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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