

## THE ROLE OF SOCIAL CAPITAL IN PRESERVING THE TRADITIONAL CUISINE OF *EMPAL GENTONG* IN CIREBON

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### ABSTRACT

Preserving traditional culinary heritage is essential to maintaining local cultural identity amid modernization. This study analyzes the role of social capital in preserving *Empal Gentong*, a traditional Cirebonese dish with strong historical and cultural significance. Using a descriptive qualitative approach, data were collected through observation, in-depth interviews, and document analysis. The results show that social capital—trust, social networks, and social norms—contributes significantly to preserving the authenticity of recipes, cooking techniques, and cultural values. Local culinary communities and intergenerational involvement play a key role in transmitting these values. Furthermore, collaboration between local governments, tourism stakeholders, and Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) is strengthened through social capital, enhancing promotion and preservation efforts. The study concludes that cultural culinary preservation relies on economic factors and strong social ties within the community. Strengthening social capital is therefore vital to sustaining local food heritage.

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## INTRODUCTION

Indonesia is known as a country rich in culture, and one manifestation of this wealth is evident in the variety of traditional cuisines spread throughout the archipelago. Each region has its own uniqueness in processing food ingredients into dishes that are delicious and full of meaning. Traditional cuisine not only fulfills physical needs but also reflects local identity, social values, and historical heritage preserved through generations (Beno, 2023). However, the ongoing currents of modernization and globalization have posed significant challenges to preserving this cultural heritage. Fast food that is practical, quick, and tends to be uniform is now increasingly dominating, especially in urban areas, including Cirebon, West Java (Basiran et al., 2023). One of the traditional specialties originating from Cirebon is Empal Gentong. This culinary dish is famous for its distinctive and appetizing taste and the cultural and historical value closely tied to its creation process. Empal Gentong is a specialty dish from Battembat Village, Tengah Tani District, Cirebon Regency. The name Empal Gentong itself has a meaning that reflects two main elements in its presentation. "Empal" refers to the beef used as the main ingredient, usually from parts that have little fat to produce a tender and savory texture.

Meanwhile, "Gentong" refers to a traditional cooking tool, a large clay vessel used for boiling meat and broth over a wood fire, specifically mango tree wood, which is believed to impart a unique aroma to the dish (Rahayu, 2025). The uniqueness of this cooking tool lies not only in its shape or the materials used to make it, but also because the long-used gentong is believed to impart a deeper flavor. It is due to the layer of spices seeping into the pot's pores over time, creating an authentic taste that is difficult to replicate with modern cooking technology (Ratnawulan et al., 2025). It's no wonder that Empal Gentong has become a regional culinary icon and a symbol of cultural heritage deeply rooted in the lives of the Cirebon community.

The tradition of cooking with clay pots used to be done with a carrying system, where vendors would bring their cooking equipment directly to the selling place. This activity reflects local wisdom rich in values of hard work and togetherness. The process of cooking Empal Gentong, which requires extra time and attention, also reflects the philosophy of patience and perseverance. These values are now starting to be eroded by the instant culture. Unfortunately, culinary dishes like Empal Gentong now face various challenges. In addition to the factor of modernization that makes society, especially the younger generation, prefer instant food that is considered practical and trendy, the issue of business regeneration has also become an important focus. Many Empal Gentong businesses passed down through generations face obstacles in continuing the business because young people are less interested in continuing the family culinary business. They tend to choose other professions considered more modern, flexible, or economically promising in the short term (Pohan et al., 2024). Moreover, structural challenges such as the lack of recipe documentation, the absence of standardization in ingredients and processes, and the weak support of local government policies in preserving traditional cuisine also accelerate the threat of losing this heritage (Ropiah, 2018). Empal Gentong has the potential to be an intangible cultural heritage and a highly promising local economic and tourism asset if managed well.

In facing those challenges, studying and optimizing social capital is very important. Social capital refers to the network of relationships, norms, and trust built within a community that facilitates cooperation and collaboration to achieve common goals (Fathy, 2019). In Cirebon, the sustainability of Empal Gentong is inseparable from the strength of social capital within the community, especially among traditional culinary traders and families of entrepreneurs who have been running this business for generations. This social capital is evident in the mutual trust between sellers and buyers, the close familial relationships among fellow entrepreneurs, and the social norms that uphold the values of tradition and the sustainability of local culture. For example, many sellers still preserve their family's original recipes and maintain traditional cooking methods even in the modern era. Informal relationships among community members also enable the exchange of information, labor assistance, and even access to raw materials and traditional cooking equipment. Not only at the micro level, this social capital can also be strengthened by the active role of local governments, educational institutions, and cultural communities that promote the preservation of local cuisine through food festivals, traditional culinary entrepreneurship training, and the integration of local culture into school curricula. Empal Gentong can be preserved as part of Cirebon's cultural identity and continue to be maintained and passed down to future generations with synergistic support between the community and the government. Thus, all

parties need to view Empal Gentong not only as a regional specialty but also as a symbol of culture, local identity, and economic potential. Through strengthening social capital and collective commitment, Empal Gentong can continue to thrive and develop amidst the tides of change, while also becoming a proud heritage for the people of Cirebon and the Indonesian nation as a whole.

## RESEARCH METHOD

This research uses a descriptive qualitative approach. This approach aims to deeply understand how social capital plays a role in the efforts to preserve the traditional cuisine of *Empal Gentong* in Cirebon. This research is descriptive because it focuses on depicting the actual conditions occurring in the field. The research location is in Batembat Village, Tengahtani District, Cirebon Regency, which is known as one of the centers for Empal Gentong cuisine. This location was purposefully chosen because it is considered to have a rich culinary culture and a community that actively preserves traditions. The research was conducted in April 2025. The data sources in this research are divided into two, namely primary data and secondary data. Primary data was obtained through direct observation and interviews with *Empal Gentong* business operators. Meanwhile, secondary data were obtained from documents, village archives, media articles, and literature relevant to the research topic.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This research aims to identify the forms of social capital that play a role in the sustainability of traditional culinary businesses, particularly among *Empal Gentong* vendors in the Cirebon area. Through a qualitative approach, data were collected using in-depth interviews with several active traders, one of whom is an experienced trader who has been in this business for more than two decades. From the interviews, information was obtained describing how social networks, unwritten social norms, and customer trust are essential to business sustainability. The following findings are the results of interviews that have been analyzed and organized thematically based on the aspects of social capital being studied.

Most *Empal Gentong* traders do not have an intense communication network with other traders. However, the social relationships are more familial, such as between parents and children, nephews, or cousins. This relationship pattern is not formal but influences maintaining business continuity amid market competition. The familial bonds often serve as a foundation for sharing information or support in running the business. It shows that traditional social structures still play an essential role in local economic activities.

Cooperation among traders regarding promotion or collective procurement of raw materials is not widely found. However, traders with strong social networks tend to find obtaining good-quality raw materials and favorable prices easier. This social network is generally built through long-term relationships with suppliers, which create trust and loyalty between both parties. Although not formal, forms of cooperation like this still hold strategic value in the sustainability of the business. Thus, social networks play a significant role in traders' efficiency and economic stability.

Relationships with raw material suppliers, such as meat and spices, also highlight the importance of social networks in the *Empal Gentong* business practice. Merchants well-known to suppliers tend to receive priority in distributing raw materials, especially when

availability is limited. This social closeness functions not only as an economic means but also as a form of solidarity within the community of traders and suppliers. In this context, social values also indirectly regulate business relations. Therefore, social networks become an essential foundation for the resilience of traditional culinary businesses.

Besides social networks, unwritten social norms are essential in maintaining harmony among traders. One highly upheld norm is the prohibition against opening a business too close to other *Empal Gentong* traders. This norm aims to avoid unhealthy competition and maintain comfort among business operators. Although no official regulations exist, this norm is adhered to as a form of ethics and solidarity among local traders. This norm shows that socio-cultural aspects are essential to daily business practices.

In the past, there was also a norm that required using a clay pot as the primary cooking utensil for making *Empal Gentong*. This norm was reinforced by the myth that the longer the pot was used, the better the taste of the resulting dish. However, over time and with the development of technology, some traders have begun to abandon this norm. Currently, the use of modern cooking utensils is becoming widely accepted because they are more practical and efficient. This shift in norms reflects social dynamics and cultural adaptation in traditional culinary practices. Social capital in the form of customer trust is also a key aspect that sustains the continuity of the *Empal Gentong* business. This trust is built through consistent taste, cleanliness of the place, and friendly service to customers. In the interview, the traders realized that maintaining customer trust is the primary strategy for their business to survive in the long term. Trust is not only emotional but also directly impacts loyalty and business sustainability. It proves that social interactions have a tangible economic impact.

One of the vendors, Mr. Ali, who has been selling for over 25 years, shared that maintaining customer trust is part of his business routine. He ensures that the taste of the dishes remains consistent and maintains the place's cleanliness so that customers feel comfortable. In addition, he also emphasizes the importance of a friendly attitude towards every customer, whether they are regulars or new. According to him, good service is the key to ensuring that customers return in the future. It indicates that a personal approach to service is still relevant in traditional culinary businesses.

Mr. Ali also stated that most of his customers are regulars who have been buying from him for years. He mentioned that maintaining good relationships with long-time customers is far more beneficial than constantly seeking new customers. Satisfied customers usually recommend others, which ultimately expands the consumer network organically. This strategy is considered adequate because it does not require enormous promotional costs, yet still has a broad impact. The trust built becomes a long-term investment for his business.

Based on the results of this interview, it can be concluded that social capital in the form of social networks, unwritten norms, and customer trust plays an essential role in the sustainability of the *Empal Gentong* business. The three are interconnected and form a business ecosystem based on local values and social relations. Although not formal, these social elements can effectively regulate and maintain business stability. Social capital becomes a force that unites economic practices and cultural values in the local context. Therefore, understanding these social aspects is crucial for formulating strategies to preserve traditional cuisine amidst modernization.

*Empal Gentong* is one of the typical culinary dishes from Cirebon that can be found in

almost every corner of the city. One of the most famous is *Empal Gentong* H. Apud, which has become an icon of local culinary tourism. The potential of *Empal Gentong* lies not only in its authentic taste but also in its role in boosting the economy of the Cirebon community; wherever tourists go, *Empal Gentong* is almost always available, making it a unique attraction for the local tourism industry (Ropiah, 2018).

The social relationships among *Empal Gentong* sellers at Pasar Kanoman demonstrate a strong sense of solidarity and mutual support. Beyond economic interests, the sellers cooperate to maintain the cleanliness of the trading area, exchange information about quality raw material suppliers, and remind each other to uphold consistent taste and product quality standards (Setiawati & Sungkawa, 2024). Trust becomes the primary social capital in maintaining the secrecy of ancestral recipes; only sellers deemed capable and responsible can access the original recipes, as a form of respect for cultural heritage. Unwritten norms—such as the prohibition against unilateral price increases and the requirement to obtain permission before imitating another seller's recipe or culinary presentation—strengthen trade ethics and maintain local economic stability. Based on Pierre Bourdieu's social capital theory framework, this relationship demonstrates how social capital can contribute to the reproduction of culinary culture. *Empal Gentong* sellers preserve recipes and pass on the collective values inherent in traditional food heritage (Bourdieu, dalam Setiawati & Sungkawa, 2024).

The research found that the social relationships among *Empal Gentong* sellers in the Batembat center support each other without the fear of competition in entrepreneurship among one another (Muzhaffar et al., 2024). In their research, the trust among traders strengthens solidarity and business sustainability. In this case, the business actors show a high commitment to maintaining the quality and taste of *Empal Gentong*, which has been passed down through generations. The business operators do not have concerns about unhealthy competition because of their willingness to share information regarding quality raw material sources and traditional cooking techniques. Not just one or two *Empal Gentong* restaurants exist in Cirebon regency, but quite a few, all maintaining the quality of taste and price in their sales. Several *Empal Gentong* restaurants that are pretty familiar include *Empal Gentong* H. Apud, *Empal Gentong* H. Dian, and *Empal Gentong* Mang Darma.

A strong social network among the *Empal Gentong* entrepreneurs in Batembat plays an essential role in maintaining the existence of this culinary tradition. They build good relationships with fellow traders, raw material suppliers, and loyal customers. (Ropiah, 2018) In her findings, researching one *Empal Gentong* restaurant, she stated that the meat used is not produced in-house but sourced from specialized meat suppliers because the meat used consists only of offal. Usually, the meat is supplied from farms, then through wholesalers, and finally to market traders, including those involved in the industry or restaurants, one of which is *Empal Gentong* (Fajriaty et al., 2024). One of the locations where *Empal Gentong* business operators source their meat is directly from a well-known cattle slaughterhouse in Cirebon, specifically in the Batembat area of Cirebon (Nurkhodijah, 2023).

Business operators also build good relationships with loyal customers as consumers and promoters of *Empal Gentong* sales, such as through collaboration with tourism programs. The distinctive local *Empal Gentong*, with its unique flavor in the making, often attracts tourists to try the dish (Marthaputra et al., 2021). This collaboration creates a mutually supportive

ecosystem where information, resources, and moral support flow effectively. A study on the culinary community in Tenggalinggah Village shows that community involvement in social networks can enhance the resilience and sustainability of traditional culinary businesses.

The norms that apply in the Batembat *Empal Gentong* community, such as maintaining reasonable selling prices and not carelessly copying recipes, whether in unwritten or written agreements, function as regulatory mechanisms that preserve harmony and business sustainability. Not only that, but also respecting the recipes by not imitating them carelessly and maintaining and honoring the identity of each stall. These norms create a healthy and positively competitive business environment.

The findings from the research on *Empal Gentong* cuisine can be analyzed using Putnam's social capital theory. Showing that social capital plays an essential role in maintaining the existence of *Empal Gentong*. Like networks, norms, and trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit. Putnam sees the relationship between the focus on horizontal social networks and economic success. Meanwhile, Coleman defines social capital in a broader sense, focusing on the impact of vertical and hierarchical institutions on people with low incomes and the good performance of companies. Quoted from the research journal (Alfiansyah, 2023). It aims to create expectations and reciprocal obligations, which is evident in business actors' commitment to maintaining the culinary scene's quality and identity. In this context, the strong social networks and norms in Batembat reinforce community solidarity.

## CONCLUSION

This research highlights the importance of social capital in preserving the traditional cuisine, *Empal Gentong* in Cirebon. The cuisine that has become part of the cultural identity of the Cirebon community not only has economic value but also high historical and symbolic value. Amid the tide of modernization and globalization that increasingly erodes local culture, the preservation of *Empal Gentong* becomes an effort that requires synergy between the community, business actors, the government, and cultural communities.

Social capital becomes the primary factor driving the sustainability of this culinary tradition. The trust between business actors and the community, the social networks formed across generations, and the norms passed down through generations become the forces that maintain the originality and sustainability of *Empal Gentong* production. Social capital is also evident in the spirit of cooperation in culinary promotion activities, whether in festivals, bazaars, or collaborations with the tourism sector and SMEs.

This preservation is done in physical forms (such as maintaining original recipes or cooking techniques), socially, and culturally. The process of passing down values, stories, and meanings attached to this cuisine becomes an essential part of the non-material preservation carried out by the local community. In other words, *Empal Gentong* is preserved as food and a cultural heritage that unites local identity.

Based on the research findings, it can be concluded that social capital connects cultural, economic, and social aspects in preserving traditional cuisine. Therefore, strategies for preserving local culture, such as *Empal Gentong*, need to continue strengthening the social capital dimension, including encouraging the younger generation's involvement and supporting collaborative spaces among stakeholders. This research is expected to serve as a

foundation for further in-depth studies on the role of social capital in preserving other local cultures in Indonesia.

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