

CULTURAL ETHNOGRAPHY OF PECCEL MADIUN: RECONCEPTUALIZING CIVIC SPACES FOR NATIONAL CHARACTER FORMATION

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze the role of traditional cuisine as a medium for lived citizenship in the formation of national character. Utilizing a qualitative approach with a focused ethnography design, this research was conducted at warung pecel (traditional food stalls) in Madiun City from December 2025 to January 2026. Data were gathered through focused observation, in-depth interviews, and visual documentation, which were then analyzed inductively through the lenses of the sociology of citizenship and public space. The results indicate that warung pecel functions as an egalitarian and inclusive civic space imbued with citizenship values. Social practices such as communal seating regardless of social class, the ethics of "geser-geseran", fair queuing, the use of pincuk, and informal public discourse manifest social citizenship, cultural nationalism, and ecological awareness in everyday life. This study concludes that citizenship and national character are not solely constructed through formal education and legalistic approaches, but also through grounded, repetitive cultural practices. The implications of this research underscore the need to reconceptualize learning resources for Pancasila and Civic Education by leveraging local cultural spaces as social laboratories for citizenship.

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INTRODUCTION

In contemporary social science discourse, gastronomy is no longer understood merely as a biological activity for nutritional fulfillment, but as a socio-cultural practice laden with meanings of identity, power relations, and national politics. Food functions as a social symbol representing history, values, and the collective imagination of a nation,

while serving as a medium for articulating national identity in everyday life. DeSoucey (Astuty & Setiawati, 2025; DeSoucey, 2010; Renyoet, 2026; Samuri & Salleh, 2025; Yogi Ageng Sri Legowo et al., 2025), through the concept of gastronationalism, asserts that culinary traditions can foster national belonging through the emotional attachment of citizens to food regarded as the "common property" of a national community (Astuty & Setiawati, 2025; Putri et al., 2024; Rizanur, 2020).

Correspondingly, the Sociology of Citizenship perspective views citizenship not just as a formal-legal status attached via state documents, but as a social practice lived and experienced in the daily lives of citizens (lived citizenship). Within this framework, seemingly simple cultural acts—such as choosing local food, maintaining family culinary traditions, or gathering in shared dining spaces—are understood as integral parts of citizenship practices (Kallio et al., 2020; Però et al., 2025). Through these practices, citizens indirectly preserve collective memory, strengthen social solidarity, and affirm national identity in everyday life.

However, globalization has triggered a homogenization of taste, shifting the culinary preferences of the younger generation (Gronow, 2026; Inglis, 2015; Sulaeman et al., 2022). Fast-food chains, modern cafes, and transnational popular foods now exist not just as consumption choices but as symbols of specific lifestyles and social identities. This phenomenon creates a symbolic distance between youth and traditional culinary practices, which are often perceived as antiquated, less prestigious, or irrelevant to modern identity (Chisan et al., 2015; Entitas et al., 2023).

In the context of citizenship, this condition reflects a weakening of cultural citizenship when students are more familiar with foreign cultural narratives through food, media, and lifestyle. At the same time, local values appear only as symbolic knowledge in classrooms, and citizenship risks being reduced to normative memorization. Pancasila and Civic Education (PPKn), which has emphasized cognitive and juridical aspects, has not fully addressed these affective and cultural dimensions (Nurlatifa & Lianda Dewi Sartika, 2025; Shabrina et al., 2026). Consequently, national values are learned as abstract concepts rather than felt life experiences (Hanif, 2003; Ramon, X., & Rojas-Torrijos, 2021).

In this context, this article views traditional cuisine as a civic space, a social arena where citizenship practices occur informally and contextually. In Madiun, warung pecel is a concrete example of how local culinary functions as an everyday citizenship space. These stalls lack membership systems, do not segregate visitors by social background, and do not limit who may attend. Everyone, from farmers, traders, and students to state officials, shares the same dining space (Roggeband & Krizs, 2021; Faidah & Dewi, 2021).

For instance, the practice of sitting side by side without barriers in a warung pecel demonstrates the principle of civic equality in a very concrete way. No VIP rooms or symbolic markers are affirming social hierarchy. Relatively affordable prices also allow broad access for various social layers. In this situation, citizenship is not manifested through formal state symbols but through the direct experience of equality felt by citizens

(Roggeband & Krizs, 2021).

The use of pincuk (banana leaf plates) also carries cultural citizenship meanings. Beyond representing simplicity and closeness to nature, this practice reflects values of sustainability and social responsibility. These values align with principles of social and ecological citizenship, emphasizing the bond between citizens, community, and the environment. Thus, eating pecel is not merely a means of consumption, but a means of implicit value learning.

Furthermore, social interactions in warung pecel often involve light conversations regarding commodity prices, local development issues, or social events. Though unstructured, these conversations demonstrate public discourse practices on a micro-scale. Citizens exchange views, compare experiences, and build a collective understanding of shared problems. In this context, warung pecel can be understood as a microcosmic public sphere where social opinion is formed through daily communication.

These practices demonstrate that Madiun's traditional culinary practices hold significant potential as a resource for contextual citizenship learning. Rather than positioning citizenship as a set of verbally taught norms, shared dining experiences in local culinary spaces allow students to understand Pancasila values as a lived social reality.

The discourse on value formation within Indonesian Civic Education has traditionally centered on formal educational settings. The existing literature demonstrates a prevalence of studies on pedagogical innovations in schools, such as media development (Abdulkarim et al., 2018; Nuryadi & Aim Abdulkarim, 2016) and the effectiveness of teaching methods (Feriandi, Budimansyah, & Komalasari, 2021; Parji & Feriandi, 2020). As the research focus shifts toward the societal realm, emerging studies remain confined either to digital platforms (Aqillah, 2024; Mufidah et al. 2024) or to planned physical public spaces like city parks (Zheng, 2024). Consequently, a substantial gap exists in the literature regarding how civic values are lived and transmitted within grassroots public spaces. Therefore, this research aims to fill this void by exploring the potential of traditional eateries, specifically warung pecel, as alternative civic spaces within the community. Given this urgency, this article aims to reconceptualize Madiun's traditional culinary as a civic space and to analyze its potential as a pedagogical medium in civic education. Through a sociology of citizenship approach, this research offers a framework for internalizing national values based on daily cultural experiences, aimed at revitalizing students' sense of patriotism, increasingly eroded by globalization (Shannon et al., 2023).

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative approach with a focused ethnography design. Unlike conventional ethnography, which requires long-term researcher involvement to capture holistic cultural systems, focused ethnography concentrates on specific cultural practices or social situations over a shorter period but with higher data-collection intensity (Shannon et al., 2023; Wall, 2015).

This design was selected because the research does not aim to examine the entire cultural system of Madiun society, but rather to specifically investigate the social practice of eating Nasi Pecel as a cultural event that embodies civic virtues. The unit of analysis in this study is the social interaction occurring during the Nasi Pecel dining event within the warung pecel space, encompassing communication patterns, inter-individual social relations, and the use of cultural symbols and artifacts. The research was conducted from December 2025 to January 2026, with repeated observation sessions during peak and off-peak hours to capture variations in social interaction. In this study, the researcher acts as the key instrument possessing adequate background knowledge of the local cultural context, while maintaining continuous reflexivity to minimize interpretative bias.

Research Setting and Participants

The research was conducted in Madiun City, East Java, focused on three purposively selected Nasi Pecel stalls (warung). These sites were chosen because they represent inclusive, informal public spaces characterized by spatial openness, affordability, and high levels of cross-class attendance.

Participant selection employed a purposive sampling technique to capture information-rich cases. The number of participants ranged from 8 individuals, categorized as follows: (1) Stall Owners (Cultural Actors): Owners serve as guardians of traditional culinary practices who understand the serving philosophy, history, and cultural values inherent in Madiun pecel. (2) Consumers/Patrons: Consumers were variably selected from diverse professional backgrounds including informal sector workers, students, civil servants, and the general public to observe social interaction patterns and their perceptions of equality and togetherness within the dining space.

Data Collection Techniques

Within the focused ethnography framework, data collection was conducted through a combination of immersive fieldwork methods. The techniques employed include: (1) Observation, involving intensive, direct observation sessions in culinary public spaces, specifically Pecel Madiun environments, to capture real-time daily interactions, social dynamics, and the practical application of equality among citizens. Detailed field notes were continuously recorded during these sessions; (2) In-depth Interviews, conducted with key participants such as vendors, buyers, and residents to gather rich narrative data exploring their perspectives on citizen interaction, public space utilization, and their lived experiences of citizenship; and (3) Documentation, which entailed collecting supporting empirical materials such as photographs of the culinary spaces, audio recordings of the interactions, and relevant visual artifacts to contextualize the physical and social environment.

Following the data collection, the data analysis was systematically conducted through three key stages: (1) Data coding, involving the labeling of interview transcripts and field notes with initial thematic codes such as equality, citizen interaction, public space, and local identity; (2) Categorization, which involves grouping these codes into broader themes from the perspective of the sociology of citizenship; and (3) Cultural interpretation, which entails providing meaning to empirical findings within the framework of citizenship and character education. At the interpretive stage, the analysis used public sphere theory and social citizenship as analytical lenses to understand how lived citizenship emerges in these daily culinary interactions.

Trustworthiness

The trustworthiness of the data was maintained through triangulation of sources and techniques, limited member checking with key informants, and researcher reflexivity throughout data collection and analysis. In addition to methodological rigor, strict research ethics were upheld throughout the study. Informed consent was obtained from all individuals prior to their involvement, ensuring that participants provided voluntary consent and had a full understanding of the research objectives. Furthermore, participants' identities were kept confidential by anonymizing personal details in all transcripts and final reports. Together, these strategies were implemented to ensure the credibility, consistency, reliability, and ethical soundness of the research interpretations.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on a focused ethnographic analysis of the social dynamics within Madiun's warung pecel, this study finds that traditional cuisine serves as a medium for lived citizenship. Through participant observation and in-depth interviews, five primary dimensions were identified that construct the warung pecel as a civic space.

Warung Pecel as "The Egalitarian Space": Deconstructing Social Hierarchy

Observational results indicate that the social architecture of warung pecel in Madiun is naturally designed to dismantle social class barriers. Unlike modern restaurants that emphasize privacy through separate table layouts (cubicles), warung pecel utilizes long wooden benches (lincak) without partitions. This physical condition forces an intimate co-presence: patrons must sit closely together, touching shoulders, and sharing personal space with strangers.

In an interview, Mr. Hartono (68), a retiree, described this phenomenon as the "wooden bench brotherhood." He stated:

"Lho, Mas, di Madiun itu rumusnya satu: asal sudah duduk satu bangku kayu, ya jadi saudara... Warung pecel ini ruang tamu kami. Kalau di rumah terus, otak saya karatan."

"Look, in Madiun, there is one rule: once you sit on the same wooden bench, you become brothers... This pecel stall is our living room. If I stay home all day, my brain gets rusty."

The Third Place and Radical Egalitarianism

The statement "our living room" signals a shift from the private to the public (Oldenburg, 1989). When a local official sits on the same bench as a pedicab driver, status is suspended. There are no VIP tables or priority services; bureaucratic protocols vanish, replaced by the protocols of humanity. Mrs. Ratna (45), a market trader, added that this egalitarian atmosphere instantly creates high social trust:

"Di sini itu kayak ada sibirnya, orang jadi gampang percaya satu sama lain hanya karena sama-sama antre sambal. Tadi saya curhat soal anak saya ke ibu sebelah, padahal baru kenal."

"It is like there is magic here; people trust each other easily just because they are queuing for the same chili sauce. Earlier, I shared concerns about my child with the woman next to me, even though we had just met."

This finding confirms that warung pecel functions as an incubator for social capital, where civic solidarity is not formed through formal national speeches, but through the embodied experience of sitting at the same level (Portes, 2024).

The Practice of "Geser-geseran": A Microcosm of Social Citizenship

Citizenship is often rigidly understood as a vertical relationship between the state and its citizens, defined by legal rights and obligations. However, this ethnography reveals a micro-scale horizontal citizenship practiced through dining ethics. Mbak Lilis (21), a university student, highlighted a physical phenomenon in the stalls that she described as an "animating" interaction:

"Kalau di kafe modern, kita sibuk sama laptop masing-masing. Tapi di sini, ruangnya sempit, mau nggak mau ya geser-geseran, minta tolong ambilin sendok. Interaksi fisik itu yang bikin kita merasa 'hidup' sebagai orang Madiun."

"In modern cafes, we are busy with our own laptops. However, here, the space is cramped; you inevitably have to shift around (geser-geseran) or ask someone to pass a spoon. That physical interaction is what makes us feel 'alive' as Madiun people."

The term "geser-geseran" (shifting seats) serves as a crucial ethnographic datum. It is a physical act symbolizing spatial tolerance. When patrons automatically shift their bodies to accommodate new customers without being asked, they are practicing the 2nd (Humanity) and 5th (Social Justice) principles of Pancasila: acknowledging others' rights over limited resources. Mas Bagus (22) reinforces this with the concept of "seasoning justice." According to him, in a warung pecel, everyone is subject to the same queue rules. No one is allowed to cut in line, regardless of their wealth.

"Whether you drive a Fortuner or walk, the queue is the same. The vendor gets angry if someone cuts in."

"Mau naik mobil Fortuner atau jalan kaki, antrenya sama. Penjualnya galak kalau ada yang nyerobot."

This represents an effective form of civic discipline (Matto et al., 2017). Citizens learn that public order is maintained not out of fear of the police, but through the social shame of violating a shared consensus within the stall.

The Pincuk Artifact: Ecological Identity and Resistance

One of the most significant findings in this study is the profound meaning attributed to the pincuk (a banana leaf food container). The use of pincuk is revealed to be more

than just a matter of tradition or economics; it represents a cultural resistance against a modernity perceived as "lifeless. Mrs. Lastri (58), a third-generation vendor, offers a sharp ontological interpretation:

"Plates are dead; banana leaves are alive. When hot pecel sauce meets the leaf, the aroma 'emerges'... Using pincuk is our way of respecting the earth."

"Piring itu mati, Mas. Daun pisang itu hidup. Kalau bumbu pecel panas ketemu daun pisang, aromanya itu 'keluar'... Pakai pincuk itu cara kami menghargai bumi."

The metaphor of "dead plates" versus "living leaves" represents a clash of values. Pincuk embodies organic local wisdom in harmony with nature, while glass or melamine plates represent a sterile yet distant modernity.

Furthermore, Mr. Gunawan (48), an architect, analyzes pincuk from a design and ecological perspective: "Pincuk is an ecological identity. Its asymmetrical shape, which must be held with one hand, creates a physical connection between humans, food, and nature. It is the most genius packaging technology." For the younger generation like Dinda (17), pincuk is reinterpreted as a sustainable lifestyle. This finding demonstrates that Madiun's gastronationalism possesses an ecological dimension (eco-citizenship). Loving local culinary thus implies loving the environment by minimizing inorganic waste (Feriandi et al., 2021).

The Warung Pecel as a Stage for Public Discourse: Grassroots Deliberative Democracy

In the framework of Jürgen Habermas's critical theory, the public sphere is defined as a discursive arena where private individuals assemble to engage in rational-critical debate regarding matters of general interest. This research posits that the warung pecel in Madiun is a vivid, grassroots manifestation of this conceptual arena. Unlike formal political institutions that are often perceived as elitist and exclusionary, the warung pecel offers a low-barrier, accessible space where organic public opinion is synthesized through everyday interaction. Mas Doni (30) captures this phenomenon through a compelling dramaturgical metaphor, describing the stall as a "stage":

"We are 'stage creatures' in need of an audience, and the warung pecel provides that stage without a rental fee. Eating is merely a bonus; the essence is 'updating one's soul' (update nyawa)." "Kita ini 'makhluk panggung' yang butuh penonton, dan warung pecel menyediakan panggung itu tanpa bayar sewa. Makan itu bonus, intinya update nyawa."

This "stage" functions as a micro-parliament, where the agenda is set not by political elites but by the immediate concerns of the citizenry. The discourse observed, ranging from the fluctuating prices of basic commodities and critiques of urban sidewalk developments to national political tensions, demonstrates that these stalls facilitate a form of deliberative democracy.

In this space, citizens engage in a "street-level parliament" where social consensus is built organically. This interaction serves as informal civic education; patrons learn to navigate differences, listen to others' grievances, and exchange vital information without the coercive pressure of formal state apparatuses (Habermas, 2020). Consequently, the *warung pecel* transcends its biological function, becoming a vital site for the formation of collective agency and the maintenance of a healthy, functioning democracy at the community level.

The potency of the *warung pecel* as a public sphere lies in its radical inclusivity and its resistance to the "colonization of the lifeworld" by bureaucratic systems. In formal political forums, discourse is often stifled by rigid procedures, technical jargon, and hierarchical seating arrangements that reinforce power imbalances. Conversely, the *warung pecel* fosters fluid, unmediated intersubjective communication. Within this space, the "unforced force of the better argument" (Habermas's *zwangloser Zwang des besseren Argumentes*) operates through humor, local idioms, and shared sensory experiences. The absence of a formal moderator does not lead to chaos; rather, it allows for a more authentic articulation of the subaltern counter publics the voices of those often marginalized in mainstream political discourse.

Furthermore, the physical proximity mandated by the stall's architecture catalyzes "accidental" political encounters. A patron might enter with the sole intention of consumption, yet find themselves involuntarily drawn into a discussion on local governance or social justice. This transition from a private individual to a public participant occurs seamlessly, suggesting that the *warung pecel* acts as a social lubricant that lowers the psychological barriers to civic engagement. By transforming mundane dining into a site of political socialization, these spaces provide a robust defense against the atomization of modern society, proving that national character is best nurtured through the vibrant, messy, and unscripted dialogues of everyday life.

Gastronationalism: Pecel as a Bulwark of Identity

Amid the relentless onslaught of global culinary homogenization and Western fast-food hegemony, Madiun pecel remains a formidable symbol of cultural pride and communal identity. Informants across generational cohorts consistently describe pecel as the "soul" (*nyawa*) of Madiun. The authentic, bold, and intense profile of the peanut sauce, locally termed as "medok," is interpreted as a sensory representation of the Madiun people's character: assertive yet humble (*bersahaja*) (Ju et al., 2023; Noviati et al., 2025)

This pride transcends mere local chauvinism; it constitutes a strategic cultural defense mechanism. By consistently consuming and elevating pecel, the citizens of Madiun engage in what Michael Billig terms banal nationalism, the everyday, subconscious reminders of national and local belonging. In this context, asserting a "sovereignty of taste" is a quiet yet powerful act of resistance against foreign culinary hegemony, reinforcing the idea that identity is maintained not through grand gestures but through consistent choices made at the dining table.

Theoretical Synthesis: Pecel as an Act of Citizenship

Theoretically, these findings confirm that citizenship cannot be reduced to a mere formal-legal status or a set of administrative rights and obligations. Aligning with Engin Isin's (2002) Conceptualization of Acts of Citizenship, the mundane act of eating nasi pecel in Madiun is elevated to a "civic act." It is an intentional performance that creates new possibilities for social interaction and collective identity.

When citizens willingly sit in cramped spaces, spontaneously shift their seats for strangers (*geser-geseran*), prioritize ecological responsibility through the use of banana leaves (*pincuk*), and engage in unscripted public discourse, they are internalizing the Pancasila values *de facto*:

1. Humanity & Social Justice (2nd & 5th Principles): Manifested through the rigorous ethics of the queue and the rejection of social stratification in seating arrangements.
2. National Unity (3rd Principle): Evidenced by the cross-class social cohesion that occurs around a singular, shared table, dissolving socioeconomic boundaries.
3. Deliberative Democracy (4th Principle): Observed in the organic public discourse and informal *musyawarah* (deliberation) that permeates the stall atmosphere.

The implications of this study necessitate a fundamental reconceptualization of learning resources within Pancasila and Civic Education (PPKn). We argue for the recognition of the *warung pecel* as a "social laboratory," a living civic space where character is forged through lived experience rather than rote memorization of normative doctrines.

Instead of confining citizenship education to the abstract boundaries of a classroom, educators should leverage these local cultural spaces to demonstrate how democratic values operate in real time. This approach shifts the pedagogical focus from "learning about citizenship" to "practicing citizenship." By integrating these grounded cultural practices into the curriculum, we can revitalize students' patriotism through an affective and experiential lens, ensuring that national character remains relevant and vibrant amid global cultural erosion.

CONCLUSION

This study finds that traditional culinary practices, particularly Madiun *pecel*, function as vital, inclusive, and egalitarian civic spaces that extend beyond mere consumption. Values of equality, togetherness, and social justice are practiced through cross-class interactions, the ethics of shared space (*geser-geseran*), and queuing discipline. The use of *pincuk* (banana leaf plates) further reflects ecological citizenship and cultural resistance to homogenizing modernity, demonstrating how environmental awareness can emerge from local wisdom. In addition, the *warung pecel* serves as a grassroots public arena for informal discourse and social consensus-building. Theoretically, this study reinforces the concept of lived citizenship by linking everyday practices to acts of citizenship. It shows that citizenship and national character are not

only shaped by formal-legalistic approaches but also by repeated, grounded cultural practices. Traditional culinary spaces can therefore be understood as “social laboratories” for civic learning.

The main implication of this study is the need for a pedagogical shift in Pancasila and Civic Education (PPKn) from a normative-cognitive approach toward experiential civic learning. Local cultural spaces, such as warung pecel, should be positioned as contextual learning resources to help students experience democratic values in real-life settings. This study is limited by its ethnographic design, which focuses on three selected warung pecel in Madiun, potentially limiting the generalizability of the findings. Future research is recommended to conduct comparative studies in other regions, develop action research models that integrate cultural spaces into PPKn learning, and examine the long-term impact of participation in informal civic spaces on formal civic engagement.

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Cultural Ethnography of Pecel Madiun: Reconceptualizing Civic Spaces for National Character Formation (Yoga Ardian Feriandi, et al.,)

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