

Cultural Caste Systems in Indonesia: Continuity, Transformation, and Their Implications in Modern Society

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Abstrak

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis keberlanjutan, transformasi, dan implikasi sistem kasta budaya pada masyarakat adat di Kabupaten Labuhanbatu, Sumatera Utara. Meskipun Indonesia tidak mengenal sistem kasta secara formal sebagaimana di India, bentuk-bentuk stratifikasi sosial berbasis adat, garis keturunan, dan kepemimpinan tradisional masih memengaruhi kehidupan sosial masyarakat. Penelitian ini mengkaji kesinambungan historis sistem kasta budaya, perubahan yang terjadi pada aspek pendidikan, perkawinan, politik, dan ekonomi, serta implikasinya terhadap identitas sosial, ketimpangan, dan kohesi masyarakat. Penelitian menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan desain historis dan etnografis. Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara mendalam, diskusi kelompok terarah (FGD), observasi partisipatif, dan studi dokumentasi yang melibatkan pemimpin adat, tokoh masyarakat, generasi muda, serta aktor politik lokal. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa status keturunan dan kepemimpinan adat masih menjadi sumber legitimasi simbolik yang penting, terutama dalam penyelenggaraan upacara adat, penyelesaian konflik, dan kepemimpinan masyarakat. Namun demikian, modernisasi, demokratisasi, dan globalisasi telah mengubah dasar penentuan status sosial, di mana pendidikan, prestasi profesional, keberhasilan ekonomi, dan partisipasi politik semakin berperan dalam menentukan posisi sosial seseorang. Sistem kasta budaya tidak mengalami kepunahan, melainkan bertransformasi menjadi institusi simbolik yang lebih adaptif dalam mempertahankan identitas budaya sekaligus menyesuaikan diri dengan perubahan sosial. Di sisi lain, sistem tersebut tetap memberikan pengaruh terhadap kohesi sosial sekaligus mempertahankan ketimpangan melalui akses yang tidak merata terhadap jaringan sosial dan otoritas adat. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa sistem kasta budaya di Labuhanbatu merupakan institusi sosial yang dinamis dan masih berperan dalam membentuk identitas, mobilitas sosial, serta tata kelola masyarakat di Indonesia modern.

Kata kunci: Sistem Kasta Budaya, Masyarakat Adat, Adat, Stratifikasi Sosial

Abstract

This study examines the continuity, transformation, and contemporary implications of cultural caste systems among indigenous communities in Labuhanbatu Regency, North Sumatra, Indonesia. Although Indonesia does not formally recognize hereditary caste systems, localized forms of social hierarchy rooted in adat (customary law), genealogy, and traditional leadership continue to influence social relations. The research aims to analyze the historical continuity of these cultural hierarchies, identify their transformation in the domains of education, marriage, politics, and the economy, and assess their implications for social identity, inequality, and community cohesion. Employing a qualitative research design with historical and ethnographic approaches, the study collected data through in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, participant observation, and document analysis involving customary leaders, community elders, youth, and local political actors. The findings reveal that hereditary status and adat authority remain important sources of symbolic legitimacy, particularly in customary ceremonies, conflict resolution, and community leadership. However, modernization, democratization, and globalization have significantly transformed the basis of social status, with educational attainment, professional achievement, economic success, and political participation increasingly complementing or replacing hereditary privilege. Rather than disappearing, cultural caste systems have adapted to contemporary conditions by functioning as flexible symbolic institutions that preserve indigenous identity

while accommodating social change. Furthermore, these systems contribute to both social cohesion and inequality by reinforcing customary solidarity while maintaining differential access to social networks and local authority. The study concludes that the cultural caste system in Labuhanbatu represents a dynamic institution that continues to shape identity, social mobility, and governance in modern Indonesia, highlighting the need for policies that balance cultural preservation with the promotion of equality and inclusive development.

Keywords: *Cultural Caste System, Indigenous Communities, Adat, Social Stratification*

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INTRODUCTION

Indonesia's socio-cultural landscape is characterized by multiple layers of social hierarchy, often conceptualized as "caste-like" systems. Although not directly equivalent to the South Asian varna, *jati* order, these localized stratification forms manifest through genealogical origins, hereditary leadership, aristocratic titles, and ritual obligations. Across the archipelago, societies such as the Balinese, Bugis, Makassar, and Javanese have maintained symbolic markers of hierarchical status. Importantly, such systems are not static relics; they continue to shape access to resources, political authority, and social identity in contemporary Indonesia, even as modernization, democratization, and globalization reshape their form (Sartini, 2020; Asri, 2022; Wulandari, 2021).

While scholarship has traditionally focused on well-documented cases such as the *Catur Wangsa* of Bali or the Bugis aristocracy of South Sulawesi, less attention has been paid to Sumatra's local hierarchies, particularly those of North Sumatra. In Labuhanbatu Regency, the presence of diverse *masyarakat adat* groups, including Mandailing, Angkola, Melayu, and Batak, presents a unique case where cultural stratification intersects with migration, plantation economies, and religious pluralism. Historically, Labuhanbatu was shaped by colonial plantation systems, which attracted waves of labor migration and restructured local authority patterns (Lindblad, 2019). This historical layering complicates the persistence of indigenous hierarchies, as aristocratic and adat-based leadership roles became intertwined with colonial governance and later with Indonesia's bureaucratic structures (Houben, 2021).

Contemporary ethnographic observations suggest that among the indigenous communities of Labuhanbatu, status distinctions are still articulated through adat institutions, marriage alliances, and the symbolic role of traditional leaders (*raja adat* or *pemangku adat*). For example, access to land, ritual spaces, and local political authority is often mediated through adat hierarchies, while intermarriage across status lines may trigger negotiations of symbolic and material obligations (Nasution, 2020). These dynamics reveal both continuity, in the sense that genealogical legitimacy still matters, and transformation, as younger generations interpret status through new lenses such as education, migration, and economic mobility.

Colonial legacies continue to cast long shadows in this region. The Dutch plantation economy in Labuhanbatu institutionalized stratification between European

managers, migrant laborers (Javanese, Tamil, Chinese), and indigenous groups. This stratification was not only economic but also cultural, reinforcing the boundaries between “locals” and “outsiders” while empowering certain adat elites as intermediaries (Stoler, 1995). Post-independence policies did not entirely erase these distinctions; rather, they were reconfigured within the framework of Indonesia’s national development and decentralization, where local elites frequently mediate between state authority and community life (Aspinall & Berenschot, 2019).

In the post-Reformasi era, Labuhanbatu, like many regions in Indonesia, has experienced a surge of identity politics. Traditional authority figures and adat institutions have been revitalized as sources of legitimacy, particularly in the context of regional autonomy and local elections. Cultural caste-like structures thus find new relevance: they are invoked as cultural heritage, mobilized in political competition, and reshaped through interactions with modern institutions. At the same time, democratization and globalization have opened new pathways for contesting hierarchy, with education and migration enabling individuals to challenge inherited stratifications (Danu et al., 2024).

Key areas of transformation in Labuhanbatu’s adat societies include education, marriage, politics, and the economy. First, education has become a critical marker of mobility, yet studies of assortative marriage suggest that educational homogamy may reproduce inequality within and across groups (Nurhayati & Putri, 2024; Kujundzic, 2025). Second, marriage remains a site where adat hierarchies are negotiated. For instance, adat norms still govern dowry, clan exogamy, and alliance formation, but these norms increasingly intersect with urban lifestyles and egalitarian ideals. Third, in the political domain, local elites often draw upon adat titles or genealogical prestige to bolster legitimacy, demonstrating how cultural hierarchies adapt to democratic competition. Fourth, economic change, especially the shift from plantation dependence to diversified livelihoods, has created new opportunities and vulnerabilities, yet inequality persists, raising questions about how cultural caste systems intersect with contemporary class structures.

Understanding the cultural caste systems of Labuhanbatu’s indigenous societies is crucial for several reasons. Theoretically, it allows for a reassessment of the applicability of “caste” as an analytical category in Indonesia, broadening the conversation beyond Bali and Java. Empirically, it provides insights into how localized stratification systems endure and evolve in response to modernization, decentralization, and globalization. Practically, it informs policy debates about inequality, social cohesion, and cultural rights in a diverse and decentralized Indonesia.

Objectives of Research

1. To analyze the historical continuity of caste systems in Indonesian societies.
2. To examine the transformations occurring under modernization and globalization.
3. To assess the socio-cultural and political implications of these systems in modern Indonesia.

Literature Review

Theoretical Perspectives on Caste and Social Stratification

The study of caste and stratification has long occupied a central place in sociology and anthropology, with debates centering on the extent to which “caste” should be treated as a universal category or as a culture-specific formation. Classical sociological thought, particularly in the works of Max Weber (1978), emphasized stratification in terms of class, status, and party. For Weber, caste-like systems represent extreme forms of status group closure, where honor and privilege are monopolized by birthright and enforced through restrictions on marriage, commensality, and access to resources. From this perspective, caste can be analyzed as a sociological phenomenon of social closure rather than solely as a religious or cultural institution.

Louis Dumont’s (1980) *Homo Hierarchicus* provided a different lens, interpreting caste in India as fundamentally rooted in a religious worldview of purity and pollution. Although Dumont’s work has been critiqued for its essentialism and for overemphasizing Hindu ideology, it influenced later scholars examining the symbolic logic of stratification across societies. More recently, Pierre Bourdieu’s (1986) theory of capital (economic, social, cultural, and symbolic) has offered tools to examine how hierarchy reproduces itself across generations through not only material inheritance but also through practices, education, and symbolic recognition. In many ways, Bourdieu’s framework allows for a nuanced understanding of caste-like systems beyond India, including Indonesia, where genealogical prestige and symbolic capital intersect with modern forms of educational and economic capital.

Within Southeast Asian scholarship, the debate has centered on whether indigenous forms of hierarchy, such as the Balinese *wangsa*, the Bugis nobility (*arung*), or the Javanese *priyayi*, should be described as “caste,” “class,” or “status.” Scholars such as Geertz (1960) have used “status group” to describe the *priyayi* of Java, while others emphasize that the Balinese *wangsa* system shares many features with caste in India, particularly endogamy and ritual ranking (Sartini, 2020). Recent anthropological studies have highlighted that while caste-like systems in Indonesia lack the pan-Hindu varna framework, they nevertheless display durable patterns of hierarchy that structure marriage, ritual, and leadership (Wulandari, 2021).

The applicability of “caste” as an analytical category to Indonesia has therefore been debated. Some scholars argue that “caste” should be reserved for the South Asian context, while “stratification” or “status hierarchy” better describes Indonesia. However, as Houben (2021) suggests, the utility of “caste” lies in its ability to capture the historical continuity of rigid ascriptive hierarchies even as they are reinterpreted under modern conditions. In Labuhanbatu, where indigenous communities maintain adat-based stratifications rooted in clan, lineage, and ritual roles, the term “cultural caste system” provides analytical traction to examine how these local hierarchies persist and transform.

The theoretical literature also emphasizes the relationship between structure and agency. While classical frameworks portrayed caste as rigid and immutable,

more recent approaches highlight the agency of individuals and groups in negotiating boundaries. For instance, boundary-work theory (Lamont & Molnár, 2002) shows how symbolic boundaries, such as distinctions of purity, nobility, or adat title, can be contested, reinterpreted, and sometimes reified depending on context. This perspective is particularly useful for studying how younger generations in Indonesian adat societies may selectively reproduce or challenge traditional hierarchies in marriage, education, and politics.

Finally, globalization and modernization have prompted scholars to revisit the notion of “caste in transition.” While structural-functionalists once argued that caste would wither away with modernization, contemporary evidence shows that caste-like systems often adapt by linking themselves with modern institutions such as education, bureaucracy, and electoral politics (Bayly, 2001; Berenschot & Aspinall, 2021). In Indonesia, adat hierarchies are increasingly mobilized in democratic politics, revived as markers of cultural authenticity, or reconfigured through legal pluralism. Theoretical debates thus provide a foundation for understanding Labuhanbatu’s indigenous hierarchies not as archaic remnants but as evolving systems embedded in both cultural logic and institutional frameworks.

Indonesian Context of Cultural Caste Systems

Indonesia’s remarkable cultural diversity has produced multiple forms of stratification that scholars describe as “caste-like,” though each case reflects its own historical and cultural logic. These systems are not uniform but reveal how localized traditions of hierarchy intersect with broader processes of religion, politics, and colonial encounters. Examining these cases provides a comparative lens to situate the hierarchies of Labuhanbatu’s indigenous communities within Indonesia’s wider patterns of stratification.

The Balinese *Catur Wangsa* is perhaps the most studied. Comprising Brahmana, Ksatria, Waisya, and Sudra, this hierarchy has long been likened to Indian caste systems. Yet recent studies highlight how Balinese communities reinterpret these categories, particularly in the sphere of marriage and ritual obligations (Sartini, 2020). Younger generations increasingly challenge strict endogamy rules, and religious discourses recast *Catur Warna* as an ethical rather than hereditary principle (Sulastri, 2021). This demonstrates how hierarchies persist through symbolic and ritual forms while adapting to egalitarian discourses.

In South Sulawesi, the Bugis–Makassar social order historically divided society into *arung* (nobility), *to maradeka* (freemen), and *ata* (slaves). Aristocracy was legitimized through genealogy, titles, and marriage rules, which continue to influence social interaction and politics today (Asri, 2022). Contemporary studies note that aristocratic identity remains a resource in patronage politics, even as education and migration open alternative mobility paths (Burhanuddin, 2020). This suggests that nobility has not disappeared but has been hybridized with modern markers of status.

The Javanese *priyayi* represent another variant of Indonesian hierarchy. Unlike rigid caste divisions, the *priyayi* identity operates as a status culture,

expressed through refined speech levels, bureaucratic ethos, and cultural practices (Geertz, 1960). Modern studies argue that *priyayi* ideals remain influential in literature and governance, shaping middle-class aspirations and bureaucratic norms (Haryanto, 2023; Wulandari, 2021). This shows how symbolic status continues to structure everyday life, even as hereditary closure weakens.

Turning to Sumatra, hierarchies manifest in both aristocratic traditions and adat institutions. In Aceh, the *uleebalang* held hereditary authority, while in Minangkabau, matrilineal kinship shaped property and leadership. In North Sumatra, particularly in Labuhanbatu, stratification emerges from the coexistence of Mandailing, Angkola, Batak, and Melayu communities. Here, adat leadership (*raja adat* or *pemangku adat*) still plays a central role in regulating rituals, marriage alliances, and land use (Nasution, 2020). Local genealogical prestige, whether from clan (*marga*) lineage or Malay aristocratic descent, confers authority and legitimacy.

Colonialism intensified these dynamics. Dutch plantation expansion in Labuhanbatu during the late 19th and early 20th centuries introduced a new layer of stratification by importing Javanese, Tamil, and Chinese laborers, while positioning indigenous elites as intermediaries (Stoler, 1995; Lindblad, 2019). This dual process crystallized adat-based authority within colonial governance and reinforced distinctions between “locals” and “migrants.” Even today, adat leaders in Labuhanbatu are seen as custodians of tradition and arbiters of disputes, reflecting both historical continuity and adaptation to new contexts.

Recent scholarship emphasizes that adat in Labuhanbatu is neither static nor obsolete. Instead, it continues to mediate social life in ways that connect the past to the present. For example, adat rules about marriage and dowry persist, but are renegotiated in urbanized contexts where inter-ethnic unions are common. Similarly, adat leaders engage not only in ritual affairs but also in local politics, where genealogical legitimacy intersects with electoral competition (Nasution, 2020). This underscores the continuing relevance of cultural caste systems in shaping identity and power.

In summary, Indonesia’s local hierarchies, whether in Bali, Bugis, Java, or Labuhanbatu, demonstrate both continuity and adaptability. They share common mechanisms: genealogy as a marker of legitimacy, marriage as a key site of reproduction, and political institutions as arenas of negotiation. Yet each context also reveals unique historical trajectories. For Labuhanbatu, the interweaving of adat, colonial legacies, and post-Reformasi politics positions it as a critical case for analyzing how caste-like systems endure and transform in modern Indonesia.

Continuity and Transformation in the Modern Era

The endurance of caste-like systems in Indonesia, including those among the indigenous communities of Labuhanbatu, highlights the complex interplay between tradition and modernity. Rather than being static relics of the past, these systems demonstrate a remarkable ability to adapt and transform in response to social, political, and economic change. Continuity is evident in the persistence of genealogical legitimacy, ritual obligations, and adat authority, while transformation is

visible in how these elements are reinterpreted in relation to education, marriage, politics, and the economy.

Education has become one of the most significant arenas where traditional stratification interacts with modern institutions. Historically, hereditary privilege determined access to knowledge and leadership, but in contemporary Indonesia, education is widely regarded as the principal pathway to mobility. Yet, this apparent democratization of opportunity often reproduces inequality through assortative marriage. Recent studies show that educational homogamy, where individuals marry partners with similar educational attainment, reinforces household income inequality (Nurhayati & Putri, 2024; Kujundzic, 2025). In Labuhanbatu, where clan and adat affiliation remain strong, educational homogamy often overlaps with status-conscious marriage choices, creating layered forms of stratification that combine traditional prestige with modern credentials.

Marriage norms further illustrate both continuity and change. In many Indonesian adat communities, including Labuhanbatu, marriage is not merely a personal union but a social alliance with implications for kinship and resource distribution. Dowry systems, clan exogamy, and expectations of marrying within certain genealogical or status groups remain influential (Nasution, 2020). However, urbanization, inter-ethnic interaction, and shifting gender norms have opened spaces for renegotiating these practices. For example, intermarriages that once challenged adat taboos are now increasingly accepted, albeit with symbolic negotiations such as additional ritual obligations or modified bridewealth payments. Such cases illustrate how adat adapts to social change without abandoning its underlying logic of boundary maintenance.

In the political sphere, traditional hierarchies have found new expression in the era of democratization and decentralization. Across Indonesia, cultural identities and aristocratic lineages are often mobilized in electoral politics (Aspinall & Berenschot, 2019). In Labuhanbatu, adat leaders continue to act as community representatives, leveraging genealogical legitimacy to build political support. This indicates continuity in the symbolic authority of adat figures, while transformation lies in their engagement with modern electoral institutions. Identity politics, particularly the invocation of indigenous heritage, has become a double-edged sword: it can promote cultural recognition and representation but also risks reinforcing exclusivity and polarization (Danu et al., 2024).

The economic domain also reveals important dynamics. On one hand, traditional authority continues to influence access to land and local resources, with adat leaders mediating land disputes and resource allocation (Nasution, 2020). On the other hand, integration into global markets and the decline of plantation dominance have shifted the basis of economic power. The World Bank (2024) notes that while poverty in Indonesia has declined, inequality remains significant, particularly in rural regions. In Labuhanbatu, economic transformation has diversified livelihoods, yet cultural caste systems still shape opportunities by structuring social networks and determining who controls key resources.

What emerges is a picture of selective continuity and adaptive transformation. Genealogical prestige, adat authority, and ritual obligation remain vital for community identity and cohesion. Yet their meanings and practical expressions are continuously redefined by education, migration, democratization, and economic change. This challenges earlier modernization theories that predicted the inevitable decline of caste-like systems. Instead, these systems endure by integrating with modern institutions, demonstrating resilience and flexibility.

For Labuhanbatu, continuity is expressed in the enduring respect for adat leaders, clan-based authority, and ritual practices. Transformation, however, is evident in the hybridization of status markers, where educational attainment and political participation are layered upon hereditary prestige. This dynamic suggests that rather than disappearing, cultural caste systems in Indonesia continue to shape inequality, social mobility, and community cohesion in the twenty-first century.

METHOD

This research employs a qualitative research design with elements of historical and ethnographic approaches. The focus is on understanding the continuity and transformation of cultural caste systems within the indigenous communities of Labuhanbatu Regency, North Sumatra. Since caste-like stratification is embedded in local traditions, rituals, and oral histories, qualitative approaches allow for the exploration of meanings, practices, and experiences as narrated by community members.

At the same time, historical analysis is required to trace the evolution of these systems from the pre-colonial era, through Dutch colonialism and post-independence development, into the Reformasi period. Archival documents, colonial records, and local manuscripts will therefore complement ethnographic fieldwork, producing a multi-layered account of continuity and change.

This study is thus situated within the interpretive paradigm, aiming to understand how communities construct and reconstruct their social hierarchies across time and in response to modernization, globalization, and political transformation.

Research Location and Context

The field site for this research is Labuhanbatu Regency, North Sumatra, an area characterized by cultural diversity and a history of plantation economies. Labuhanbatu is home to multiple indigenous groups, primarily Mandailing, Angkola, Batak, and Melayu, whose social organization is heavily influenced by adat traditions. These communities maintain ritual and genealogical distinctions, with adat leaders (*raja adat*, *pemangku adat*) playing crucial roles in social regulation.

Historically, Labuhanbatu was deeply integrated into the Dutch colonial plantation system, which attracted Javanese, Tamil, and Chinese migrants while reinforcing the authority of local elites (Stoler, 1995; Lindblad, 2019). Today, the region reflects both indigenous continuity and multi-ethnic transformation, making it a strategic site to examine the resilience and reconfiguration of cultural caste systems.

Population and Unit of Analysis

The population of this study consists of indigenous communities in Labuhanbatu who continue to practice adat-based forms of stratification. These communities preserve hierarchical traditions rooted in genealogy, ritual obligations, and symbolic authority, making them a rich context for examining the persistence of caste-like systems. Within this setting, the research focuses not only on the collective identity of the masyarakat adat but also on how various actors sustain and reinterpret these structures in everyday life.

The unit of analysis is centered on cultural practices and the ways they are reproduced or transformed across generations. Particular attention is given to adat leaders and elders who embody genealogical legitimacy and ritual authority; households that regulate marriage patterns, dowry, and kinship alliances; and local politicians or elites who strategically mobilize adat identity in contemporary political arenas. At the same time, the perspectives of younger generations are crucial, as they negotiate between inherited status and the demands of modern institutions such as education, work, and migration. Together, these units of analysis allow for a comprehensive understanding of continuity and transformation within Labuhanbatu's cultural caste systems.

Data Collection Methods

Data collection in this study will primarily rely on in-depth interviews designed to capture the voices of adat leaders, elders, and household representatives. Semi-structured interviews will provide flexibility to explore key themes such as genealogical legitimacy, marriage practices, educational experiences, political mobilization, and perceptions of social hierarchy. This method allows participants to express their perspectives in their own terms while giving the researcher the opportunity to probe deeper into issues of continuity and transformation within Labuhanbatu's cultural caste systems.

In addition to individual interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs) will be organized with youth groups and women's associations. These sessions will provide a platform for generational and gendered perspectives to emerge, especially regarding how younger members of the community and women experience, challenge, or adapt adat norms. FGDs are expected to reveal differences and similarities between collective interpretations and individual narratives, offering a broader understanding of how cultural caste systems are negotiated in daily life.

The study also employs participant observation to gain first-hand insights into social interactions and rituals that reinforce or reinterpret hierarchy. By attending adat ceremonies such as weddings, funerals, and land-related rituals, the researcher will observe the use of symbols, language, and spatial arrangements that reflect stratification. Detailed field notes will document how hierarchy is enacted in public life, complementing the interview data with contextualized observations of practice.

Finally, document and archival research will enrich the fieldwork by tracing the historical trajectory of caste-like systems in Labuhanbatu. Colonial plantation records,

Dutch administrative reports, and local manuscripts will be reviewed to identify how adat leadership was integrated into broader political and economic structures. Contemporary documents such as adat codes, government regulations, newspapers, and policy papers on adat recognition will also be analyzed. This triangulation of archival and ethnographic data ensures a comprehensive picture of both the historical continuity and modern transformations of Labuhanbatu's cultural caste systems.

Data Analysis

The data analysis in this study will employ thematic analysis informed by grounded theory principles. All interviews, field notes, and documents will be transcribed, coded, and categorized into themes that reflect the research focus on continuity, transformation, and implications of cultural caste systems. To manage and systematize this process, qualitative analysis software such as NVivo or Atlas.ti may be used, enabling the identification of recurring patterns and the construction of a coherent narrative from diverse data sources.

Three levels of analysis will guide the interpretation. The historical analysis will trace the evolution of cultural caste systems in Labuhanbatu from the pre-colonial period, through Dutch colonialism, and into the post-Reformasi era. The cultural analysis will explore symbolic boundaries, rituals, and identity markers that sustain or reshape stratification within adat communities. Meanwhile, the political-economic analysis will examine how these caste-like systems intersect with inequality, access to resources, and the use of adat identity in political mobilization. Together, these levels of analysis ensure that the study captures both diachronic and synchronic dimensions of stratification.

To enhance the credibility and validity of findings, the research will apply triangulation by cross-checking data from interviews, participant observation, and archival sources. This approach reduces bias and strengthens the reliability of interpretations. In addition, member-checking will be conducted, allowing participants to review and validate preliminary findings. This not only ensures accuracy but also respects the voices of adat communities, ensuring their perspectives are authentically represented in the study.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Continuity of Traditional Cultural Caste Systems in Labuhanbatu

Field findings indicate that although Indonesia no longer formally recognizes hereditary caste systems as legal social institutions, cultural hierarchies rooted in customary (adat) traditions continue to influence everyday life among indigenous communities in Labuhanbatu Regency. Interviews with customary leaders (raja adat), village elders, and members of Mandailing, Melayu, and Batak communities revealed that genealogical lineage remains an important source of symbolic legitimacy. Individuals descending from historically respected clans continue to receive preferential recognition during customary ceremonies, conflict mediation, and community decision-making. Rather than functioning as rigid legal categories, these

hereditary distinctions now operate as symbolic social capital that shapes authority and leadership. These findings support Weber's (1978) argument that status groups maintain social closure through inherited prestige rather than economic ownership alone. Likewise, Bourdieu (1986) argues that symbolic capital derived from lineage continues to reproduce social recognition across generations even under conditions of modernization.

The persistence of adat authority is particularly visible during traditional ceremonies such as weddings, inheritance settlements, and ritual gatherings. Participant observation showed that ritual seating arrangements, ceremonial speech, and the allocation of customary responsibilities remain structured according to genealogical status. Senior adat figures occupy central ritual positions, while younger generations acknowledge customary authority even when they personally advocate more egalitarian social values. Similar observations were reported by Nasution (2020), who found that adat leadership in North Sumatra continues to function as a legitimate institution for regulating customary affairs. Furthermore, Houben (2021) argues that colonial and post-colonial social structures have enabled customary elites to preserve symbolic authority despite democratic reforms.

Transformation of Cultural Hierarchy

Despite the continuity of customary hierarchy, the research revealed significant transformations driven by modernization, urbanization, and democratization. Informants consistently stated that educational attainment has become the most influential indicator of social prestige among younger generations. University graduates, civil servants, entrepreneurs, and professionals often receive greater recognition than individuals possessing hereditary prestige alone. Consequently, educational capital increasingly complements—or even surpasses—traditional genealogical authority. These findings are consistent with Bourdieu's (1986) concept that educational capital functions as a new mechanism for social reproduction. Similarly, Kujundzic (2025) demonstrates that educational attainment increasingly shapes household social status in developing countries, including Indonesia.

Marriage practices also demonstrate substantial transformation. Interviews with young adults revealed that inter-ethnic marriages between Mandailing, Batak, Melayu, and Javanese families have become increasingly common. Although customary negotiations remain important, family acceptance now depends more heavily upon educational background, economic stability, and religious compatibility than solely upon hereditary status. This finding confirms Sartini's (2020) study on inter-caste marriage in Bali, which concluded that modernization encourages more flexible interpretations of customary hierarchy. It also supports Lamont and Molnár's (2002) boundary theory, suggesting that symbolic social boundaries are continuously negotiated rather than permanently fixed.

Implications for Social Identity and Inequality

The findings demonstrate that cultural caste systems continue to shape social identity among indigenous communities. Older participants strongly identified themselves through clan affiliation (*marga*), *adat* lineage, and customary responsibilities. Conversely, younger generations increasingly combine hereditary identity with educational achievement and professional success. This hybrid identity reflects the coexistence of traditional cultural values and modern social mobility. Wulandari (2021) similarly observed that symbolic status continues to influence cultural identity in contemporary Javanese society, despite the weakening of hereditary hierarchy. Moreover, Houben (2021) argues that colonial sociocultural structures continue to influence identity formation in post-colonial Indonesia.

Although hereditary privilege no longer determines formal political or economic rights, inequality remains visible through differential access to customary authority and influential social networks. Families occupying historically respected positions continue to exercise greater influence in local governance and customary decision-making. These findings support Aspinall and Berenschot (2019), who argue that local elites frequently mobilize traditional legitimacy within democratic political institutions. Likewise, Danu et al. (2024) explain that identity politics in post-Reformasi Indonesia often revitalizes traditional authority as a source of political legitimacy.

Implications for Social Cohesion

The study further reveals that customary hierarchy contributes not only to inequality but also to social cohesion. *Adat* institutions continue to function as mechanisms for conflict resolution, cultural preservation, and community solidarity. Traditional leaders mediate disputes concerning inheritance, marriage, and land ownership before cases reach formal legal institutions. These findings support Nasution (2020), who concluded that *adat* leadership remains central to maintaining social harmony in North Sumatra. Similarly, Burhanuddin (2020) found that traditional aristocratic institutions continue to reinforce community integration despite changing political contexts.

Overall, the findings suggest that cultural caste systems in Labuhanbatu have undergone adaptive transformation rather than disappearance. Genealogical prestige remains culturally significant, but education, professional achievement, and democratic participation increasingly determine social mobility. This conclusion aligns with Weber's (1978) theory of status groups, Bourdieu's (1986) concept of symbolic capital, and Houben's (2021) analysis of the persistence of colonial social structures in contemporary Indonesia.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that cultural caste systems within the indigenous communities of Labuhanbatu have not disappeared but have undergone adaptive transformation in response to modernization, democratization, and globalization. Traditional hierarchies based on genealogy, *adat* leadership, and ritual obligations continue to function as important sources of symbolic legitimacy, cultural identity, and

social cohesion. However, contemporary social mobility is increasingly influenced by educational attainment, professional achievement, economic capacity, and democratic participation, indicating a shift from hereditary privilege toward merit-based recognition. Although these transformations have reduced the rigidity of traditional stratification, customary institutions remain influential in regulating marriage, conflict resolution, political legitimacy, and community leadership. Consequently, the cultural caste system in Labuhanbatu represents a dynamic social institution that simultaneously preserves indigenous cultural heritage while adapting to contemporary societal changes, thereby continuing to shape social identity, patterns of inequality, and community cohesion in modern Indonesia.

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