

Storytelling of Benjor Coffee: A Social Portrait of the East Malang Community, Indonesia

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Abstract

This study examines the coffee plantation community in Benjor Village, Tumpang District, East Malang, which has rarely been the subject of academic inquiry. The main problem lies in the lack of historical documentation and socio-economic narratives that shape the identity of the local community. The research employs the historical method through the stages of heuristics, source criticism, interpretation, and historiography, combined with an oral history and storytelling approach. The findings reveal that coffee functions not only as an economic commodity but also as a force shaping social structures, cultural values, and the collective identity of the community transmitted across generations. Preservation efforts through sustainable farming practices and the strengthening of village institutions have the potential to support the development of creative economies and history-based cultural tourism.

Keywords: *Benjor Coffee; Local History; Storytelling; Social Structure; Cultural Tourism*

Introduction

In Indonesia, coffee is not merely an economic commodity but also reflects the social and cultural dimensions of society. Life around coffee plantations shapes community identity, strengthens social networks, and serves as a primary livelihood, making plantation communities a relevant subject of

multidisciplinary inquiry, ranging from sociology to ecology (Purnomo, 2021; Hasnida et al., 2021; Nilla Pradita et al., 2024).

Sociological and anthropological perspectives reveal distinctive social configurations within these communities, encompassing farmer–landowner relations, sharecropping systems, and women’s economic participation. Harvest rituals and collective labor practices further demonstrate coffee’s symbolic role as cultural heritage (Purnomo, 2021).

From an economic standpoint, coffee farmers remain vulnerable to price volatility and dependence on middlemen. Strategies to enhance welfare include strengthening cooperatives, adopting fair trade certification, and improving competitiveness in global markets (Hasnida et al., 2021). Ecological perspectives, meanwhile, underscore the urgency of sustainable practices such as agroforestry and organic farming to mitigate climate change and curb environmental degradation linked to land expansion (Nilla Pradita et al., 2024).

This study contributes novelty through a historical approach employing oral history and storytelling to reconstruct the lived experiences of coffee plantation communities in Benjor Village, Tumpang District, East Malang. In contrast to prior research centered on socio-economic or ecological dimensions, this work foregrounds collective narratives and intergenerational memory. By situating Benjor, a rarely studied community at the core of analysis, the study provides an original contribution to the scholarship on coffee plantations in Indonesia. Specifically, it aims to map the social, economic, and cultural conditions shaping the Benjor community.

Materials and Methods

This study employs the historical method as outlined by Gottschalk (1986) and Kuntowijoyo (2003), further refined in contemporary scholarship (Izzah et al., 2018; 2021; 2022; 2024). The main stages include object selection, heuristics, source criticism, interpretation, and historiography. The research focuses on the coffee plantation community of Benjor Village, Tumpang District, Malang Regency, with data collected through observation, participation, and in-depth interviews with key informants, including coffee farmers, community leaders, agricultural officers, and representatives of State Forestry Public Corporation (Perum Perhutani).

Data collection was also supported by focus group discussions (FGDs) and secondary sources drawn from scientific publications and government reports. All data were subjected to rigorous source criticism to ensure authenticity and credibility prior to interpretation through analysis and synthesis. This process produced a historiographical reconstruction that moves beyond linear description toward collective narratives, framed through oral history (Donald A. Ritchie, 2014) and storytelling (Gottschall, 2012).

In contrast to promotional strategies based on social media platforms such as Instagram Live (Nabila Cahyani Putri et al., 2024), TikTok (Mae Manah et al., 2024), or narrative marketing (Anggun Wijayanti, 2024), this study emphasizes academic validity combined with the narrative strength of lived experiences. Following Gottschall’s (2012) argument that humans possess a natural affinity for stories, the research aims to construct narratives that are not only empirically grounded and academically robust but also capture the emotional, social, and cultural dimensions of the Benjor coffee plantation community.

Results

The History of Coffee in East Malang

The entry of coffee to East Malang, particularly on the slopes of the Tengger Mountains, was closely tied to the *cultuurstelsel* policy imposed by the Dutch colonial administration in 1830. This policy exploited the fertile soils of Java for the cultivation of export commodities, notably coffee, which held high value in European markets (Ricklefs, 2008). Tumpang and its surrounding areas, with their favorable climate and elevation, became strategic sites for coffee plantation expansion. The dissemination of coffee cultivation to Benjor Village involved the mobilization (but often coercion) of both local residents and migrant laborers, who were compelled to plant coffee as part of colonial obligations. This process established a new agrarian economy oriented toward commercial production, while simultaneously reshaping village social structures. Coffee cultivation skills were transmitted across generations, becoming a fundamental component of local community identity (Boomgaard, 2013).

Beyond colonial domination, the presence of coffee plantations also transformed village spatial organization, irrigation systems, and settlement patterns. Power relations were often marked by exploitation, reflecting the asymmetry between colonial authorities and local farmers. Nevertheless, the legacy was not entirely negative. Plantation infrastructure, architectural remains, and local oral traditions now serve as historical evidence that underpins contemporary initiatives in coffee tourism, cultural reflection, and the preservation of communal identity in East Malang (Stoler, 2002).

The Involvement of the Dutch Colonial Government and European Entrepreneurs in the Coffee Culture of the Dutch East Indies

The Coffee Cultivation System (*koffiecultuur*) emerged from the *cultuurstelsel* introduced in 1830 by Governor-General Johannes van den Bosch. Designed to offset the Dutch crown's fiscal deficit following European wars, the policy required villagers to cultivate export crops, including coffee, on a portion of their land. Harvests were surrendered to the colonial government for overseas trade. Java, particularly upland regions such as the Tengger slopes, became the primary locus of cultivation due to favorable agroecological conditions (Elson, 1994).

The colonial administration collaborated with European entrepreneurs and local elites to oversee plantation operations. Private companies were granted extensive land concessions and access to cheap labor, while local farmers were coerced into arduous work with little compensation. This arrangement reinforced an exploitative economy that enriched the Dutch state and European capitalists but imposed severe burdens on rural communities. Liberal critics in the Netherlands denounced the system for violating basic human rights and exacerbating poverty (Bosma, 2007; Fasseur, 1992).

Although widely condemned as oppressive, the *cultuurstelsel* left a more complex legacy. Some studies note limited positive outcomes, including the transfer of agricultural skills, the emergence of commercialized rural economies, and the construction of infrastructure such as roads, bridges, and transport networks that were eventually utilized by local populations (Ricklefs, 2008). In certain contexts, technical support from the colonial government also contributed to relative economic stability, particularly when surplus harvests were permitted for sale in local markets (Elson, 1994; Fasseur, 1992). Thus, societal responses to the *koffiecultuur* were not uniform but contingent upon local conditions, modes of implementation, and the mediating role of indigenous elites in negotiating with colonial structures.

The Origins of Benjor, Geographical and Demographic Conditions, and Social Structure

The toponym *Benjor* is believed to derive from *bambu selonjor*, referring to a long bamboo pipeline traditionally used by villagers to channel water from the Coban Cinde spring. Beyond serving agricultural irrigation, this system also provided farmers with a natural source of drinking water while working in the fields. The practice, transmitted across generations, gave rise to the name “Benjor,” which endures as a marker of local identity, imbued with historical and cultural significance.

Geographically, Benjor is situated in the northeastern part of Tumpang District, Malang Regency, at the foothills of the Tengger Mountains. Covering an area of 1,027.08 hectares, approximately 14.25% of the district’s total, Benjor is the largest village within Tumpang (Kecamatan Tumpang Dalam Angka, 2024). Its hilly terrain, cool climate, and fertile soils render the area highly suitable for agricultural and plantation development. Patterns of migration, particularly during the colonial period, shaped Benjor into a permanent agrarian community, adaptive to mountainous environments and deeply rooted in cooperative traditions.

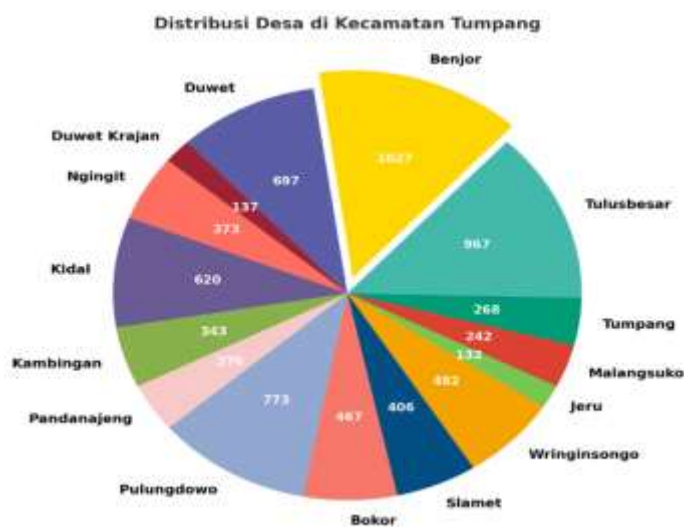


Figure 1. Villages in Tumpang District
Source: Kecamatan Tumpang Dalam Angka, 2024

In demographic and social terms, Benjor consists of two *Rukun Warga* (neighborhood units) and 14 *Rukun Tetangga* (smaller administrative units), with a population of 2,228 in 2023. This figure includes 1,160 men and 1,068 women, yielding a sex ratio of 108.61, which indicates a predominance of men in agricultural production. Population density is relatively low, at 216.93 persons per km², reflecting the village’s extensive land area. Religious life is highly homogeneous, with 2,225 residents adhering to Islam. One mosque and 14 *musholla* serve not only as centers of worship but also as arenas of social interaction and informal education (Kecamatan Tumpang Dalam Angka, 2024).



Figure 2. Number of Population in Benjor Village in 2023
Source: Kecamatan Tumpang Dalam Angka, 2024

Agricultural Patterns and Economic Dynamics of the Benjor Village Community

The agricultural system in Benjor capitalizes on its highland geography, characterized by dry and steep terrain that, since the Dutch colonial *cultuurstelsel*, has been dedicated to coffee cultivation. Arabica coffee remains the primary commodity, complemented by other perennials such as clove and secondary crops. With the rising demand for specialty coffee, some farmers have adopted environmentally friendly and organic practices. In addition, horticultural crops, including chili, cabbage, and spinach, are cultivated to meet household subsistence needs while supplying local markets. The agricultural sector of Tumpang District, including Benjor, contributed significantly to Malang Regency's GDP, accounting for 14.60% in 2023 (Kecamatan Tumpang Dalam Angka, 2024).

Agriculture in Benjor remains largely family-based, with labor organized around household members and close social networks. Gendered divisions of labor are evident: men predominantly engage in land preparation and crop maintenance, while women play central roles in post-harvest processing, such as drying and sorting coffee beans. Marketing of agricultural produce is still largely mediated by middlemen, although village authorities have promoted farmer institutional strengthening to enable more direct market access. This aligns with findings that cooperative development, the adoption of sustainable practices, and diversification of coffee products can enhance competitiveness and economic resilience in highland farming communities (Murdaningsih & Hutubessy, 2021; Pradita et al., 2024). These dynamics illustrate that agriculture in Benjor functions not only as the foundation of the local economy but also as an enduring pillar of the community's social identity.

The History of Coffee in Tradition and Collective Memory: Values that Shape Community Life

Coffee cultivation on the slopes of Tengger, including Benjor Village, has shaped not only the local economy but also the community's socio-cultural identity. Since the era of the Cultivation System, farmers' narratives of maintaining plantations, marketing harvests, and transmitting oral traditions across generations have constituted a collective memory that reinforces communal solidarity (Assmann, 2011). Values of mutual cooperation, perseverance, and communal cohesion are embedded in farming practices and coffee harvest rituals, where social interaction functions not merely as part of production but as a mechanism for sustaining networks and social stability (Geertz, 1963).

Beyond its economic role, coffee serves as a cultural symbol in everyday life. Its presence in religious ceremonies and social gatherings signifies respect and fosters inter-communal bonds. Coffee income sustains household needs, from education and healthcare to small-scale entrepreneurial ventures (Boomgaard, 2013). Today, this collective memory is rearticulated through new initiatives such as local coffee branding and digital promotion driven by younger generations. Such transformations demonstrate that coffee heritage is not only preserved but also mobilized as a resource for socio-economic innovation and local identity formation, supporting the development of educational tourism and the creative economy (Narotzky, 2004).

Storytelling as Legacy: Village Tales, Plantation Workers' Experiences, and Coffee Legends

Intergenerational storytelling in Benjor Village, on the slopes of the Tengger Mountains, constitutes an element of intangible cultural heritage that reinforces communal identity. Folktales on the origins of coffee are often entwined with local myths imparting values of honesty, diligence, and modesty. Narratives of elder plantation workers, ranging from experiences under the Cultivation System to cooperative practices in the post-independence era, form part of the community's collective memory. Such traditions function not merely as entertainment but as symbolic communication that consolidates solidarity and ensures social continuity (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 2014).

Stories of local figures, from successful farmers to religious leaders, illustrate how role models embody adaptation and innovation. Today, these oral traditions are rearticulated through digital media, as younger generations transform them into documentaries, social media content, and other creative outputs. This transformation underscores that coffee-related narratives extend beyond preserving the past; they operate as social capital for fostering creative economies and cultural tourism. In this sense, coffee storytelling in Benjor exemplifies the continuity between tradition, local identity, and contemporary development strategies (Smith & Robinson, 2006).

Storytelling as a Medium for Shaping Plantation Community Identity and Transmitting Local History

Storytelling traditions occupy a central position in shaping the identity of plantation communities on the Tengger slopes, including Benjor Village, Tumpang District. Through oral practices, communities transmit historical experiences while embedding values and norms that construct their social identity. Narratives of the colonial period, struggles to cultivate coffee land, and socio-political changes after the Reformasi are reproduced in communal spaces such as harvest festivals, religious gatherings, and village meetings. These narratives reinforce communal attachment to land and local history, serving as intergenerational pedagogical tools (Assmann, 2011; Putri & Rahman, 2021).

Benjor's local identity is also deeply rooted in Tengger cultural traditions, which emphasize harmony with nature, reverence for ancestors, and *gotong royong* as the foundation of social interaction. Within this framework, storytelling not only conveys historical memory but also preserves spiritual agrarian practices such as *sedekah bumi* rituals and prohibitions against cutting coffee trees without specific prayers. Such practices demonstrate the integration of ecology, spirituality, and agrarian livelihoods, positioning oral narratives as instruments of cultural value preservation (Bachtar, 2013; Susanto & Kurniawan, 2022).

As a living archive, community narratives record the trajectory of social transformation from the *cultuurstelsel* to the era of village autonomy. Stories of coffee farmers and coffee-related myths not only sustain collective memory but also constitute the foundation of a new identity, shifting from subsistence farmers to actors within a coffee-based creative economy. In the context of modernization and

globalization, storytelling functions as both cultural resistance and social capital that strengthens community participation in development grounded in local history and culture (Somers, 1994).

Furthermore, storytelling has recently been incorporated into local history preservation programs through collaborations between village authorities, schools, and youth communities. Narratives about coffee and Benjor's history are now documented in village books, coffee festivals, and digital platforms, including social media and documentary films. These innovations highlight that oral traditions are not static heritage but dynamic instruments of sustainable development that integrate economic, historical, and spiritual dimensions of community life. Thus, storytelling emerges as a strategic medium for safeguarding local identity while advancing cultural ecotourism in the Tengger region (Smith & Robinson, 2006; Handayani & Lubis, 2024).

Integrating Area Conservation with the Historical Heritage of Benjor Coffee

The preservation of coffee plantation landscapes and histories in Benjor Village requires an integrative approach that unites ecological, historical, and sociocultural dimensions. As a settlement with agrarian legacies dating back to the colonial era, coffee functions not merely as an economic commodity but as an intrinsic element of communal identity. Preservation efforts can be initiated through systematic documentation of local histories using oral history methods, archival research, and participatory studies, ensuring that collective memory remains a living source of education and a foundation for narrative-based tourism development. Coffee festivals, family archives, and the testimonies of elder farmers serve as vehicles to reinforce local pride and cultural values (Hakim, 2021).

Sustaining the coffee agroecosystem further requires the adoption of environmentally sound practices, the protection of local varieties, and the regulation of land-use conversion. Agroforestry systems and origin-based certification represent strategic mechanisms to strengthen competitiveness and establish Benjor coffee as a historically embedded specialty product (Murdaningsih & Hutubessy, 2021). Institutional support at the village level is equally vital, for instance by incorporating coffee preservation into mid-term development plans (*RPJMDes*) and forming heritage preservation teams that engage academics, customary leaders, and youth. Collaboration with universities and the application of geoinformation technologies in agro-tourism initiatives have proven effective in enhancing community capacity to manage agrarian heritage sustainably. In this way, Benjor Village holds the potential to safeguard its past while simultaneously constructing a sustainable future grounded in historical legacy and local resources.



Figure 3. Heri, one of coffee farmers in Benjor Village – giving a guidance to some students in 2025
Source: Research Documentation



Figure 4. The Researcher – in the “Kopi Rakyat” Plantation in Benjor Village in 2025
Source: Research Documentation

Conclusion

Benjor’s coffee storytelling functions as a living archive that documents the socio-economic trajectory of East Malang from the *cultuurstelsel* era to the contemporary period. The introduction of coffee under colonial policy not only shaped a commercial agrarian economy but also left enduring legacies of cultivation skills, infrastructure, and patterns of social relations transmitted across generations. Situated in fertile highlands, Benjor evolved into an agrarian community that integrates farming practices with *gotong royong*, spirituality, and Tengger cultural identity. Oral traditions, ranging from narratives of coffee’s origins and plantation labor to stories of local figures, demonstrate the continuity between collective memory, social identity, and adaptive strategies in response to historical change. At present, storytelling extends beyond preserving the past; it constitutes social capital for creative economic innovation, cultural tourism, and the safeguarding of local values. Thus, Benjor’s coffee narratives reflect a complex socio-economic dynamic: from colonial exploitation to the strengthening of communal identity and the pursuit of sustainable development rooted in history and local wisdom.

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