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Kinship Innovation Model: Citizens' Responses to Protective Policies in the Indonesia-Timor Leste Border Area

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ABSTRACT

This study explores how COVID-19 mitigation policies trigger deviant adaptation among border residents. This article uses a qualitative approach with a case study research strategy. To ensure data representation, the author uses multiple relevant information sources and conducts in-depth, semi-structured interviews with informants aware of and involved in illegal economic activities, drawing on rational choice theory and anomie. Meanwhile, the study conducts internal validity, reliability, construct validity, and external validity tests to ensure research quality through a data-source triangulation strategy. The findings of this study elaborate on Merton's innovation in the context of rural communities in border regions of related countries, where illegal sociological-based economic activities not only maintain kinship solidarity but also serve as justifications for survival that transcend state authority. This article concludes that Haumeni Ana residents' kinship innovations respond to protectionist policies and weak state structures in peripheral areas. Addressing these structural problems requires strengthening the state apparatus and revitalizing border market governance to reflect residents' needs and characteristics.

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■ INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has prompted governments worldwide to implement strict migration and trade controls (CARREÑO et al., 2020), resulting in socioeconomic and political implications (Tisdell, 2020) and disruptions to trade routes for necessities (Schertzer & Woods, 2020). This situation has forced communities, both collectively and at the household level in urban areas, to adopt economic coping strategies to survive while still adhering to COVID-19 pandemic mitigation policies (Adesina-Uthman & Obaka, 2020). Conversely, the response of communities in the West Timor-Timor Leste border region has shown a different trend. This phenomenon shows that protectionist policies in the form of closing national borders have not only failed to anticipate their external impacts (Bieber, 2022), but have also triggered border communities to form informal networks of illegal cross-border trade (Kudejira, 2020), both for economic and social reasons (Rouillé et al., 2024).

Environmental changes, whether natural or driven by government policies, often prompt individuals or groups of residents to adopt deviant forms of adaptation. Such behavior reflects actors' rationality, in which ensuring their own survival becomes the primary objective. These high-risk actions are undertaken based on a cost-benefit calculation. Notably, the cognitive limitations of local residents do not hinder their ability to manipulate a new environment, an environment they perceive as an obstacle to their socio-economic activities, even when doing so requires violating state regulations or international law. When the drive for survival and sociological preferences align with the structure of the social environment, the natural conditions and the individual's ultimate goals converge, becoming integrated into the local entity. Over time, these individual adaptations evolve into collective deviant behavior. This form of solidarity not only violates social norms at a macro level but also transcends state authority, which often enforces regulations inconsistently in peripheral or border regions. The strain protective COVID-19 policies place on the socio-economic order, unsupported by state capacity to meet the needs of residents in border areas, has driven these populations to adopt collective, non-normative adaptive strategies. This adaptation manifests as illegal economic activity, which is viewed as the most advantageous option from both economic and sociological perspectives, thereby justifying these unlawful actions.

The phenomenon of deviant behavior due to COVID-19 has become a global phenomenon.

In Africa, for example, the closure of the South Africa-Zimbabwe border at Beitbridge forced local communities to increase the intensity of illegal trade to support their families' finances (Moyo, 2022). This was driven by weak state capacity and the poverty of border residents, which led to corrupt behavior (Dzawanda & Matsa, 2023). In Nigeria, a paradoxical relationship emerged in which syndicates gained the sympathy of victims and their families because they were seen as helping break the chain of poverty in their families (Okorie & Okeja, 2024). Elsewhere, the closure of the Colombia-Venezuela border led to collective non-normative behavior (Albornoz-Arias & Morffe Peraza, 2023). In Kalimantan, the closure of the Indonesia-Malaysia border, along with growing dependence on necessities, increased smuggling from Malaysia to the Badau sub-district (Bangun, 2023).

These academic studies share a commonality: poverty and disruptions in the supply chain of necessities are the primary drivers of transnational crime and a form of resistance against corrupt state officials. In this regard, this article empirically examines patterns of illegal trade on the Indonesia-Malaysia border, where the Haumeni Ana community in West Timor supplies various daily necessities to the people of Pasabe Sub-District, Timor-Leste.

Meanwhile, this article offers a new approach by constructing the causal logic of rational choice (Burns & Roszkowska, 2016) and anomie (Merton, 1938), which differ epistemologically. Rational choice theory uses an individualist methodology that treats individuals as the basis of study, with preferences and actions freely based on profit-loss calculations (Sher et al., 2022). In contrast, anomie theory tends to be structurally functionalist, where structural pressures can trigger deviant actions as people choose roles appropriate to certain situations as a product of institutionalized actions to achieve collective goals (Bódi et al., 2014). Merton's theory takes a functionalist perspective: when social regulations can no longer serve as a controlling instrument, some individuals or groups within a given entity act outside society's general norms (Ahsan, 2016).

This article synthesizes both theories through operational logic to understand residents' anomic behavior in peripheral areas. Borrowing Merton's idea, the cultural goals of the Haumeni Ana community are manifested in how kinship ties and solidarity with residents of the Pasabe Sub-District are maintained through socio-cultural and economic activities. However, in reality, protective policies as an institutionalized means have created structural tensions that prevent them from legally achieving their cultural goals. This tension has triggered local actors to engage in deviant adaptations outside of general societal norms. Actors in this article are defined not only at the micro level (individual actors) but also at the meso level, namely groups or residents who form anomic networks of illegal economic activity. The choice of deviant action in the form of innovation begins with individual decisions that, over time, become institutionalized at the meso level as collective behavior. As utility-maximizing actors, they treat innovation as the most profitable action, using non-normative means to exploit weaknesses in the local state structure. Their reasoning centers on covert resistance and their ability to negotiate with the local state apparatus.

The protective navigation of COVID-19 has resulted in a mutually negating structural tension between state authority and the socio-economic realities of citizens in border areas (Bieber, 2022). This reality began to manifest itself when state security apparatuses ceased to function as intended. Instead of safeguarding and controlling the circulation of citizens and goods, this street-level security bureaucracy has become part of illegal activities for the benefit of certain groups (Walder, 2026). Deviant actions, such as granting discretion and privatizing regulations that undermine law enforcement, ultimately stem from limited state capacity, including scarce facilities and resources, and unfavorable working conditions (Peeters & Campos, 2022). Furthermore, salaries that fail to guarantee welfare encourage state apparatuses to build patronage relationships with communities through informal market transactions (Widner, 1992, pp. 12–14).

In this study, the author assumes that protective policies without state-capacity support will create anomie as a precondition that triggers strain through a broken commodity supply chain and residents' sociocultural activities. This condition becomes a forum for rational-choice logic, which, through the confluence of economic and sociological interests, shapes moral and structure-agent preferences as a dialectical relationship between internalists and externalists (Herfeld, 2022). This anomie pressure triggers Haumeni Ana residents to carry out collective rational calculations that exceed the capacity of a state apparatus that has lost power over its peripheral spaces. When the official entrance to the State Cross-Border Post (*PLBN*) closes and changes the local environment, complying with state regulations sacrifices survival and damages cultural kinship. As utilitarian beings, sociologically based illegal economic activities are the most profitable option because they can guarantee survival while maintaining sociological solidarity. In

Merton's typology, residents' deviant adaptation is considered innovation, where reactive policies without adequate socialization ultimately create resistance, as residents ignore institutional means to maintain economic continuity and transnational kinship ties as their main consideration (Merton, 1938, p. 676). The imbalance between cultural goals and access to institutionalized means produces tension or strain, driving individual or group deviations by using the most efficient means while still interacting normally and adapting to society's norms (Ahsan, 2016). Theoretically, residents' rationality is not merely egoistic and materialistic; subjective sociological values, including altruism, also guide the decision-making process (Ogu, 2013).

In contemporary sociology (Ritzer & Smart, 2011), this situation facilitates deviations from collective citizen action. The black market's rent-seeking mechanisms for individuals and groups stem from the state's weak power in peripheral areas and the strong genealogical ties among residents. From here, illegal economic activity manifests at the lowest level of state structures, where agents consolidate into semi-structured micro-syndicalism. This shows that navigating the health emergency is intertwined with illegal socio-economic networks that the state failed to anticipate.

This study aims to uncover the reasoning and working methods of collective deviant adaptation of border residents to build a conceptual framework that the weak capacity of the state in implementing elitist policies has created opportunities as well as structural tensions based on utility calculations; it turns out that residents choose deviant actions as the best choice for socio-economic reasons during and after the mitigation of the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, this research question is: How does the kinship innovation model of Haumeni Ana residents function as a response to protective policies in the Indonesia-Timor Leste border area?

■ METHOD

Research Informants

This research involved nine purposively selected informants. They were directly or indirectly involved in and aware of illegal economic activity in Haumeni Ana Village, North Central Timor (TTU) Regency, Indonesia, which shares a land border with Pasabe Sub-District, Timor-Leste. Details are presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Informant codes and composition

No	Code	Age (year)	Profession	Category
1	P01	29	Odd-job worker	Regular performer
2	P02	43	Unemployed	Regular actors as well as networks
3	P03	35	Grocery store owner	The recipient actor
4	P04	55	Small-scale farmer and odd-job worker	Incidental perpetrator
5	A01	53	Government employees	Apparatus
6	A02	48	Government employees	Apparatus
7	A03	32	Government employees	Apparatus
8	A04	35	Government employees	Apparatus
9	A05	45	Government employees	Apparatus

This research issue is relatively sensitive, has legal consequences for the actors involved, and relates to both countries' sovereignty. Therefore, informants may withhold information that reflects empirical reality. Based on these considerations, the researcher implemented a confidentiality and anonymity protocol while maintaining the research code of ethics and objectivity (Kang & Hwang, 2023). After informants understood the research objectives and voluntarily agreed to be interviewed, the researcher stored their identity data separately from the interview transcripts. In this article, informants are referred to by code to protect their personal data from possible misuse by irresponsible parties, which could threaten their lives and careers. By using initials, informants, perpetrators, and local officials are

easily identified because, by tradition, the last letter must represent the family name. For the informants of the apparatus consisting of Bikomi Nilulat District staff, Haumeni Ana Village officials, one person each from the Indonesian and Timor-Leste security forces, and one ministry official in Timor-Leste, they were randomly disguised using the codes A01-A05. In contrast, the perpetrators of illegal activities were coded P01-P04.

Research Design and Approach

This research used a qualitative approach because it was the most appropriate for exploring informants' experiences and how they understand and interpret a phenomenon, to produce a new concept (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 15). As an empirical research approach, the choice of case study as a research strategy is the most appropriate choice to study contemporary phenomena in real-life reality (Rowley, 2002), in which, in this context, there is a phenomenon of deviant adaptation in the form of illegal economic activities based on kinship in the border area of West Timor-Timor Leste.

Data Collection

To obtain data that reflects empirical reality, the author uses relevant sources, including observations, interviews, information from various electronic media, and report documents from authorized institutions (Creswell, 2013, p. 97). To avoid biased interpretations, when exploring and interpreting the sociological economic reality in border areas, the researcher interprets it from the informant's perspective. For this reason, interviews are conducted in a semi-structured manner to allow informants to express their views freely about empirical phenomena based on their experiences.

Data Analysis and Validity

The collected field data were then processed using interactive procedures (Miles et al., 2014) and a data-source triangulation strategy (Creswell, 2013, pp. 246–253). To ensure this research contributes to theory development, the researcher addressed internal validity, reliability, and construct validity (Rowley, 2002). The thematic analysis process was carried out manually with the following academic considerations: 1) The field data and informants were relatively small, so that the researcher could easily maintain the consistency of the field data to develop the constructs of economic motives, sociological motives, structural problems, tribute, kinship innovation, and resistance to protectionist policies inductively, and 2) Interpretation of intonation and tone of voice, body language, and environmental context can only be interpreted by humans. Although there were only nine informants, the researcher determined that data saturation had been reached; furthermore, the research setting was micro-scale, with a sociologically homogeneous population, thereby ensuring that the informants were representative of the residents of Haumeni Ana.

Meanwhile, the data triangulation stage was carried out through the following steps: 1) Developing interview guidelines, 2) Identifying and determining informant codes, 3) Processing, grouping field data, and comparing the answers of each informant to ensure consistency of statements between informants. This stage is crucial for ensuring the objectivity of field data; therefore, the researcher consistently cross-references the responses and statements provided by the actors involved with those from state officials, and vice versa; 4) conducting construct tests to ensure the concepts that researchers build in this study are in accordance with the reality of empirical phenomena; and 5) compiling articles. However, this article has limitations because it uses only a qualitative approach and is conducted at the micro and meso scales.

■ RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Sociological, Economic, and Structural Problems: Kinship-Based Motives for Illegal Trade

The Haumeni Ana Village community has a traditional elite structure, Usif Atok-Bana, Lake-Sanak, which is autocratic. According to oral tradition, the local community was historically under the control of the Bikomi Kingdom and still maintains a genealogical relationship as siblings with the people of the Pasabe Sub-District in Timor-Leste. Geopolitically, the Bikomi Kingdom's position was strategic because it lay between the Wewiku-Wehali Kingdom in South Belu and the Oenam Kingdom around Mount Mutis. However, tracing the origins of the Atoni Meto ancestors faces two obstacles: the information comes only from oral traditions with various versions, and events from that time lack a clear chronological order (Nordholt, 1971). Nevertheless, this tradition of 'blood relatives' is still maintained and believed to this day, as shown by local community rituals that always involve the Pasabe Sub-District community.

The strong cohesion between the two communities has led to a gradual shift from previously legal social activities to illegal socio-economic ones, particularly after the establishment of protective COVID-19 navigation measures. Initially, when relatives from Timor-Leste brought several commodities for daily needs, residents in Pasabe Sub-District

discovered they were buying some of those commodities. This marked the beginning of a transformation in the sociological relationship, not only in socio-cultural relations but also in the emergence of economic motives. This illegal phenomenon was acknowledged by informant A01 when met in the courtyard of the Haumeni Ana Village office, who stated:

> *"Initially, smuggling goods to the neighboring area was done as a way of helping each other as relatives. At the time, they didn't even think this illegal activity could be a business opportunity. However, because residents here are generally unemployed and relatively poor, the illegal trade became an alternative way to supplement family income over time. The perpetrators continue to live normal lives, blending in with their neighbors like ordinary citizens."*

When confronted, informants involved in this illegal trade confirmed that sociological motivations drove cross-border smuggling. The informants' confessions emphasized that cross-border illegal activity does not arise in a vacuum. Sociological ties and solidarity, along with economic issues, serve not only to improve the economic well-being of local families but also to justify maintaining mechanical solidarity between citizens of two related countries. Socio-cultural values manifest in traditional rituals, as well as mourning or other family events, which become the momentum for smuggling various goods under the pretext of the event in question. From a socio-economic perspective, poverty and the lack of permanent employment, where the average local resident works as a small farmer, rural transportation driver, and construction worker with an unstable income and difficulty meeting family needs, drive them to commit cross-border crime. However, these illegal traders are not isolated citizens; they continue their normal routines, socializing and interacting with the community and local government officials as ordinary civilians.

Informant P03, a fairly influential resident and owner of a local grocery store, when met at his home, admitted that illegal economic activities were able to make a significant contribution to improving the family's economy, compared to working odd jobs as a construction worker, which was emphasized as follows:

> *" Outsiders will never understand the problems we face and will easily blame us. That is why most of the residents here have been involved in illegal trade, some regularly, some weekly, or depending on orders. Instead of working as a construction worker or a rural transportation driver, where the salary is low, you can deliver goods to neighboring areas and earn an average of one million rupiah per delivery. The more regularly you deliver goods, the higher your income. The goods they request vary from snacks, gasoline, kerosene, furniture, motorcycles, and electronics; basically, it depends on their demand. Because the demand is quite high, I opened a kiosk to store goods before they are delivered to Timor-Leste."*

The informants' testimonies demonstrate that, in *Atoni Meto* psychology, collective solidarity serves as a relational bond and ethical value between individuals and their entities. For them, collective solidarity must be shown through actions and sacrifices that demonstrate loyalty to their traditions and cultural norms. This genealogical intuition emerges instinctively when they face the same collective problem.

Despite being separated by national borders, they still uphold customary values and traditions as guidelines for life at the individual, family, and community levels. This steadfastness in maintaining sociological solidarity often clashes with the state's perspective on border areas, as informants from both countries' officials acknowledge. For indigenous entities, the state border area remains a space that shapes history and a living space that supports their lives. In contrast, for the state, the border area serves as the boundary of state sovereignty (Lara-Valencia & Laine, 2022). The perspective of local indigenous entities clearly contradicts state sovereignty, yet the facts on the ground show that actions exceeding state authority continue. This also confirms that bonds of sociological solidarity between relatives across countries transcend state authority, especially when they remain caught in structural problems. From a local socio-cultural perspective, the complexity of these intertwined sociological and economic problems stimulates social cohesion and builds solidarity through altruism and self-sacrifice (Wallace et al., 2023). This reasoning ultimately provides the most rational justification for why residents choose to engage in illegal economic activities, which both countries' governments are still struggling to contain.

Field investigations also revealed how sociological solidarity is intertwined with the perpetrators' economic motives. For men and heads of families, illegal economic activity plays a strategic role in meeting household needs. For housewives, however, this illegal activity serves only as supplemental income, as they typically smuggle women's necessities. School-aged perpetrators engage in this illegal activity

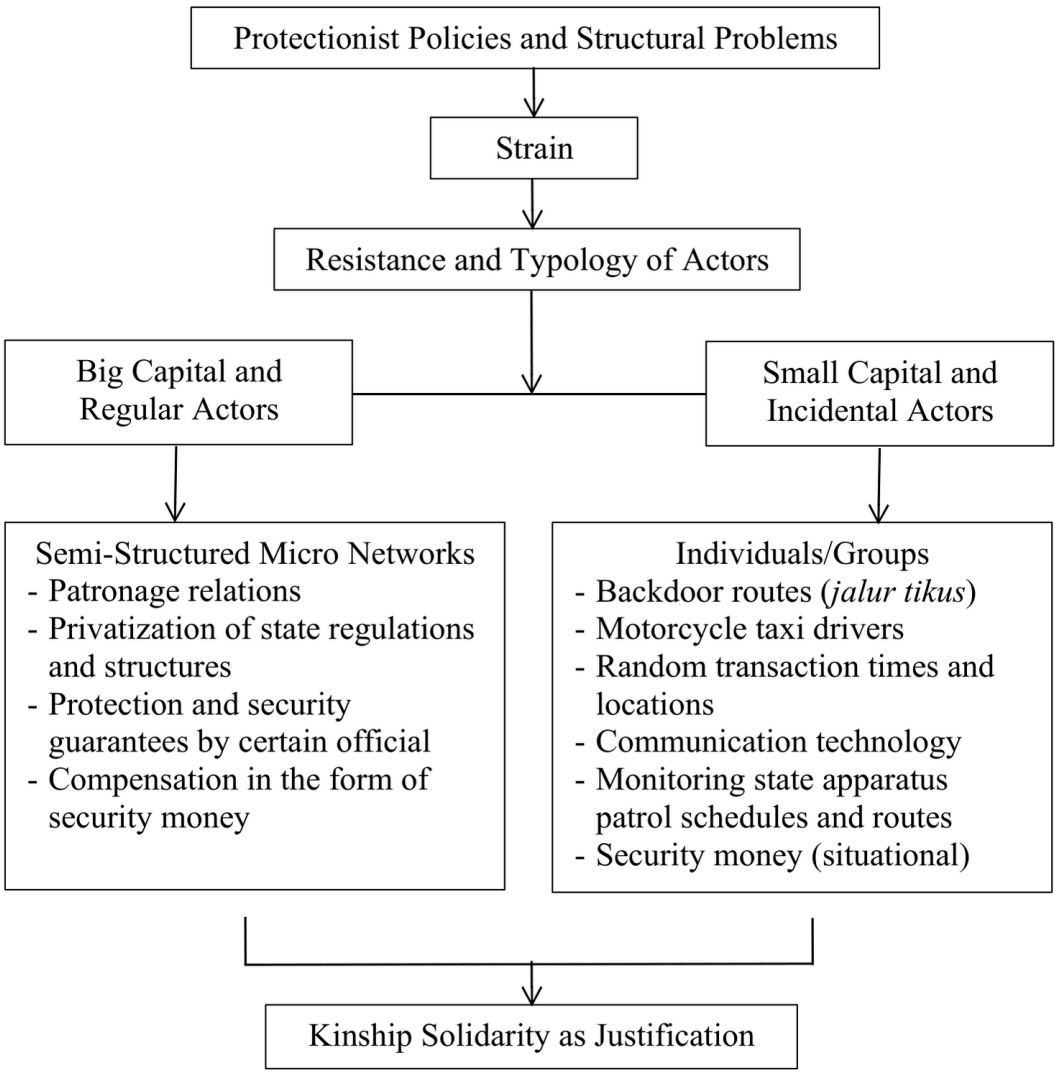


Figure 1. Semi-structured patronage networks for illegal economic activities

to supplement their pocket money and help their parents. These perpetrators profit from the difference in the purchase price of goods in Kefamenanu, the capital of TTU Regency, compared to the selling price on the back roads or 'safe routes, ' which can be three to four times higher due to risk factors and the exchange rate difference, as these illegal transactions are denominated in US dollars. This hidden phenomenon can persist and even grow because it is semi-structured, large-scale, and highly profitable. To streamline transactions, they utilize information technology such as Facebook and WhatsApp, or send people to visit security posts to monitor communications, patrol times, and locations. Their pattern involves using cryptic messages to specify the type of goods, currency for transactions, schedules, and locations, making them relatively difficult for security officers to track due to limited technological resources, personnel numbers, and capacity. However, according to the perpetrators, this strategy does not apply to those who have established agreements with local security forces to obtain discretionary compensation in the form of regular or incidental financial deposits. While some authorities have denied this, others have confirmed it.

Based on the actor network category, illegal traders fall into three groups: independent traders with substantial capital, trader groups, and limited-capital traders. However, they coordinate

and exchange information to sustain their businesses. Furthermore, these traders maintain a code of ethics that prohibits them from seizing regular customers in the Pasabe Sub-District, except in exceptional circumstances, such as obstacles or other factors. In the first and second categories, they have shifted away from conventional transaction methods and are using back channels, having successfully established transactional compromises with border authorities to secure security guarantees. Meanwhile, traders with limited capital continue to conduct illegal trade through clandestine channels and move their locations to avoid security patrols. However, one unique fact remains: they sometimes visit local security posts as ordinary citizens, but covertly seek information about the schedules and locations of local security patrols. Illegal economic activities, initially sporadic and simply to meet the basic needs of relatives in Timor-Leste, have now metamorphosed into businesses involving kinship networks, operating both individually and in groups. The detailed, semi-structured micro-network of these illegal economic activities is illustrated in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1 shows that the distinction between large-scale and small-scale financiers does not represent a competitive relationship; rather, it highlights different patterns of engagement in illegal economic activities. Large-scale financiers are able to establish patronage networks with border officials, effectively privatizing regulations to serve the interests of the parties involved. Consequently, these large-scale financiers regularly provide monetary payments and tribute to state officials, who in turn use their power and authority to guarantee the security of illegal economic operations. In contrast, small-scale financiers tend to use riskier methods, relying on unofficial routes (jalur tikus) and using information technology creatively; they engage with state officials only occasionally, specifically when smuggling goods of significant volume or value.

Based on the interpretation of field facts, this study's findings are unique both empirically and theoretically. Empirically, the deviant behavior of residents contrasts with the research findings of academics who have studied patterns of illegal cross-border trafficking in Africa (Moyo, 2022; Okorie & Okeja, 2024), South America (Albornoz-Arias & Morffe Peraza, 2023), and Kalimantan (Bangun, 2023), which are solely driven by economic motives. Conversely, despite different citizenship statuses, kinship solidarity is maintained, and this genealogical bond even triggers illegal acts and justifies local residents' deviant actions. Indeed, their goal of smuggling to the Pasabe Sub-District is to gain economic benefits; however, socio-cultural cohesion becomes a justification for local residents' deviant actions. The instrumentalization of kinship ties is inevitable, as cultural goals can be achieved only collectively, especially when marginalized citizens feel unaffected by the COVID-19 pandemic (Silva et al., 2021).

Theoretically, this finding deconstructs the rational choice view in classical criminology, which believes that the motive for seeking material gain is the basis of individual actions (Oladejo, 2022), while also confirming the subjective side of the logic of rationality where rational and irrational attitudes often coexist in the decision-making process (Ogu, 2013). In this context, kinship solidarity is an altruistic act understood only by local residents who are still related. In line with this empirical reality, this article also addresses the limitations of Merton's anomie typology, which views deviant adaptation as driven solely by material motives (Merton, 1938).

Informal Compromise as a New Pattern of Deviant Adaptation

COVID-19 navigation in Indonesia is implemented through strict protective policies involving cross-sectoral state structures, including lockdowns and social distancing, as stipulated in Law Number 6 of 2018 concerning Health Quarantine. Regarding the prohibition of migration flow into Indonesia, the Directorate General of Immigration of the Ministry of Law and Human Rights issued Circular Letter Number: IMI-GR.01.01-2493 of 2020. This symmetrical policy has proven effective when implemented through the *PLBN* Mota'ain, Motamasin, Wini, and Napan as formal gateways for migration routes in West Timor. Records from the Atambua Immigration Office show that migration flow in 2019 remained normal at 268,320 people, but after border closures were implemented in 2020, it dropped drastically to 60,353 people. In 2021, migration fell to only 3,422 people, mostly migrants with special permits, such as diplomats, medical personnel, and humanitarian workers (Chart 1). However, in remote border areas often inaccessible to security forces, these protective policies may be ineffective, even though no valid data exists. However, the continued illegal economic activity further confirms that these protective policies have left a residue that the state has not been able to address. For example, the increased intensity of state security patrols at the Border Security Task Force (*Satgas Pamtas*) post in Haumeni Ana has had a domino effect. Local residents and border market traders have

lost their regular weekly income, which has sociologically hindered residents from carrying out activities related to traditional rituals. Meanwhile, residents engaged in illegal trade have had to find ways around the situation to survive.

However, as rational actors, coping strategies in such instrumental situations are inevitable. Some local groups have learned to manipulate and change the rules to ensure the continuity of meeting their individual and group needs (Bennett, 1976). They chose this illegal approach, which transcends state structures, in response to protectionist policies that halted trade at the border market in Haumeni Ana, a source of livelihood for residents. It turns out that emergency health policies that are not supported by state capacity only create new problems. Instead of strengthening state authority over peripheral areas, local residents respond with silent resistance, continuing to run black markets in new ways that ultimately reduce state power in border areas. In this context, the central government's reactive policies have failed to understand the sociological characteristics and structural problems of border residents; the state treats local residents symmetrically, like urban residents in large cities that are easily accessible through state structures. It is not surprising that these symmetrical policies have reaped covert resistance at the grassroots level at the border.

This phenomenon reminds the government that, no matter how well-intentioned a policy is, it must still take anticipatory action against its potential impacts. Because, within certain limits, if a policy fails to provide a sense of justice, it will create public resistance. Public compliance with state policies will not only decline, but may also lead to silent resistance. From the perspective of marginalized communities, the state should guarantee economic resilience, as this is the biggest problem for most citizens (Alam et al., 2022). In a political context, this phenomenon is a governmentality problem, where the state cannot be present, control, and provide social protection to communities in peripheral areas (Wallace et al., 2023).

This empirical explanation demonstrates a very close relationship between COVID-19 pandemic mitigation policies, poverty, and strengthening social cohesion, which in turn triggers deviant behavior in the form of new patterns of illegal economic activity. This was conveyed by informant P02, who said:

> *"We actually had no intention of fighting the government during COVID-19. The problem was this… we had to make ends meet, but there was no work. We also had a moral burden when our relatives there asked for help, but we just kept quiet. So, rather than playing cat and mouse and risking arrest, we started talking to them politely. So we gave them a thank-you note (deposit), the amount of which varied depending on the type of goods. It was the safest way, and they were happy to get the cigarette money."*

The informant's confession further confirms that even in instrumentalized situations, sociological reasons still justify the illegal economic actions of local groups. For them, collective solidarity must be expressed through impulsive actions and sacrifices to demonstrate kinship loyalty. This view is an intuitive response that emerges when they face the same problem collectively. Navigating the COVID-19 pandemic is a touchstone for maintaining this collective solidarity. Usually, there is a linearity between micro-social actions and meso-social norms in entities with strong tribal ties (Bennett, 1976).

When confronted with informant A03, the person concerned initially denied it. However, based on the informant's voice intonation and body gestures, the researcher interpreted this as informant A03 confirming informant P02's statement, after finally using the term 'for the sake of humanity'. The involvement of state officials in the semi-structured illegal network in the border region in West Timor was confirmed by informant A05, who stated that recently the Timor-Leste government had dismissed eight members of the security forces who were suspected of being involved in illegal activities on the West Timor-Timor-Leste border.

From this phenomenon, it can be concluded that the underhand agreement formed from a meeting of justifications: economic motives wrapped in sociological values and a sense of humanity. The informal agreement between the two actors, initially in antithetical positions, now finds a middle ground as a synthesis that sustains illegal economic activities, ultimately creating a gray area in the border region and contextualizing the problem of governmentality (Wallace et al., 2023). The pattern of power relations between the authorities at the border and the perpetrators of illegal economic activities that form a kind of patronage network is unique and not found in studies of illegality in other parts of the world, such as in Africa (Okorie & Okeja, 2024) and Latin America (Albornoz-Arias & Morffe Peraza, 2023), where the state apparatus and the perpetrators of illegal trade are in opposing positions.

Further field investigations revealed two smuggling patterns in Haumeni Ana. First, they use backdoor routes (*jalur tikus*), moving around according to security personnel's patrol

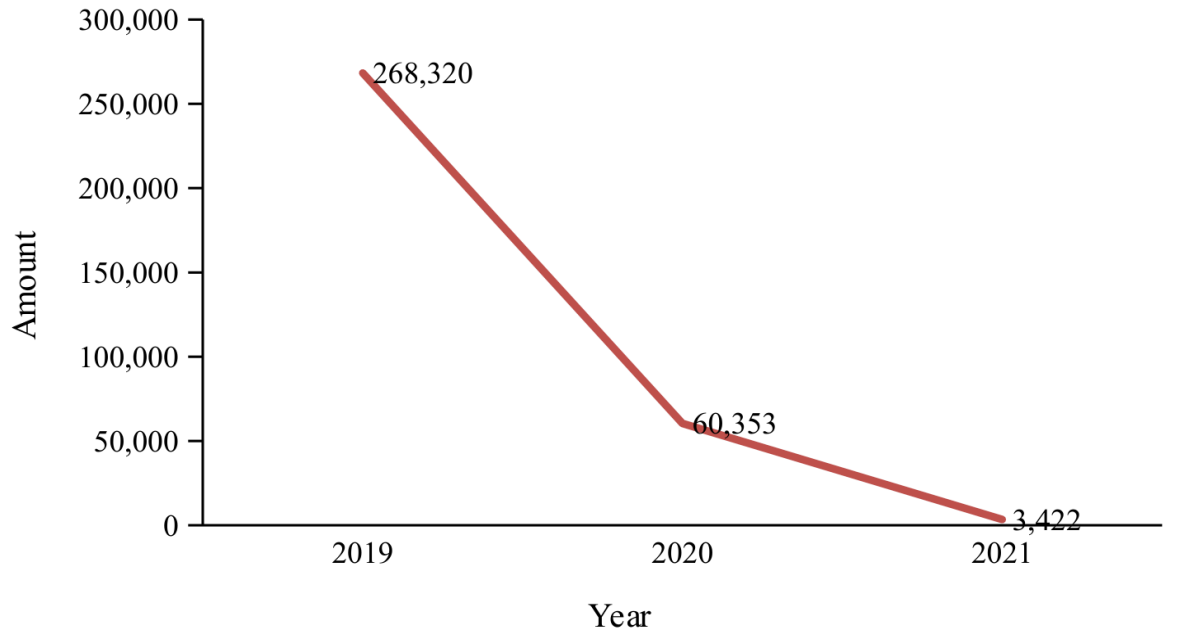


Figure 2. Migration flow trends between Indonesia and timor-leste, 2019–2021

schedules and locations. They typically use porters, commonly known as motorcycle taxi drivers (*tukang ojek*), who use routes that are infrequent and difficult for local authorities to monitor. Second, they create a gray area by negotiating transactional agreements with local government structures, eliminating the need for backdoor routes and allowing shipments to the Pasabe Sub-District to be made during the day. This security transaction requires a set of rules, including confidentiality for each party.

According to the perpetrators, the security incentive scheme has two variations as shown in Table 2, depending on the initial agreement and the individual preferences of each individual involved in the illegal economic activity. First, there are regular incentives, with two variations: weekly and monthly. The weekly incentive is approximately Rp 150,000.00, while the monthly incentive is approximately Rp 500,000.00 for both individuals and groups generally active in the illegal trade. However, if the smuggled goods are estimated to have high value, such as furniture, electronics, or motorcycles, an additional deposit is charged based on the estimated value of the goods. Second, incidental incentives are given per trip per perpetrator and adjusted according to the value of the goods. However, the incentive amount is higher than for perpetrators who choose the first deposit method, even for the same type of goods. For example, a motorcycle is charged Rp 500,000.00. Goods or commodities frequently smuggled into Timor-Leste include various snacks, instant noodles, cigarettes, gasoline, kerosene, rice, sugar, household furniture, mobile phones, televisions, refrigerators, and vehicle spare parts. Meanwhile, commodities smuggled from Timor-Leste into West Timor typically include canned fruit juice drinks, such as Sagiko, as well as various alcoholic beverages produced in Singapore, Portugal, and other European countries.

The protectionist policy, which abruptly halted sociological activities and regular weekly legal trade through a border market that opened every Saturday, became a new reality for local residents and created new problems. They could not tolerate this situation through direct resistance, as it would have involved state law. They chose a deviant adaptation method, which they believed provided double benefits. This non-normative behavior, which had become a kind of collective habit, could be interpreted as a form of everyday resistance (O'Brien, 2026). Local residents quietly continued illegal economic activities through back channels and adapted by purchasing security deposits as a sociologically grounded economic coping strategy. This means that implementing this legally binding policy for every citizen directly clashed with the socio-economic realities of Haumeni Ana residents, forcing them into silent resistance.

However, if the state can mobilize resources for the welfare of its citizens and officials, phenomena such as transnational crime

in Haumeni Ana can be eradicated, or at least reduced in intensity (Oberwittler, 2019). The problem is that Jakarta's state elite structure tends to misunderstand the complexity of these intertwined issues. This practice of legalizing illegality does not arise in a vacuum, because it is a confluence of problems of law enforcement that cannot be implemented consistently, structural problems that can only be understood by residents, not to mention the COVID-19 pandemic whose handling does not anticipate the socio-cultural and economic aspects of peripheral residents, as well as problems of state structures at the lowest level, which bear similarities to cases that occurred in Africa that triggered corrupt behavior (Dzawanda & Matsa, 2023).

Table 2. Incentive schemes for officials provided by those engaged in illegal economic activities

No	Category of Actors	Incentive (Rp)			Information
		Weekly	Monthly	Per trip	
1	Regular individual/ group	150,000.00	500,000.00	-	In accordance with the initial agreement
2	Incidental individual/group	-	-	100,000.00 – 500,000.00	In accordance with the initial agreement

Kinship Innovation in Merton's Typology

The previous explanation shows that the non-normative socio-economic activities of the Haumeni Ana residents are triggered by a disparity between cultural goals and legitimate means, which creates tension (Merton, 1938). As utilitarian actors, responding to environmental changes that exert socio-economic pressure from protectionist state regulations is inevitable. Furthermore, on the ground, lower-level state structures implement these regulatory mandates inconsistently. This inconsistency further emphasizes the problem of state governance in peripheral areas. These two realities within local state entities and apparatuses have sparked deviant adaptations and the embryonic formation of semi-structured informal networks. The state's inability to guarantee the welfare of its apparatus, and the lack of facilities appropriate to its characteristics and geographical conditions, have given local residents opportunities to exploit this gap and formalize informal actions. The COVID-19 response policy in the country's peripheral areas has brought these two actors, previously in opposing positions, together around a common interest: socio-economic motives achieved through the privatization of state instruments to realize their pragmatic preferences.

Referring to Merton's anomie theory, citizens' actions in the country's peripheral regions fall into the category of adaptation innovation. Such actions are generally carried out by marginalized groups who lose access to conventional means, so to pursue their goals they are forced to take abnormal actions (Merton, 1938). However, there are realities that cannot be explained comprehensively by Merton's innovation model, so the findings of this article expand on Merton's explanation of innovation as shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Comparison of merton's adaptation typology and empirical reality

Mode of Adaptation	Culture Goals		Institutionalized Means		Information
	Merton Model	Empirical Facts	Merton Model	Empirical Facts	
Conformity	(+)	(×)	(+)	(×)	Complementing cultural goals, but different contexts and ways of achieving them

Mode of Adaptation	Culture Goals		Institutionalized Means		Information
	Merton Model	Empirical Facts	Merton Model	Empirical Facts	
Innovation	(+) Focus on material-based success.	(+) Sociologically based economic orientation for survival	(-) Macro-urban context	(-) Peripheral micro-rural context	Elaborating on Merton's innovation
Ritualism	(-)	(×)	(+)	(×)	Not relevant
Retreatism	(-)	(×)	(-)	(×)	Kinship innovation carries out silent resistance.
Rebellion	(±)	(×)	(±)	(×)	Not relevant

Note: (+) acceptance, (-) rejection, (±) rejection and replacement of goals and means with new standards, and (×) have no relevance to empirical phenomena.

The conformity adaptation model is a response carried out by citizens in general: when pursuing economic goals, they do so in legitimate ways in accordance with regulations (Merton, 1938), but in empirical reality, material is not the only cultural goal. In contrast, middle-class groups practice ritualism by lowering their goals to keep their job positions secure (Ahsan, 2016). The fourth adaptation is usually carried out by actors who feel marginalized and give up on legitimate goals and means; as an escape, they are trapped in the world of drugs and withdraw from their social environment (Merton, 1938), but empirical reality shows that there are actions against formal structures illegally, not surrendering to strain. Finally, rebellion aims to overhaul cultural goals and formal structures according to their interests through revolutionary actions such as terrorism (Ahsan, 2016). Given the limitations of Merton's adaptation model, researchers assess that the innovation adaptation model aligns with this study's findings.

Contextually, the Haumeni Ana residents engage in silent defiance against state authority and social norms in general as a form of anomie among border residents who feel marginalized by the state. State policies create strain, in the logic of local actors, by eliminating socio-economic access that threatens the sustainability of livelihood sources and the solidarity of tribal identity across countries. Here lies the difference between Merton's conceptual innovation model and the innovation version among local residents, where they engage in smuggling not solely for material motives but also because of sociological factors. If referring to the logic of rational choice, Merton's concept of deviant adaptation typology is a form of classic rational choice (Merton, 1938). In contrast, in this context it has shifted into a contemporary sociological form of rational choice which tends to be altruistic and does not place methodological individualism so strictly (Ritzer & Smart, 2011).

In relation to this conceptual argument, informant A01, who was met at the Bikomi Nilulat District office, emphasized the following:

> *"However, they still hold fast to tradition. For Timorese, tribal identity is strong, and it remains embedded and even binds them as one family unit despite their different citizenship statuses. Therefore, border violations, whether through smuggling or customary matters, cannot be eliminated. Moreover, local residents are more familiar with the geographical terrain than security forces. Therefore, we don't have data on perpetrators of illegal trade, but what I've observed is that most residents have engaged in or are still engaging in illegal activities."*

The statement of one of these informants aligns with the statements of informants A02 and A03, who were met in the courtyard of the Haumeni Ana Village office, and informant A05, who was confirmed in Dili, Timor-Leste. Based on the statements of these officials, this article further strengthens the argument that optimizing benefits from the local residents' risky actions has two intertwined goals, economic and sociocultural, which transcend state power.

These empirical facts help fill the gap in Merton's innovation adaptation typology. Field findings add parameters and broaden perspectives on explanations of innovation, which has previously focused on material-based success as the standard cultural goal in urban societies at a macro level. Conversely, this article finds that sociologically based illegal economic activities within indigenous rural communities residing in border areas operate on a micro-scale and are primarily for survival rather than for material wealth. They use this as a justification for illegal actions. Furthermore, patronage relations between lower-level state structures and actors are formed through the privatization of regulations and compensation payments as the rules of the game within semi-structured networks in peripheral areas.

In practice, this research also confirms that protective COVID-19 navigation policies have created friction between loyalty to the state and sociocultural ethics. When read from the perspective of principal-agent logic (Hu et al., 2023) and the weak state (Lorch, 2017, p. 36), the moral hazard practiced by state and non-state actors that form patronage relationships and corrupt acts can be interpreted as a form of rent-seeking behavior that has the effect of reducing state power over border areas. Lower-level state structures use their authority to commercialize regulations, while perpetrators pay financial compensation for the security guarantees they obtain. These underhanded transactions have transformed border areas, instead of becoming spaces of state sovereignty, into spaces of illegal sociological and economic patronage relations.

This state of anomie in the peripheral space is likely to persist. The assumption is that when non-state and state actors at lower levels each face structural problems, and resolving them through formal legal channels is virtually impossible, this suggests they are facing the same structural problem. In their view, the only rational response is to consolidate pragmatically through patronage relations. In this context, residents are categorized as a mesostructure that seeks to survive by normalizing their informal actions. However, if the structural boundaries are extended to the macro realm, namely society in general, then these deviant actions clearly fall into the category of transnational criminal acts. This empirical phenomenon shows that sociological solidarity and guarantees of sustainable family economic access, along with problems in lower-level state structures, apparently outweigh compliance with legitimate regulations.

This empirical fact aligns with Merton's thesis, which states that when access to institutionalized resources is blocked, marginalized groups tend to choose the most efficient path to achieve their goals, even if it means violating legitimate regulations, as this is the optimal option. This aligns with the character of the Haumeni Ana residents, who face economic challenges and a lack of formal employment opportunities and are bound by sociological similarities, ultimately normalizing their response to this abnormal situation. These actions outside the norms of the broader societal structure can be considered crimes based on the morality of sociocultural solidarity. This contrasts with Merton's thesis, which holds that success is measured solely by material possessions.

From the perspective of the actors involved in the dynamics of illegal sociological economics, the Haumeni Ana-Timor Leste border region is not merely a geopolitical space. Instead, it has become a social space (Lara-Valencia & Laine, 2022). This marginalized region has become an arena for interaction between individual actors, local community groups, and lower-level state apparatuses, producing new rules through patronage mechanisms. From an economic and sociological perspective, this tri-polar relationship shares common interests; from this perspective, all actors define the border region as a space they can use to secure these shared goals. If these socio-economic preferences are analogous to a pragmatist ideology that must be nurtured, it is perfectly rational for this semi-permanent illegal network to silently reject state policies deemed detrimental (Su & Shen, 2021). However, interpreting this innovation in local kinship as a crisis of nationalism is premature (Pulla, 2020). While regulatory privatization is a pragmatic compromise, it is merely an instrument for sociologically based illegal economic activity, not a rejection of state sovereignty. From this, it can be concluded that the actions taken in response to COVID-19 navigation depend on the geographic and demographic characteristics of the community, where concern for loved ones, in this context, kinship ties, tends to overcome compliance with government regulations and also serves as a justification for the choice of risky rationality (Clarke & Barnett, 2023).

■ CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 mitigation policies have left residual socio-economic problems for residents in peripheral areas. In the logic of anomie, socio-economic goals that are impossible to achieve through normal means become a driving force for deviant behavior in the form of illegal economic activity. Under this social pressure, residents tend to maintain recognition of state sovereignty, but they are

forced to resort to illegal means. According to Merton's typology of adaptation, border communities in Haumeni Ana tend to fall into the category of innovation. However, an additional motive emerges: Merton uses material logic as a basis for deviant behavior. At the same time, local residents justify their deviance through transactional socio-cultural solidarity as a form of kinship anomie. Because local residents' optimization behavior is guided by both egoistic and altruistic preferences, this article positions itself within the rational choice framework of contemporary sociology (Ritzer & Smart, 2011).

Local citizen innovation increasingly emerges as the state reduces its power over peripheral areas. This regression in state power creates a loophole that locals exploit to mount covert resistance by forging compromises with state officials. Privatization of regulations emerges as the most rational option, a compromise that can guarantee the achievement of each actor's previously conflicting socio-economic preferences.

In this regard, this article suggests a shift in the policy paradigm from a state-centric approach to one oriented toward improving citizens' welfare, especially in marginalized areas such as border regions, and continuously strengthening the capacity of the state apparatus down to the grassroots level. Therefore, the author recommends that the governments of both countries begin revitalizing the border market in Haumeni Ana, which currently opens every Saturday, into a semi-traditional daily market as a buffer zone for local-scale trade and economic development, so it can truly meet the needs of local residents.

The limitations of this study lie in the micro-scale research subjects and locations, namely only kinship entities at the village level bordering the Pasabe Sub-District, Timor-Leste. Therefore, the findings of this article cannot be generalized to communities in other peripheral areas, which certainly have different characteristics and socio-cultural structures. Therefore, further studies by social academics are still very much needed to compare and test kinship innovations in other regions in response to how countries manage border areas after the global health crisis.

■ DECLARATION OF GENERATIVE AI USAGE IN THE WRITING PROCESS

During the drafting of this manuscript, the authors used Google Translate and Gemini to translate text and refine sentence structure. After using these tools, the authors reviewed and revised the content as needed and accept full responsibility for the final content of the article.

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