

Portraying Patron-client in Fishermen Work Relationships: A Phenomenon from Bengkulu, Indonesia

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Abstract

The working pattern in traditional society still becomes an exciting topic to investigate as they portray how society makes their living. The research aims at investigating the relationship between employer and employee in fishing management in Kelurahan Pasar Bengkulu, Bengkulu Province, Indonesia. The study employed a phenomenology-based qualitative approach, with participants chosen using a purposive sampling technique. Data were gathered through observation, interviews, and documentation. The collected data were analyzed by reducing, describing, and verifying data. The standards of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability are confirmed to validate the data. The findings signified that: 1) the patron-client symbolizes exploitation in which most business is dominated by the middlemen, while the fishermen only play a role as the executors during the fishing process. Additionally, the patron-client relationship represents an imbalance of fishery profit sharing; 2) such a relationship does contribute to fishermen's structural and cultural poverty. The cooperation between labor associations and governance active role supported by financial aid from related parties is highly recommended to promote fishermen's wealth.

Pola kerja dalam masyarakat tradisional masih menjadi hal yang menarik untuk diteliti karena pola kerja ini menggambarkan bagaimana masyarakat bekerja. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengetahui hubungan antara majikan dan karyawan dalam pengelolaan perikanan di Kelurahan Pasar Bengkulu, Provinsi Bengkulu, Indonesia. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif berbasis fenomenologi dengan melibatkan sejumlah partisipan yang dipilih dengan teknik purposive sampling. Pengumpulan data dilakukan dengan observasi, wawancara, dan dokumentasi. Data yang dikumpulkan dianalisis melalui reduksi, deskripsi dan verifikasi data. Untuk memvalidasi data, dilakukan dengan standar kredibilitas, tranferabilitas, dependabilitas, dan confirmability data. Temuan tersebut menunjukkan bahwa: 1) klien patron melambangkan eksploitasi dimana sebagian besar usaha didominasi oleh tengkulak, sedangkan nelayan hanya berperan sebagai pelaksana dalam proses penangkapan. Selain eksploitasi, hubungan patron klien juga menunjukkan ketidakseimbangan bagi hasil perikanan; 2) hubungan tersebut memang berkontribusi pada kemiskinan struktural dan kultural nelayan. Kerjasama antara serikat pekerja dan peran aktif pemerintahan yang didukung oleh bantuan keuangan dari pihak terkait sangat dianjurkan untuk meningkatkan kesejahteraan nelayan.

Keywords: civil society; market mechanism; social construction; state policy

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Introduction

A patron-client relationship is commonly found in some poor people's societies (Pellicer et al. 2021). Strong people are bound together in a mutually beneficial arrangement through non-official credit systems; patrons obtain labor and other benefits, in return for favors ranging from loans to protection (Miñarro et al. 2016). In brief, the relationship has to do with the connection between people who have more power and poorer power.

To go further, patron-client or also well known as clientelism is more associated with engagement between a state and society (Anciano 2018). In this context, the state may play a role as the patrons, and society as the clients. A patron-client relationship is woven into both traditional and modern societies as cultural heritage (Lukiyanto, Widita, and Kumalasari 2018). For instance, in the Indonesian context, patron-client relationships might be found in farmers (Damayanti et al. 2019), fishing communities (Firman et al. 2020; Handoko, Fitriyana, and Susilo 2022), or villagers when they come to vote for new leaders (Suyono, Nugroho, and Windyastuti 2021).

It is previously implied that a patron-client is in a dyadic state involving the majority of individual relationships (Scott 1972). Higher socio-economic status individuals act as patrons, using their authority and wealth to provide protection and good actions to lower-status individuals. As a way of repaying the favour, clients should provide entire support and help, including personal attention to patrons. It is no surprise that such a relationship becomes unjust for clients.

Jackson (1978) recently specifies that a patron-client relationship occurs when the

following conditions are met: 1) clients clearly prefer patrons as a far superior ally in the duumvirate; 2) patrons and clients have had a mutually beneficial and courteous relationship for quite some time; 3) patrons and clients should have faith in one another's goodwill in order to facilitate an unbalanced exchange that benefits just one of them; 4) despite the fact that they have no similar expertise, talent, or power, patrons and clients should complement each other's general interests, particularly in the economic sector, and 5) requests from patrons should be malleable rather than limitless, and they should also be appropriate for the patrons' service.

A patron-client relationship is found to be either beneficial or harmful, especially to client parties. Humbas, Massie, and Wangke (2021) highlight that the relationship between patrons and clients results in a good and positive impact because during these two parties' collaboration, patrons get the goods they want from clients, and clients get profits to fulfil their daily needs. This patron-client relationship is also claimed to be the main pillar in helping social resilience during the COVID-19 pandemic (Firman et al. 2020). However, this patron-client pattern is considered inimical to income redistribution towards the poor (Kyriacou 2023). Access to information will also be limited once patron-client relations occur due to clients' economic dependency (Beg 2021).

As mentioned in advance, this patron-client relationship is commonly detected in many fishery communities in Indonesia (Aida et al. 2020; Firzan and Erawan 2020; Lukiyanto et al. 2018; Miñarro et al. 2016; Roberts et al. 2022). One of the communities is in Teluk Segara, Bengkulu, Indonesia.

The fishermen in Teluk Segara make up the majority of those who live near the coast; other villagers also work as farmers, civil servants, traders, and labor workers. Unfortunately, the fishermen's community continues to be viewed as having low revenue. Although the business run by the fishermen can fulfill their basic needs, the economic progress of these fishermen is not equal to other community businesses in rural areas. The condition there worsens as middlemen enter the market with their tricky imbalance trading pattern, in which middlemen have the authority to determine fishing share and profit. Such a relationship ties fishermen to hard lives. It is not easy for them to avoid this type of dependent relationship even though it unfairly benefits the middlemen.

A number of researches conducted in some areas in Indonesia found out other phenomena of patron-client. A research conducted by Aini and Wijaya (2019) in Malang Regency, Central Java, discovered how fishermen were bound to capital owners in this patron-client relationship. Similar facts are also discovered by Handoko et al. (2022) that fishermen livelihood is much dependent on patron power. The debt fishermen receive from patrons does not allow them to escape from such a situation due to the need to return patrons' favours (Firzan and Erawan 2020).

The preceding studies have concentrated on how a patron-client relationship binds fishermen in a destructive relationship with patron-client. However, more detailed discussion on why this patron-client is propitious and prejudicial for clients shall also be carried out, including further description patron-client contribution to many types of poverty. Therefore, the present research is conducted to depict the types of patron-clients detrimental

for fishermen as clients; and the types of impoverishments are affected by patron-client?

The research employed phenomenology-based research. It was chosen for its capacity of empirical understanding and thought revealing. The setting was Kelurahan Pasar Bengkulu in Teluk Segara, Bengkulu city. The site was chosen as most of the people have been working as fishermen for a couple of decades with their clientelism working pattern.

The data was collected using observation, interviews, and documentation. The data were then analyzed using the data analysis procedure proposed by Miles et al. (2014), which included data reduction, data description, and data verification. First, the completeness of all data obtained through observation, interview, and documentation was verified. Following that, the data was classified based on the research foci. The findings were interpreted and justified to validate the data in relation to the existing theory and previous studies. Lincoln and Guba's concept (1985) was used to confirm the data's validity consisting of 1) credibility, 2) transferability, 3) dependability, and 4) confirmability.

Fishermen Exploitation and Imbalance Profit Sharing as the Causes of Detrimental Patron-Client

Fishermen Exploitation. Based on the observation and interview, it is found out that the patron-client observed in the research setting has been depicting an exploitation pattern of working relationship by the patron (middlemen) to the client (fishermen).

First, the middlemen are the party to determine and dominate the fishing process but the working capital is the fishermen responsibility. The middlemen provide production unit

tools including ship and fishing equipment. The fishing process is usually done within 15 days, and all the cost are charged to the fishermen or crews. Most of the fishermen rely the capital on their family inheritance. If they have no capital, they borrow it from the middlemen.

One of the fishermen admitted,

“When the time for fishing comes but we have no capital, the middlemen lend us their money. We use the loans during fishing days and our family daily needs while we are away. The debt will be paid by cutting our catches” (Yt, a fisherman, 25 years old).

The middlemen lend them capital once they run out of money for working capital and money for their family bread and butter. A patron giving a loan to fishermen as a client is a common fact in clientelism (Aida et al. 2020). The loan itself commonly provides materials and assets for the fishermen and protects the fishermen, including their family (Firzan and Erawan 2020). Another fact observed also shows that the fishermen frequently borrow money from the middlemen because they do not get bank loans. The banks do not provide loans for small scale fishermen for they do not meet the loan requirement. This undeniably causes more fishermen to get trapped in poverty as they have no more business opportunities.

The habit of middlemen giving capital to the fishermen makes most fishermen dependent on the middlemen who own most capital there. A study conducted by Firzan and Erawan (2020) proved that the fishing community are attached to capital owners as their patron; compared to other credit possibilities, getting financial support from the patron is still preferred (Drury O'Neill et al. 2019). This habit directs and develops more unfavourable social resilient so

that fleeing from clientelism will be more challenging (Bedran-Martins and Lemos 2017).

Unluckily, the reality indicates that the middlemen cut the fishermen catches to pay their debt, not by money. On this ground, the fishermen cannot get profit from their catches. This exploitation condition has been widely recognized by the fishermen and scholars, but policy makers have not been concerning on it (Roberts et al. 2022). Such phenomenon also takes place in another fishery community (Pauwelussen 2016). This kind of relationship, to Semenova (2018), is a short-term promises exchange. Similar condition was also reported by Mengge (2019) in his research. He found out that such exploitation, or what he characterized as class exploitation commonly happens in patron-client relationship. Fausayana et al. (2018) see this as an imbalance for the client should pay by the result of their working instead of repaying by money. Even so, it is not seen as an imbalance in another fishing community. Still, fishermen's agreement with middlemen (Handayani, Qurrata, and Purnamasari 2022), in which the clients commit themselves to work for the patron and the patron give them salary. Fishermen do not feel the exploitation carried out by middlemen because the social process that occurs seems to be middlemen as meritorious people, because in addition to providing capital loans to fishermen, it also guarantees the life of fishermen's families while fishermen go to sea.

Second, another data about the exploitation was found that the fishermen as ship crews do not get their rights as labours as declared in the Act of Labour (State Gazette of The Republic of Indonesia 2003). They get no health fund, insurance, leave, and life pension. It certainly makes them have no access to legal certainty

and wealth as stated formally in the Act of Labour. It is risky for the fishermen due to the middlemen arbitrariness, such as unfair dismissals without adequate severance pay. Nonetheless, this is foreseeable as a patron-client relationship is usually established in informal pattern. As discovered by Lukiyanto et al. (2018), the relationship is a common phenomenon in which risk sharing becomes the central support. In addition, most fishermen said that the relationship has been used for generations in their region although exploitation still becomes a hot issue. Budiyaniti et al. (2020) reported parallel discovery that a patron-client relationship has lasted for a long time in society. Clients stepping out from such relation is almost impossible, as they feel they cannot escape from such a circle (Veenendaal 2019). Social facts and legal protection facts that do not enter into the lives of fishermen make patron-client relations that always harm the subordinate party will always occur. The patron will further strengthen its dominance while the client will become increasingly dependent on the patron for various reasons.

Imbalance of fishing profit-sharing. In addition to the exploitation, fishermen also experienced imbalance of fishing profit-sharing. Some causes found in this study are: Firstly, the law of fishery profit sharing has not been implemented. The result of observation in this research found the imbalance of fishing profit sharing as the middlemen get more portions compared to the government regulation. The total profit gained by the fishermen is not proportionate compared to the middlemen. The middlemen or ship owners got 75%, while the fishermen got only 25%. If the middlemen directly go fishing, they will get more portion of the percentage as their direct role in fish

catching. Another case showed that middlemen get 65% while fishermen is given 35% from total catches (Handoko et al. 2022).

Meanwhile, based on the Law Number 3 Year 1964 on Fishery Profit Sharing,¹ net income is gained from gross income subtracted by operational cost and agency cost. The sharing system for fishing with motor ship is 60% for owner and 40% for crew or fishermen. 60% of owner income is subtracted by total fix cost and ransom cost.

The above condition obviously points out that the profit-sharing system listed in the fishery-sharing profit law has not been applied. Substandard government control as institution to have authority in law enforcement is predicted to worsen the fishing practice. Particularly, as the relation between the fishermen and their middlemen is based on informality (Pedroza-Gutiérrez and López-Rocha 2021), the patron disregard for the law is predictable. Then, many studies claim that as clients dependency on their patron is considered exceedingly high (Veenendaal 2019), this condition continues taking place.

Secondly, determination of fish selling price. Other disserving fact as the cause of imbalance of fishing profit-sharing is the profit of fish selling price. The middlemen determine the price with high margin for the fishermen and sellers' involvement although they sell the catches in a fish auction. This tactic is also comparable to what Damayanti et al. (2019) discovered among coffee farmers: middlemen who set the price of the commodities. Nunan et al. (2020) see this phenomenon as a

¹ Undang-Undang Republik Indonesia Nomor 16 Tahun 1964 tentang Bagi Hasil Perikanan. Indonesia

representation of the nature and activities of clientelism in fishing community.

The middlemen's method undoubtedly results in increased revenue and profit for them. The fishermen have little recourse since the middlemen own all of the fishing gear.

One fisherman describes the condition,

"The fish catches are traded in the fish auction, and our middlemen sell the fish. The price is determined by our middlemen and it is different from the market price, we can do nothing as they own the ship. Well... what we can do then?" (Br, a fisherman, 40 years old).

The above lines suggest that monopoly phenomenon by the middlemen does take place. Likewise, it apparently happens in many traditional societies, especially in fishery communities (Yudistira 2017). The study found out that the landlords can maximize extra profit. The excerpt above either describes the fact happens in the fish auction, that the fishermen almost have no access to the auction. All the business in the auction is dominated by the middlemen who have the production facilities. The data confirms how patrons has greater power (Prasetyo et al. 2020). As a consequence, income inequality cannot be avoided, which ultimately traps the fishermen in permanent poverty. Although the fact speaks that fish consumption in the world has been rising radically over decades (Yan and Graycar 2020), which logically should also promote the fishermen welfare. In assent with the fact, the study of Rana and Kamal (2018) has statistically proven how patron-client negatively affect imbalance income of patrons and their clients (Hamzah 2017). The inability of fishermen to fight against the dominance of patrons in obtaining profits from their catches is

because they are trapped in eternal debt in their socio-economic process as fishermen.

Impoverishment Affected by Patron-client

The present research discovers that the patron-client relationships contribute to the fishermen impoverishment both structurally and culturally.

Structural Impoverishment

Structurally, the researchers analysed the fishermen living poorly as they have limitation to access the resource availability. The middlemen dominate access, knowledge, and information to enrich themselves. The fishermen stay poor. They basically may increase their total income if they are given similar chance in managing and possessing production unit equipment. One of the informant fishermen mentions,

"So, this is how we live. Not to mention building a new house, even repairing what we have now, it is not totally easy for us, because I don't make enough money for living" (Iw, a fisherman, 27 years old).

The fishermen cannot fulfil their family needs for housing as their money cannot free them from poverty. In essence, possessing production unit equipment is momentous to reduce such poorness. This finding corresponds to what recently reported by Ridwan (2022). His study in a similar province fishing community discovers that the number of poverty level is regarded high. An earlier investigation Aini and Wijaya (2019) into a fishing hamlet in East Java revealed how a patron-client structure has been keeping the fishermen in substandard living conditions.

The patron-client relationship does not touch fundamental problem of fishermen poor lives as most middlemen only do favour for fishermen daily needs fulfilment or instantaneous necessity. Despite of giving supporting help, such assistance shall precisely entangle the fishermen with indebtedness. At the end, this debt should be paid off in the next profit sharing. Consequently, the fishermen attachment to the middlemen are getting stronger. Once the middlemen force them to catch fish, they will have no chance to excuse themselves, since the middlemen have a great dominance (Suleman, Pratiknjo, and Sandiah 2019). It is clear that fishermen poor condition is mainly determined by their economic structure such as marketing system applied in clientelism (Ridwan 2022), not by limited resource. This is not surprising as the fact shows that most of the capital are dominated by the middlemen.

Cultural Impoverishment

From the observation and interviews, it is learned that the cultural poverty of the fishermen is further exacerbated by the restricted access to knowledge, including schooling. The fishermen lack the experience or knowledge necessary to effectively handle or manage their finances. They get used to buy non-investment goods such as tape recorder or other tertiary goods. Another popular habit is spending money for drinking in shop while staying up late. In short, they have such a consumptive habit. This condition is also detected in another fishing community (Permana and Mursidi 2020). The habits oftentimes drain their money, which is supposed to use to meet their family welfare. They hardly have any assets or funds set aside for the future.

Even worse, this practice prevents the fishermen from being able to plan for a time of famine. They will continuously borrow money from the middlemen whenever starvation strikes. As demonstrated by Setiawinata, Wahyudi, and Purba (2018), borrowing money from patrons is still the main preference for clients due to comfort and trustworthiness. The situation breeds a cycle of poverty that ultimately renders the fishermen economically dependent. Once more, it is obvious to see the middlemen's hegemony. Romaniuk (2017) emphasized that dominance and dependency are the features of clientelism that exist in society. Over and above that, these fishermen do not have any alternative jobs and skills except fishing, which limits their access to other jobs (Handoko et al. 2022) to earn money.

The main cause of this cultural poverty is that most of the fishermen are not well educated. The sub-district data revealed that 37,55% of its residents had only completed elementary school and 15,98% had not even completed primary school. 21.73% are graduates of junior high schools, and 22.05% finish their senior high school level. Very few people (2.68%) are university graduates, as most of the villagers have limited resources to be able to pursue higher education. Particularly, schooling is not regarded as a crucial matter by most of the villagers. One of the informants confirms the reason.

“There is no need for me to continue study for we surely will be back to work at the ocean as fishermen. I just need to be good at reading, writing, and counting” (Hr, a fisherman, 17 years old).

The above statement corroborates the fact that fishermen see schools as a less significant thing to attain. Similarly, the findings indicate that the cost of education is a burden for the

fishermen's community due to their low and unstable income. Corresponding to these causes, similar facts are discovered in other fishermen communities in Indonesia (Hidayati et al. 2021; Syarif 2021). Attesting to this fact, Dahlia et al. (2022) emphasized that one of the determinants of fishery community welfare is education. As a consequence, providing sufficient education and training is a critical move for the government to make.

Education referred to in this context is education that allows the changing of the fishermen's knowledge system about life. With a knowledge system that has a purpose, it will enable fishermen to make changes in their life patterns so that they can overcome their poverty. With the knowledge system they get they will be able to escape the debt trap due to the patron-client relationship they experience, and with the new knowledge system they will be able to manage a more prosperous life.

Conclusion

The present research has investigated how patron-client, as a work relationship between fishermen and middlemen in Kelurahan Pasar Bengkulu, gives impacts on fishing business, fishermen work and life. The findings concludes that patron-client observed in the research site does not give significant impact to the fishermen due to exploitation, imbalance profit sharing, and its contribution to the fishermen poverty.

On this ground, it is critical for the fishermen to initiate the establishment of labour association to strengthen their bargaining position with the middlemen. The government assistance as policy makers (Tan et al. 2023) on human resource empowerment for the fishermen and family is either needed to improve the quality of human resource

endeavouring more prosperous lives. Moreover, equipping the fishermen with beneficial life skill and working equipment can be executed (Wasiah, Yulida, and Kausar 2019). Banking sector can also assist the fishermen by providing capital in form of joint venture or soft loans to facilitate and maintain small scale fishermen business.

This present study has attempted to portray the pattern of relationship in the patron-client from the fishermen side. However, more investigation on how middlemen see this pattern of work may be conducted to present more comprehensive description of this relation.[]

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