



Circle of Patronage and Economic Quality: Case Study of the Puger Fishing Community

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Abstract

Indonesia's capture fisheries sector is the economic backbone of millions of households, but it is often plagued by structural inequality. This article analyzes the phenomenon of fish quality that tends to be low (KW2) in Puger, Jember, one of the largest fisheries centers in East Java, which paradoxically occurs in the midst of abundant potential. Using the client-patronage theory framework, this study argues that the low quality of fish in Puger is not solely a technical problem of post-harvest handling, but is a direct consequence of the deep-rooted and exploitative patronage relationship between fishermen and land fishermen (pengambe'). The dominance of pengambe' in the supply chain, especially in the purchase of fresh fish, hinders fishermen's initiatives to improve quality through freezing, and even leads to the stagnation of cold storage facilities built by the government. The implications of this patronage structure are the sustainable exploitation of the economy, limiting innovation, and keeping fishermen in a circle of dependency. This research analyzes transformative empowerment approaches to create a more equitable and sustainable fisheries ecosystem.

Keywords: Patronage, Fishermen, Puger, Fish Quality, Pengambe', Fisheries Economics, Exploitation.

1. Introduction

The capture fisheries sector in Indonesia plays a vital role in the national economy and the social life of coastal communities. As a maritime country, Indonesia's potential for marine resources is abundant, making it one of the largest fish producers in the world (KKP, 2024). However, behind the high production figures, structural challenges in the fisheries supply chain often hamper the welfare of small- and medium-scale fishers. One of the crucial challenges is the issue of post-harvest product quality, which has a direct impact on the selling value of fish and fishermen's income.

Puger, located in Jember Regency, East Java, is one of the largest marine fish producing areas in the region. With its long coastline and marine wealth, Puger has enormous fishing potential. Ironically, despite the significant volume of fish catch, the quality of fish from Puger is often categorized as quality two (KW2), in contrast to the quality of fish from other areas such as Sendangbiru Beach in Malang which is known to be better (Kholifah, 2020). This phenomenon raises a fundamental question: why do regions with great potential produce relatively low-quality products?

This article argues that the low quality of fish in Puger is not just a technical problem in post-harvest handling, but is a direct and inseparable consequence of the deep-rooted and exploitative structure of patronage-client relations between fishermen and land fishermen known as pengambe'. The main hypothesis is that the dominance of pengambe' in the fisheries supply chain, especially through the practice of purchasing fish in fresh form, significantly hinders the quality improvement and innovation of fish freezing by fishermen. Furthermore, this has led to the non-operation of integrated cold storage facilities built by the government, because their existence threatens the hegemony of pengambe'. Ultimately, these patronage relationships structurally suck out the economic lives of fishermen, keeping them in a circle of dependency and inhibiting broader empowerment.

Understanding the dynamics of patronage in Puger is crucial to formulate an effective and sustainable empowerment strategy for the fishing community. This research aims to unravel how this informal power structure affects local economies and thwarts development interventions.

2. Methods

This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach to understand in depth the phenomenon of patronage relationships in the context of the Puger fishing community. This approach allowed researchers to explore the patterns of interaction, motivation of actors, as well as the structural impact of patronage relationships on fish quality and fishermen's welfare from the perspective of the participants. Descriptive qualitative research was chosen because it is suitable for highlighting the social complexity and meaning contained in economic behavior (Creswell, 2014).

The research strategy is exploratory and interpretive, seeking to uncover the meaning behind existing social practices and how they shape economic reality. The main data sources for this analysis come from the synthesis of in-depth discussions and an understanding of the dynamics of the field explored by the authors, supported by previous research experiences in similar locations (Kholifah, 2017; Kholifah, 2020; Kholifah et al., 2015; Kholifah et al., 2021; Kholifah, 2022). Ideally, in the actual research, primary data will be collected through in-depth interviews with various key actors such as fishermen, pengambe', village heads, local government representatives, as well as participatory observation at fish auction sites (TPI) and fishermen's settlement environments. Secondary data include the literature related to patron-client theory (Scott, 1976; Eisenstadt & Roniger, 1984), fisheries data of Jember Regency, as well as previous study reports on fishing communities.

Qualitative data analysis was carried out using thematic analysis. This process involves identifying, analyzing, and reporting key patterns or themes that emerge from existing data. These themes are then linked to the framework of patronage theory to build coherent arguments about how informal power relations affect the fisheries economy in Puger.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. The Dynamics of Patronage Relations in the Puger Fishing Community: The Role of the Pengambe'

The Puger fishing community, like many other traditional fishing communities in Indonesia, relies heavily on patterns of patronage-client relationships. In this context, land juraga, or familiarly called pengambe', serves as the dominant patron, while fishermen and fishery laborers act as clients. These relationships are built on a clear foundation of resource asymmetry, where the pengambe' has access to capital, market networks, and sometimes local political influence (Scott, 1976).

The role of pengambe' is very central in the economic life of Puger fishermen. They are the main provider of operational capital for fishermen to go to sea, including fuel costs, ice for fish preservation on ships, food provisions, and repair of fishing gear. Without a capital bailout from the fishermen, most fishermen, especially small fishermen who do not have their own capital, cannot go to sea. These loans are often informal, without strict written guarantees, but create strong debt-receivables bonds (Kholifah, 2022).

In return, fishermen are informally bound to sell all their catches exclusively to pengambe' who has provided capital. The prevailing profit-sharing system or purchasing scheme often puts fishermen in a weak bargaining position. Although there are mutually beneficial elements (fishermen can go to sea, fishermen get fish supplies), these structures tend to be more beneficial to patrons, which can reduce the purchase price of fishermen. It is a hallmark of patronage relationships in which patrons control vital access to resources, limiting client choice (Eisenstadt & Roniger, 1984).

3.2. Authoritative Dominance of Pengambe' and Its Implications on Fish Quality

The study's main hypothesis is that the dominance of the pengambe' manifests itself in their authority to purchase fish in fresh form as soon as the ship lands. This practice has significant implications for the quality of Puger fish which tends to be KW2. From the perspective of the pengambe', the purchase of fresh fish offers a number of advantages:

Cost Efficiency: They don't have to invest in freezing facilities or incur cold storage operating costs. Fresh fish can be directly distributed to local or regional markets.

Rapid Capital Turnaround: Fresh fish has a limited shelf life, thus forcing a quick turnaround from fishermen to the pengambe' and to the market, smoothing the cash flow of the pengambe'.

Supply Chain Control: By demanding fresh fish, pengambe' takes full control of the early stages of the supply chain. Fishermen have no option to delay sales for better handling or look for other buyers who might offer higher prices for frozen fish.

For fishermen, this practice means a lack of incentives and opportunities to carry out good post-harvest handling, especially the freezing process. While fishermen may be aware of the importance of better handling, they are hindered by several factors:

Lack of Market Demand/Guarantee: If the pengambe' as the main buyer only wants fresh fish, the fisherman has no market guarantee for the frozen fish they produce.

Investment and Operational Costs: Freezing equipment, even on a micro-scale, requires significant initial investment and ongoing operational (electricity) costs, which fishermen whose finances are tied to the fishermen cannot afford.

Financial Entanglement – Debts to pengambe' effectively lock fishermen into the existing system, making it difficult for them to take initiatives that go against patron preferences.

In contrast to Sendangbiru Beach, Malang, which may have a different supply chain system, where there is market demand for quality frozen fish or stronger fishermen's initiatives in post-harvest handling. In Puger, the dominance of this pengambe' effectively limits the space for fishermen to innovate and improve product quality, so that Puger fish continue to be trapped in the KW2 category.

3.3. Failure of Innovation and Intervention: The Case of Government Cold Storage

The case study that corroborates this hypothesis is the stagnation of integrated cold storage operations built by the government in Puger. This facility is supposed to be a solution to the problem of fish quality and provide added value. However, the reality on the ground shows otherwise. This failure cannot be separated from the dynamics of patronage that have been described.

Cold storage that does not function optimally indicates that development interventions that are only technical in nature without addressing the root of structural problems influenced by patronage are likely to fail. Pengambe', as a party benefiting from the status quo, may not have an incentive to encourage fishermen to use these facilities. In fact, the existence of functional cold storage can be a threat to their dominance, as it will provide fishermen with an alternative to store and sell their fish to other parties, or even do their own marketing, thus reducing dependence on fishermen'.

In this context, pengambe' acts as a "gatekeeper" who controls the flow of resources and information. They can passively or actively hinder the cold storage operation by not channeling information, not providing incentives for fishermen to use it, or even creating disincentives to keep fishermen tied to old practices. Kholifah (2020) highlights how socio-economic structures can create conflicts and influence reconciliation efforts, which is relevant in this case of cold storage.

3.4. Patronage as a Structure for Exploitation of the Fishermen's Economy

Based on the above analysis, the patronage relationship in Puger has gone beyond just asymmetrical interactions, but has developed into a structure of exploitation of the fishermen's economy.

Value-added restrictions: Fishermen, as primary producers, only get prices for fresh fish (KW2). They don't have the opportunity to enjoy the added value of the freezing process, further processing, or marketing to a more premium market. This added value is systematically absorbed by the pengambe' and the parties above it in the distribution chain.

Cycle of Poverty and Dependence: Low selling prices due to the quality of KW2 have a direct impact on fishermen's income. This meager income forces them to continue to rely on capital bailouts from the pengambe', creating a cycle of debt and dependency that is difficult to break. This is in line with the findings of Kholifah (2022) regarding the patronage business culture which, although sometimes a "social safeguard" in difficult times, often leads to a weak bargaining position for micro-entrepreneurs.

Innovation Stagnation and Quality Stagnation: Because the system is already patronized and there are no encouraging economic incentives, fishers do not have a strong motivation to innovate in post-harvest fishing or handling techniques. As a result, the quality of fish products from Puger is stagnant, making it difficult to compete in a more competitive market.

Barriers to Village Empowerment and Development: As Kholifah (2017) reviewed regarding village development, patronage structures can hinder the effectiveness of government programs or non-governmental organizations that aim to empower fishermen and improve their welfare. Efforts to assist the legality of micro enterprises (Kholifah et al., 2021) show the need to improve the position of fishermen, but patronage is often the biggest barrier.

4. Conclusion

The quality of KW2 fish in Puger, Jember, is not just an anomaly, but a manifestation of the complexity of the deep-rooted patronage relationship between fishermen and fishermen'. The authoritative dominance of pengambe' in the purchase of fresh fish has structurally hindered fishermen from improving the quality of products through freezing, even thwarting the operation of cold storage facilities built by the government. This relationship has evolved into an economic exploitation mechanism that perpetuates fishermen's dependence, limits innovation, and hinders the achievement of economic independence.

Policy and Action Recommendations: Addressing these issues requires a holistic and transformative approach, not just a technical one: Strengthening Fishermen's Economic Institutions: Prioritize the formation and strengthening of fishermen's cooperatives that are truly independent, transparent, and participatory. Cooperatives must be able to provide alternative capital for fishermen, manage freezing facilities (including existing cold storage), and open up direct market access to larger buyers and appreciate the quality of frozen fish.

Improved Access to Finance: Governments and financial institutions should create soft loan schemes that are easily accessible and tailored to the characteristics of fishermen's businesses, reducing dependence on fishermen's capital.

Revitalizing Cold Storage with a New Governance Model: Government cold storage must be reactivated with a management model that directly involves fishers (e.g. through cooperatives or BUMDes), and there must be market guarantees for frozen fish stored there.

Capacity Building and Literacy: Conduct intensive training for fishers on good post-harvest management (including freezing), financial management, and marketing strategies to increase their bargaining power.

The Role of Regulation and Law Enforcement: Governments need to review and, if necessary, issue stricter regulations to protect fishers from exploitative practices in the fisheries supply chain. **Sustainable Mentoring:** Long-term mentoring from the government, academia, and NGOs is needed to ensure the sustainability of empowerment programs and assist fishermen in facing transition challenges.

Suggestions for Further Research: Future research could expand on this study by conducting comparative studies between Puger and other fisheries areas that have better fish quality (such as Sendangbiru) to identify key differentiating factors. In addition, research can focus on evaluating the effectiveness of specific empowerment models aimed at loosening patronage ties in fishing communities.

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