

NEGOTIATING HIERARCHIES AT SEA: Patron-client relations and social mobility among Tegal fishers

[Received August 27th 2025; accepted January 10th 2026– DOI: 10.21463/shima.290]

Asnika Putri Simanjuntak

Universitas Riau, Indonesia <asnika.psimanjuntak@lecturer.unri.ac.id>

Alltop Amri Ya Habib

Universitas Riau, Indonesia <alltopamri@lecturer.unri.ac.id>

ABSTRACT: This article examines the dynamics of social stratification and mobility among fishing communities in Tegal, Central Java, focusing on how patron-client relations structure access to capital, labour, and markets. Drawing on fieldwork conducted in 2024 in Muarareja (involving small-scale fishing operations) and in Tegalsari (with larger vessels), the study employs a qualitative approach combining in-depth interviews, participant observation, and documentation. The analysis identifies three major strata: boat owners, skippers, and crew whose positions are determined by access to financial resources and fishing assets. Evidence shows upward mobility when crews or skippers accumulate savings or secure bank loans using land or house certificates, while downward mobility occurs when boat owners lose assets due to debt, poor catches, or mismanagement. Patron-client networks with banks and middlemen regulate capital flows and fish trade but also entrench dependency. Beyond economics, cultural meanings, boat ownership as prestige, auction halls as arenas of negotiation, and beliefs in mystical practices shape mobility trajectories. By integrating structural and cultural perspectives, the article contributes to understanding stratification and mobility in Indonesian fisheries and underscores the need for safer credit systems and transparent market mechanisms.

KEYWORDS: Coastal livelihoods, debt and dependency, social mobility, pathways, cultural economy

Introduction

Fishing communities around the world, particularly in Indonesia, are often characterised by complex social relations shaped by economic structures, ownership of production assets, and maritime culture. In Indonesia, fishers represent one of the most socially and economically vulnerable groups. This vulnerability is not only shaped by limited access to capital and natural resources but also by social structures that govern working relations within coastal communities (Kusnadi, 2002; Adhuri, 2013). Patron-client ties remain central in defining fisher's positions in the social hierarchy, particularly through debt relations, ownership of boats, and obligations to sell catches to specific buyers (Aida et al., 2020). In the Javanese context, stratification is clearly visible between *juragan* (boat owners), skippers, and crew members (*Anak Buah Kapal*, or ABK), yet this structure is not entirely rigid, as both upward

and downward mobility occur depending on access to capital, patronage, and social networks.

Tegal, on the north coast of Java (Figure 1), presents a particularly illustrative case where *juragan*, skippers, crew, and fish traders (*bakul*) are embedded in strong patron-client ties. A recent study by Nissa et al. (2024) reveals potential conflicts among small-scale fishers in Muarareja, Tegal, rooted in issues of stratification and patronage. These findings echo broader studies on coastal communities, where patron-client relations critically shape access to markets, social status, and mobility patterns (Roberts, 2022).



Figure 1 – Map showing position of Tegal city on the north coast of central Java (Google Maps, 2025).

While numerous studies have explored fisher's livelihoods and patron-client relations in Indonesia, most have concentrated on economic dimensions and structural poverty (Suleman et al, 2019; Pinem & Widiono, 2019). In contrast, fewer works address downward social mobility, even though this phenomenon is crucial for understanding the structural vulnerabilities of both *juragan* and crew members. Furthermore, cultural aspects such as the symbolic meaning of boat ownership, auction practices, and local belief systems like *pesugihan* remain underexamined in the academic discourse on stratification (Simanjuntak et al., 2025). Building upon these insights, this article seeks to analyse the stratification and mobility of fishers in Tegal City, with a particular focus on how patron-client relations mediate both upward and downward mobility. Drawing on qualitative data from in-depth interviews and field observations in Muarareja and Tegalsari, the article argues that fishers' hierarchies are not static but are continuously negotiated through cultural practices, patronage networks, and adaptive strategies amid socio-economic and ecological changes.

Literature Review

Social stratification has long been considered a crucial element in the organisation of society in classical sociology. Ferrol-Schulte et al. (2014) add that patron-client relations in tropical coastal communities may reinforce social and economic dependence, which often hinders long-term social change. In this context, understanding the influence of social capital and

cultural assets within the social structure is crucial, as they affect the movement of individuals and groups within the community. Patron-client systems have been widely documented in Southeast Asia and other coastal areas. In Indonesia, Kusnadi (2002) and Adhuri (2013) have shown how the ownership of boats and fishing gear creates long-term dependency for small-scale fishers. Global fisheries research also recognises these relationships as structural features of small-scale fishing economies (Béné, 2003; Allison & Ellis, 2001). To deepen the understanding of patron-client relations in the context of coastal fisheries, Elizabeth Drury O'Neill (2019) suggests that patron-client systems can help enhance individual resilience in the face of natural disasters, but they often come at the expense of the long-term sustainability of social-ecological systems. This is because patron-client relations facilitate access to capital to manage economic shocks, but in the long run, they may increase dependence on finite resources (O'Neill et al., 2019).

Social mobility in fishing communities is often twofold: upward mobility, when crew members accumulate capital and become skippers or boat owners, and downward mobility, when former boat owners lose assets and return to working as crew members. Most studies have tended to focus on upward mobility and the resilience of fishers (Allison & Ellis, 2001; Béné, 2003), while downward mobility has rarely been examined in depth. Roberts (2022) highlights the cultural dimensions of resilience strategies, showing how social norms influence mobility pathways. In Indonesia, Simanjuntak et al. (2025) emphasise broader processes of social change in West Sumatra's fishing communities, stressing the importance of social networks and local values in shaping mobility trajectories. In this context, the addition of Drury O'Neill (2019), which investigates fisheries responses to natural disasters, will enrich the understanding of social mobility in fishing communities influenced by external shocks such as natural disasters and climate change. Although the literature on poverty, livelihoods, and patronage in fisheries is rich, there are two significant gaps: (1) the limited discussion of downward mobility as a critical element of stratification, and (2) the underexplored cultural dimensions of fisher's hierarchies, including symbolic boat ownership, auction practices, and local beliefs. Previous work by Nissa et al. (2024) highlights how conflict among fishers in Tegal is shaped by social stratification and patronage but does not address long-term mobility patterns.

Béné (2003) and Allison & Ellis (2001) discuss patron-client systems in small-scale fisheries across various countries. However, their findings are less relevant to the context of fisheries in Indonesia, where the social and economic dynamics may differ significantly based on local conditions. Therefore, it is essential to examine the role of patron-client relationships within Indonesian fisheries, as highlighted by Kusnadi (2002) and Adhuri (2013), who more specifically link boat ownership and fishing gear to social-economic dependencies within coastal communities in Indonesia. This study contributes by filling these gaps, combining cultural and structural perspectives to examine how patron-client relations shape social mobility among Tegal fishers.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative approach to capture the dynamics of social stratification and mobility in fishing communities. Fieldwork was conducted in 2024 in two coastal villages

in Tegal city, Central Java: Muarareja, dominated by small-scale fishers using *jaring arad*,¹ and Tegalsari, characterised by larger vessels such as *cantrang*,² gillnets, and purse seines. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and documentation. A total of 25 informants were selected purposively to represent different social strata, including *juragan* (boat owners), skippers, crew members (ABK), and fish traders. Semi-structured interviews allowed flexibility in exploring themes of patron-client relations, debt dependency, auction practices, and cultural beliefs such as *pesugihan*, involving rituals that are thought to bring rapid wealth or prosperity, often linked to mystical or supernatural elements. It is practiced in some Indonesian communities, with variations depending on local customs. Field notes and direct observations of auction sites and fishing operations complemented the interviews. The qualitative data were analysed using thematic analysis, combining inductive coding with sensitising concepts from stratification and patron-client theory (Weber, 1946; Scott, 1972; Firth, 1966). Triangulation was employed by cross-checking interviews, observations, and secondary sources to enhance validity. The analysis focused on identifying patterns of upward and downward mobility, and how these were mediated by patronage, cultural values, and access to capital.

Results and Discussion

The findings of this study reveal the complex dynamics of stratification and mobility within the fishing communities of Tegal. Analysis of interview data, participant observations, and supporting documentation demonstrates that fishers' livelihoods are strongly influenced by patterns of patron-client relations, ownership of capital, and cultural values attached to fishing activities. These elements interact to shape both opportunities and constraints for individuals and groups in navigating social hierarchies. The discussion is organised into several thematic sections, beginning with an examination of social stratification within the community, followed by patterns of upward and downward mobility, and finally the role of patron-client networks and cultural meanings in sustaining or challenging existing hierarchies.

The social stratification of fishes in Tegal

The fieldwork identified a clear stratification within the fishing communities of Tegal, structured primarily by access to capital and control of fishing assets. Three main strata emerged: Boat owners, skippers, and crew. This stratification reflects both economic resources and authority at sea. Based on the fieldwork, the social layers of fishers in Tegal can be categorised into three main strata, as shown in Table 1, which shows that stratification among Tegal fishers is structured around ownership of boats and fishing gear, shaping both access to capital and authority at sea. This pattern is consistent with broader observations in Indonesian coastal communities, where economic differentiation is strongly mediated by access to productive assets (Satria, 2009; Susilowati, 2012).

¹ A traditional fishing net used by small-scale fishers, typically in shallow waters or fish gathering areas. It is commonly used in coastal regions by artisanal fishers for non-intensive fishing.

² A large fishing net similar to a trawl, used by fishing vessels to capture fish by dragging the net through the water or along the seafloor. It is used by larger boats to catch various fish species.

Strata	Characteristics	Access to Capital	Role on Board	Mobility
Boat Owner (<i>Juragan</i>)	Owens one or more vessels, sometimes also acts as skipper (small boats)	High: has vessels, can borrow from bank/middleman	Provides capital, hires crew, supervises operations	May experience stable upward position or decline if indebted
Skipper (<i>Nakhoda</i>)	Commands vessel operations, sometimes also owns small boats	Medium: dependent on boat owner	Leads crew, navigates, manages daily fishing	Can move upward to become boat owner
Crew (ABK)	Provides only labour, no ownership of gear/boat	Low: no access to formal capital	Works under skipper's command	Upward mobility possible if accessing loans; high risk of stagnation

Table 1 - The social stratification of Tegal fishers

Upward and downward mobilities

Social mobility among fishers in Tegal is dynamic, with many examples of both upward and downward trajectories. Upward mobility often occurs when crew members accumulate savings or obtain loans by mortgaging land or houses, enabling them to acquire boats. For example, one informant (Yatin, 53 years old) worked as a crew for more than three decades before purchasing his own boat with a bank loan: “rather than staying a crew forever, I wanted to move forward... borrowing from the bank with my house certificate was risky, but it was the only way to become a boat owner” (interview, 2024). In contrast, downward mobility also occurred. Some boat owners failed to manage their assets, fell into debt, or suffered from poor catches, leading them to sell their boats and return to being crew. For example, Kaedi, who once owned a boat inherited from his father, was forced to sell it after repeated losses: “I was cheated by my crew, the income was always less than the expenses, until I had no choice but to sell my boat, now I am back as crew at the age of 53” interview, 2024). Based on the testimonies of informants, upward and downward mobility patterns can be illustrated as in Table 2.

Informant	Quote (translated)	Theme
Boat Owner (small-scale)	“If you don’t own land or a house certificate, you cannot get a bank loan.”	Access to capital
Yatin (ex-crew → boat owner)	“Rather than staying crew forever, I wanted to move forward. Borrowing from the bank with my house certificate was risky, but it was the only way to become a boat owner.”	Upward mobility
Kaedi (ex-boat owner → crew)	“The income never covered expenses, so I had to sell my boat. Now I am back as crew at the age of 53.”	Downward mobility
Paing (ex-boat owner)	“Better to have no boat than be deceived by my crew again.”	Mismanagement and loss

Table 2 - Selected quotes on social mobility

The mobility trajectories observed in Tegal align with previous research showing that upward movement often requires mortgaging land or houses as collateral for bank loans (Satria & Matsuda, 2004; Fauzi, 2005). However, downward mobility caused by debt, poor catches, or mismanagement has received less attention in fisheries literature. Comparative studies in other regions of Indonesia also reveal that small-scale boat owners face high risks of falling back into wage labour when operational costs exceed revenues (Resosudarmo & Yamazaki, 2020). To further illustrate these patterns, the dynamics of upward and downward movement within the stratified structure of Tegal's fishers are depicted in Figure 2.

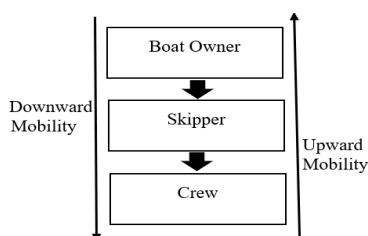


Figure 2 - Social Hierarchy and Mobility among Tegal Fishers

Figure 2 illustrates the layered structure of fishers' society in Tegal, where boat owners occupy the highest position, skippers function as mediators with authority at sea, and crew members remain the most vulnerable. The arrows indicate potential mobility pathways: upward trajectories when crew or skippers accumulate capital to acquire vessels, and downward shifts when boat owners lose assets and return as wage labourers. This dynamic resonates with studies in Indonesia and Southeast Asia, which emphasise that patron-client systems can both enable opportunities for advancement and reproduce vulnerabilities (Kusnadi, 2002; Adhuri, 2013).

Patron-Client Networks and Economic Circulation

The findings also demonstrate the importance of patron-client relations between fishers and external actors such as banks and middlemen. Boat owners often rely on bank loans to acquire vessels, while middlemen provide operational capital but bind fishers to selling their catch at lower prices. The Fish Auction Site (TPI) also regulates trade, though its role is mediated by patronage. This dynamic circulation of capital and dependency among actors is depicted in Figure 3, which maps the interconnections between *juragan*, skippers, crew, banks, middlemen, and the auction system.

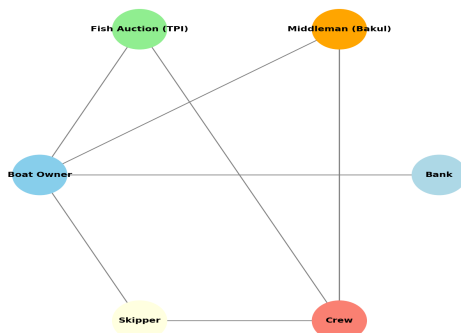


Figure 3 - Patron-client and economic circulation network among Tegal fishers.

Figure 3 illustrates how capital, labour, and fish circulate within Tegal's fishing economy. *Juragan* channel loans from banks or middlemen into production, skippers organise operations at sea, and crew contribute labour. Fish flow back into markets through auction halls or *bakul*, often reinforcing asymmetric dependencies. The findings confirm that patron-client relations are the dominant social mechanism structuring access to capital, gear, and labour in Tegal's fishing communities. In Tegal, boat ownership and debt obligations become central instruments of control, where *juragan* allocate work and distribute revenue, while bank loans and middlemen (*bakul*) reinforce dependency. Indonesian ethnographies similarly emphasise how ownership and credit perpetuate dependency (Kusnadi, 2002; Adhuri, 2013; Satria, 2009).

The social dynamics of Tegal fishers

Upward mobility in Tegal crew members becoming skippers or boat owners illustrates how economic, social, and cultural capital intersect (Bourdieu, 1986). The case of Yatin, who mortgaged his house certificate to buy a boat, aligns with findings that rural households mobilise land and property to secure access to credit (Fauzi, 2005; Resosudarmo & Yamazaki, 2020). Similar trajectories have been documented across Indonesia, where ABK often accumulate savings or leverage kinship networks to transition into ownership (Kusnadi, 2002; Adhuri, 2013; Pomeroy, 2012). Southeast Asian fisheries research also shows how trust within patronage relations can facilitate co-ownership and upward progression (Firth, 1966; Johnson, 2010; Allison & Ellis, 2001). At the same time, comparative studies in West Sumatra and South Sulawesi highlight the crucial role of cultural norms in shaping aspirations for mobility (Simanjuntak et al., 2025).

While upward mobility has received significant attention, our findings underscore the risks of downward trajectories. Small-scale boat owners face precarious margins, where operational costs for fuel, gear, and maintenance often exceed revenues, leading to debt and asset loss. The stories of Kaedi and Paing illustrate this fragility, echoing Roberts (2022), who notes that fisheries literature rarely addresses downward mobility. Comparative work in other Indonesian coasts shows similar patterns, where failed investments push owners back into wage labour (Resosudarmo & Yamazaki, 2020; Satria & Matsuda, 2004). Global studies on small-scale fisheries also confirm that reliance on unstable credit structures exposes households to cycles of vulnerability (Allison & Ellis, 2001; Béné, 2003; Johnson, 2010). Thus, patronage can create opportunities for upward mobility but simultaneously amplifies vulnerability when market risks and debt burdens accumulate.

Significance and implications

The empirical patterns documented in Tegal carry both substantive and theoretical significance. They point to the urgency of developing safer credit modalities, such as repayment schemes that adjust to seasonal variability, in order to reduce the risks of downward mobility among small-scale boat owners (FAO, 2021; World Bank, 2020). At the same time, reforms in fish marketing particularly those that diminish dependence on middlemen through more transparent auction mechanisms, and the use of digital platforms could strengthen fishers' autonomy while enhancing market efficiency (Allison & Ellis, 2001; Béné, 2003). Capacity building in financial literacy and organisational management is also essential, especially for skippers aspiring to transition into ownership positions (Kusnadi, 2002; Pomeroy, 2012). From a scholarly perspective, the findings highlight the importance of theorising downward mobility within patron-client systems and of integrating symbolic-

cultural dimensions such as the prestige of boat ownership, the auction hall as a status arena, and mystical beliefs into models of stratification and resilience (Roberts, 2022; Simanjuntak et al., 2025). Taken together, these insights demonstrate that stratification and mobility in Indonesian fisheries must be understood through a synthesis of structural, economic, and cultural perspectives, offering both practical and theoretical contributions to the study of maritime communities.

Conclusion

This study has shown that stratification among Tegal fishers is shaped by patron-client relations, ownership of capital, and access to credit. The findings highlight a layered social structure in which boat owners hold authority through financial and asset control, skippers mediate operations, and crew remain the most vulnerable. Mobility within this system is dynamic: upward trajectories emerge when crew leverage savings or collateral to acquire vessels, while downward trajectories reveal the fragility of small-scale ownership under debt, poor catches, and mismanagement. Beyond economics, symbolic meanings such as the prestige of owning boats, the auction hall as a status arena, and beliefs in mystical practices add cultural depth to fishers' hierarchies. Theoretically, the study underscores the importance of analysing both upward and downward mobility within patron-client systems, and of incorporating cultural dimensions into models of fisheries stratification. Practically, the results point to the need for safer credit systems, transparent market mechanisms, and financial literacy programs to support fishers' resilience. By integrating structural, economic, and symbolic perspectives, this article contributes to a more nuanced understanding of stratification and mobility in Indonesian fishing communities, while offering insights relevant to broader studies of island and coastal societies. Ultimately, this study demonstrates that understanding stratification and mobility in coastal societies requires moving beyond economics, by also recognising the cultural and symbolic forces that shape fishers' lives.

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