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Moral Economy and the Agency of Independent Fishermen on the Coast of Ujung Baji Village, Takalar Regency

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ABSTRACT

*Maritime anthropological studies in Indonesia have historically focused on the dependency narrative of fishermen within the patron-client (*punggawa-sawi*) structure. Challenging this deterministic view, this study analyzes the emergence of independent fishermen on the coast of Ujung Baji Village, Takalar Regency, South Sulawesi, as a phenomenon of moral resistance and social praxis. This research employs an intensive ethnographic method conducted in Ujung Baji Village. Its purpose is to deconstruct the driving factors, construction processes, and implications of fishermen's independence. The findings show that the choice to become independent is not driven solely by economic calculation, but by a crisis of moral legitimacy in the patronage system, which is perceived as having betrayed its social contract. This independence is constructed through the fishermen's reflexive agency, manifested in concrete practices such as gaining control over the means of production and reconfiguring the household into an autonomous production unit. Supported by internal solidarity and horizontal social networks, these everyday practices cumulatively give rise to an alternative social order, transforming survival strategies into a new, dignity-rooted identity. By integrating Scott's moral economy theory and Giddens's structuration theory, this study concludes that independent fishermen are not an anomaly but a reflection of the birth of a new social structure from below, one that fundamentally corrects the singular narrative of coastal society.*

Keywords: Agency; Independent Fishermen; Moral Economy; Patron-Client; Structuration.

INTRODUCTION

The study of coastal communities in Indonesia, particularly within the field of maritime anthropology, has historically been dominated by the patron-client paradigm (Fairusy, 2018). This relational structure, known in the Bugis-Makassar context as the *punggawa-sawi* relationship, has served as the primary analytical framework for understanding the socio-economic organization of fishing communities. This relationship defines a hierarchical bond between capital owners (*punggawa*) and laborer fishermen (*sawi*), which is interwoven through a series of economic dependencies and cultural norms (Pelras, 2021). The dominance of this paradigm in the literature has forged a largely uniform grand narrative about the lives of fishermen (Miñarro et al., 2016).

Historically, the *punggawa-sawi* system is rooted in past feudal social structures. Within this system, the patron functions as a protector and a provider of access to resources, while the client offers loyalty and labor in return. Over time, this relationship transformed and became institutionalized within the capture fisheries sector, especially in governing working capital, technology, and the distribution of marine yields (Acciaioli, 2004). This structure not only regulates production but also reproduces a social order that positions the *punggawa* at the center of economic networks and symbolic power at the local level (Alfia, 2023).

Nevertheless, simplifying the *punggawa-sawi* relationship as merely an exploitative one is a reductionist view that overlooks its cultural complexities. Ahimsa-Putra (2007) asserts that patron-client relationships in Indonesia are fluid and negotiable social networks, laden with the exchange of symbolic values. In the

Bugis-Makassar context, this relationship also involves exchanges of Honor (*siri'*) and social responsibilities that cannot be measured transactionally. Client loyalty, as noted by Syarifuddin et al. (2022), is often reinforced by kinship ties and communal norms, not solely by economic calculation.

However, behind these cultural complexities, various studies consistently highlight the problematic aspects of patronage. The system has been shown to engender structural inequality, hinder the economic autonomy of fishermen, and often trap them in perpetual debt mechanisms (Satria & Matsuda, 2004). In many cases, debt no longer functions as capital. Instead, it becomes an effective instrument of social control, ensuring the loyalty and compliance of the *sawi* and thereby significantly limiting their social and economic mobility (Muhartono & Nurlaili, 2018).

The near-exclusive academic focus on this patron-client structure has inadvertently created a significant analytical gap in Indonesian maritime anthropology. The hegemony of this dependency narrative risks obscuring, or even negating, the existence of alternative relational practices that emerge outside this dominant framework. The social phenomenon most overlooked due to this theoretical bias is the existence of independent fishermen: social actors who consciously choose to operate autonomously, beyond the confines of the *punggawa-sawi* system.

The presence of independent fishermen is an anomaly that challenges deterministic views of coastal society (Chalid & Manji, 2021). They represent local agency, innovation in economic practices, and a form of resistance against a social order that has long been considered established and inevitable. This phenomenon opens new analytical avenues for understanding how individuals and groups in subordinate positions navigate, negotiate, and even alter the structures that constrain them. However, the scarcity of studies specifically examining the strategies and meanings of this independence has led to the grand narrative of maritime society remaining monolithic and incomplete.

To deconstruct this phenomenon, a theoretical framework is required that can transcend the dualism between structure and agency. This study proposes a synthesis of Scott's moral economy theory and Giddens's structuration theory. The moral economy approach is employed to analyze why fishermen choose an independent path, viewing it as a response to the collapsing moral legitimacy of the patronage system. Meanwhile, Giddens's structuration theory is used to explain how the small, routine actions in the daily lives of these independent fishermen can slowly produce and reproduce an alternative social structure.

This research is situated on the coast of Ujung Baji Village, Sanrobone Sub-district, Takalar Regency, South Sulawesi Province. This region was chosen because it is a social arena where strong maritime traditions intertwine with significant dynamics of social change. On one hand, the *punggawa-sawi* system still holds influence. On

the other hand, a prominent community of independent fishermen has emerged. This location provides an ideal social laboratory for ethnographically observing the tensions, negotiations, and construction of independence in everyday life.

Thus, the primary contribution of this research is not merely to “enrich” the literature, but to explicitly challenge and correct the singular narrative of fishermen’s dependency that has long dominated the discourse of maritime anthropology. By placing agency and moral resistance at the center of the analysis, this study aims to offer a more dynamic and polyphonic model for understanding coastal societies. The originality of this research lies in its theoretical synthesis and its focus on the practice of independence as a process of social reconstruction from below.

Based on this background, this study aims to: (1) Analyze the social, economic, and moral factors that drive the emergence of independent fishermen amidst the dominance of the *punggawa-sawi* system; (2) Describe and understand how these forms of independence are constructed, practiced, and maintained in daily life; and (3) Examine the implications of the existence of independent fishermen for the broader coastal social structure. In practical terms, the findings of this research are expected to provide valuable input for formulating coastal community empowerment policies that are more participatory and conducive to strengthening the autonomy of local actors.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach with an ethnographic design to answer the research questions concerning how and why the phenomenon of independent fishermen emerges, and how this independence is constructed and maintained within a specific social context. This approach was chosen for its ability to capture the complexity of social reality from the actor’s point of view (emic perspective), which is unattainable through quantitative methods (Creswell, 2013). By immersing oneself in the daily life of the community, the researcher can gain a profound understanding of its practices, meanings, and social processes. It aligns with the research objective to deconstruct the agency and resistance of fishermen outside the dominant structure. In this capacity, the researcher becomes the primary instrument for interpreting the lifeworld of the independent fishermen (Spradley, 2006).

Field data collection was conducted intensively in Ujung Baji Village, Sanrobone Sub-district, Takalar Regency. Informants were selected through a combination of purposive and snowball sampling techniques. In the initial stage, key informants were purposively selected based on specific criteria, including fishermen who had been operating independently for at least one year, alongside several fishermen still bound to the *punggawa-sawi* system as a comparison group. Subsequently, through snowball sampling, the informant network was expanded to include family members

(particularly wives involved in managing the catch), community leaders, and former *punggawa* to obtain a holistic understanding.

To acquire rich and layered data, three primary data collection techniques were utilized. *First*, participant observation, where the researcher was directly involved in various community activities, such as going to sea, mending nets, participating in coffee shop conversations, and attending family events. *Second*, semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted to explore the life histories, experiences, perceptions, and motivations of informants regarding their choice to become independent. *Third*, a documentation study was conducted by collecting secondary data, including village records, photographs of fishermen's activities, and the researcher's field notes, to complement the primary data.

The data analysis process was conducted simultaneously with data collection. This process followed the interactive analysis framework proposed by Miles et al. (2014), which comprises three concurrent flows of activity: data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. The analysis was dialogical, combining inductive and deductive approaches. Inductively, key themes such as "moral tension," "family solidarity," and "survival strategies" emerged directly from the informants' narratives and practices. Then, deductively, these themes were analyzed and interpreted more deeply through the theoretical lenses of moral economy and structuration to systematically address the research objectives.

To ensure the validity and credibility of the findings, this study implemented two main strategies. *First*, data source triangulation was employed by systematically comparing and cross-verifying information obtained from interviews, field observation notes, and documentary data. *Second*, a process of member checking was conducted, where the researcher's initial interpretations were communicated back to several key informants. It was to ensure that the meanings constructed by the researcher did not deviate from their experiences and perspectives. These methodological steps ensure that the analysis presented in this study has a strong empirical foundation and is scientifically accountable.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. The Dominant Structure: Rationality and Ambiguity in the *Punggawa-Sawi* Relationship

The socio-economic structure in Ujung Baji Village, as observed in many other coastal communities in South Sulawesi, is fundamentally shaped by the patron-client relationship, as manifested in the *punggawa-sawi* system. Far from being a mere labor contract, this relationship is an established social institution that governs access to productive resources and is legitimized by deeply rooted cultural norms (Handoko et al., 2022). Field findings indicate that this relationship is understood by the fishermen as a historical and structural inevitability.

Dependence on a *punggawa* is not seen as a choice but as the only rational path to go to sea, given the high capital costs for boats, engines, and fishing gear. It is clearly illustrated in the account of Daeng Beta, a senior fisherman:¹

*“It has always been this way. My father also followed a *punggawa*, and so do I. Without a *punggawa*, we could never go to sea. The capital is too large. But, well, sometimes we don’t even know if we’ve made a profit or a loss. We just finish the work and wait for our share.”*

This statement confirms classic findings in maritime anthropology, which suggest that patronage serves as a risk-distribution mechanism and a provider of capital access when the state or formal financial institutions are absent (Acciaoli, 2004; Pelras, 2021). For fishermen like Daeng Beta, being a *sawi* is a pragmatic survival strategy. This logic fosters a normalization process wherein dependency is considered a “social destiny,” an order passed down between generations and accepted without much question (Nuris, 2024).

However, behind this pragmatic rationality, field data consistently reveal a profound ambiguity within the *punggawa-sawi* relationship. The key phrase in Daeng Beta’s testimony, “sometimes we don’t even know if we’ve made a profit or a loss,” is representative of the uncertainty and information asymmetry inherent in this system. The relationship, which appears symbiotic on the surface—the *punggawa* provides capital, the *sawi* provides labor—is often opaque in practice. Non-transparent profit-sharing mechanisms, coupled with operational cost deductions entirely controlled by the *punggawa*, place the *sawi* in a very weak bargaining position.

This ambiguity is further exacerbated by the debt mechanism, which can transform from an economic buffer into an instrument of social control, as described by Satria and Matsuda (2004) in other contexts. An active *sawi*, Anwar, voiced the structural dilemma he faces with resignation:²

*“If I wanted to leave the *punggawa*, I would need my own boat. But that’s a dream. I can ask for help, yes. But I also have to be obedient. Sometimes I work, but I don’t even know where my money goes. But what can I do, I have no choice.”*

This quote sharply illustrates how patronage creates a structured dependency. On one hand, the fishermen are aware of the potential for exploitation and injustice (“do not even know where my money goes”). On the other hand, the lack of viable economic alternatives (“but that is a dream”) and the obligation to conform to social norms leave them trapped. This condition creates a latent tension: an awareness of powerlessness that, although not always articulated as an open protest, becomes the psychological foundation for the desire to seek an

¹Daeng Beta, Interview, Ujung Baji Village, May 10, 2022.

²Anwar, Interview, Ujung Baji Village, May 11, 2022.

alternative path (Vellanda et al., 2021). Thus, the dominant structure in Ujung Baji Village is not a static and entirely accepted order, but an arena fraught with ambiguity, silent negotiations, and the potential for internal fissures.

B. The Crisis of Moral Legitimacy: A Turning Point Towards Independence

The primary driving factor that triggers the emergence of independent fishermen in Ujung Baji Village is not merely a rational economic calculation, but rather a crisis of moral legitimacy within the existing patronage system. To understand this dynamic, the moral economy framework proposed by Scott (1994) offers a highly relevant analytical lens. Scott argues that in subsistence societies, such as those of peasants or fishermen, economic relations cannot be separated from communal moral norms. The patron-client relationship, in this case, the *punggawa-sawi* system, can only survive and be considered legitimate as long as it fulfills an unwritten “moral contract.” In this contract, the patron guarantees the client’s right to subsistence (the subsistence ethic) and protection. When this obligation is violated and the relationship shifts towards exploitation, what Scott terms a “moral betrayal” occurs, which in turn can trigger various forms of resistance from subordinate groups.

Ethnographic findings in Ujung Baji Village vividly demonstrate how this process of “moral betrayal” occurs and is experienced by the fishermen. The experience of Ambo, who served as a *sawi* for nearly two decades, serves as a powerful testament to this turning point in consciousness. He recounted:³

“I used to work on someone else’s boat, everything was provided: the boat, gasoline, ice, nets. But over time, I felt that I was working hard, but my life wasn’t changing. My debts just kept growing. I told myself: if it goes on like this, I’m only working to pay off debt.”

Ambo’s narrative represents a fundamental shift in perception. The relationship he once accepted as a system for providing capital (“everything was provided”) is now reinterpreted as a system of structural impoverishment (“my life was not changing, my debts just kept growing”). The realization that his hard work only led to the accumulation of debt, rather than an improvement in welfare, is a clear manifestation of the collapse of the moral contract. The *punggawa* in this case is no longer seen as a protector of subsistence, but as an accumulator of surplus operating outside the norms of fairness held by the community.

This moral crisis is not only felt in the productive sphere at sea but also permeates the domestic space and affects household dynamics. This anxiety was sharply articulated by Nining, the wife of a fisherman who later chose the path of independence, as she questioned the logic behind her husband’s labor:⁴

³Ambo, Interview, Ujung Baji Village, May 18, 2022.

⁴Nining, Interview, Ujung Baji Village, May 20, 2022.

“Sometimes my husband comes home with a lot of fish, but the money he brings isn’t enough. I ask, and he says it’s been deducted for debt, for ice, for diesel fuel. Eventually, I said, what’s the point of working day and night if we’re still struggling?”

Nining’s rhetorical question, “what is the point of working day and night if we are still struggling?” is an expression of frustration with a system that no longer makes moral sense. It shows that the evaluation of the patronage system’s fairness is conducted not only by the male fishermen but also by women within the household who feel the direct impact of income uncertainty. When the fruits of hard labor can no longer guarantee a decent livelihood (Anggariani et al., 2020), the foundation of trust propping up the *punggawa-sawi* relationship begins to erode significantly.

In response to this crisis of legitimacy, Scott refers to “everyday forms of resistance” that emerge. This resistance is not confrontational but is hidden in small practices. One of its earliest forms is the act of “stealing” opportunities to act autonomously. The experience of Musdalim perfectly illustrates this process, where a minor act becomes a turning point that sparks awareness and self-confidence:⁵

“At that time, I caught quite a lot of fish, but at the distribution, I only received 200 thousand rupiah. I did the math, and it didn’t make sense. The next day, I sold some of the fish myself to a neighbor. It turned out I made more than 300 thousand. From that moment, I started to gain confidence.”

This act of covertly selling fish, although seemingly trivial, constitutes a form of political praxis (Rusydi et al., 2021). It is a moment where a social actor consciously tests and proves that the existing structure is indeed unjust and that a more profitable alternative exists outside of it. The self-confidence that grows from this experience becomes the initial capital for a larger reflective process. This process, within the framework of Giddens’s structuration theory, can be understood as the rise of agency. Thus, it can be concluded that the primary driver of fishermen’s independence in Ujung Baji Village is not merely economic pressure, but a profound moral evaluation of a system perceived to have betrayed the values of fairness and livelihood.

C. The Construction of Agency: Initial Practices and Economic Autonomy

If the moral crisis explains why fishermen choose another path, then the process of constructing independence is about how they actively build that path. This process does not occur in a revolutionary manner; instead, it unfolds through a series of concrete, measured actions born from the fishermen’s capacity for agency. To dissect this process, Giddens’s structuration theory provides a robust conceptual framework. Giddens rejects the view that individuals are passive

⁵Musdalim, Interview, Ujung Baji Village, May 21, 2022.

victims of social structures. He introduces the concept of agency as the capacity of actors to reflexively monitor their actions and the surrounding social context, and then intervene to alter circumstances. This conscious action, aimed at changing the course of history, is what he terms praxis.

In Ujung Baji Village, this agency is manifested in initial actions that fundamentally change the fishermen's position from mere laborers to autonomous producers. The most significant step is the effort to own their means of production, even on a minimal scale. The story of Nasir serves as an archetype of this process, in which he consciously breaks out of the cycle of dependency through gradual capital accumulation:⁶

"I don't want to be dependent forever. It was difficult at first, but I slowly bought a small engine, saved money to buy my own net. It's not big, but it's enough for two people to go to sea. I feel more at peace working like this. I can calculate all the earnings myself."

Nasir's act of buying a small engine and his net is a praxis in the purest Giddensian sense. It is not just an economic decision but a political act that severs one of the primary knots of dependency on the *punggawa*: control over the means of production. By owning his equipment, he reclaims autonomy over his labor process. His statement, "I can calculate all the earnings myself," underscores the shift from an opaque and asymmetrical economy to one that is transparent and controllable. This action, though small, directly intervenes in and begins to alter the established structure of production relations.

Furthermore, this construction of agency is not confined to the productive sphere at sea but also extends to the realms of distribution and marketing on land (Kurniawati, 2017), where women often play a central role. The ability of independent fishermen to survive often depends on the innovations they build into the supply chain. Hasna, the wife of an independent fisherman, describes how she actively creates alternative market channels:⁷

"I sell my husband's catch at the Mangindara Market. The small fish I sell by the kilogram, and the bigger ones I offer to the food stalls (warung). It's decent, sometimes I can set aside some shopping money. We get to manage our own finances."

The activities undertaken by Hasna are an integral part of constructing independence. She is not merely a passive seller but a distribution manager who performs market segmentation ("the small fish I sell by the kilogram, and the bigger ones I offer to the food stalls") and manages the household finances autonomously ("we get to manage our own finances"). According to Giddens (2010), it is routine practices like these that slowly but surely reproduce social structures. Every time Hasna sells fish directly at the market, she is bypassing the distribution channels

⁶Nasir, Interview, Ujung Baji Village, May 22, 2022.

⁷Hasna, Interview, Ujung Baji Village, May 23, 2022.

monopolized by the *punggawa*. At the same time, she is building an alternative, household-based economic structure.

Ultimately, these initial actions, both at sea and on land, yield something that transcends financial gain: a sense of freedom and dignity. This feeling was expressed straightforwardly by La Madi, who compared his current life with his past as a *sawi*:⁸

“I know the income isn’t large, but I’m not being chased by debt. I know I’m working for my family, not to pay for the boss’s motorcycle or fuel. That’s what makes me feel free.”

The sense of being “free” that La Madi feels is the fruit of the economic autonomy he successfully reclaimed. It is a restoration of the subsistence ethic, as analyzed through the lens of Scott. Within this ethic, the primary goal of labor is not wealth accumulation but a tranquil and dignified livelihood (Sayful, 2020). Thus, the construction of agency among independent fishermen is a dialectical process. It is born from a moral evaluation of the old structure, materialized through concrete economic practices, and ultimately results in a new, more autonomous and humane social order.

D. The Household as a Production Arena: Solidarity and the Reconfiguration of Labor

The sustainability of fishermen’s independence in Ujung Baji Village cannot be understood without positioning the household as the primary arena of production and the central locus of social solidarity. If the initial act of becoming independent is an expression of individual agency, its persistence is fundamentally supported by the reconfiguration of labor within the family unit (Muis, 2022). Field findings consistently show that the production system of independent fishermen shifts the locus of labor from a vertical relationship (*punggawa-sawi*) to a horizontal network based on kinship ties. This process effectively transforms the household from a mere unit of consumption into an integrated unit of production.

The most apparent manifestation of this reconfiguration is the flexible and complementary division of labor among family members. Limited capital and the small scale of the enterprise encourage the optimization of internal human resources. The experience of Daeng Kasim provides a representative illustration of how family solidarity becomes the foundation for the practice of independence:⁹

“If I pull the nets by myself, I’m not strong enough. My son usually comes along, helps lift the fish. My wife handles selling them. We work together, so even though it’s small, the earnings are enough.”

An analysis of this narrative reveals an internally organized production model. There is a clear yet non-rigid division of labor. The husband and son operate

⁸La Madi, Interview, Ujung Baji Village, May 24, 2022.

⁹Daeng Kasim, Interview, Ujung Baji Village, May 26, 2022.

in the production sphere (fishing), while the wife oversees the post-production sphere (processing and sales). The statement “we work together” signifies a collective ethos that replaces the wage-based logic of the patronage system. In the framework of Giddens’s structuration theory, this practice of “working together” is a routine that actively reproduces a new social structure. This structure is an order where labor relations are no longer based on power and subordination, but on trust and a shared purpose.

More than just a division of labor, this reconfiguration also gives rise to a significant shift in power relations within the household, particularly through the strengthening of women’s roles. In the *punggawa-sawi* system, women often occupy a marginal position, merely receiving the leftover earnings their husbands bring home. Conversely, in the independent system, women become crucial economic actors. They not only manage domestic finances but also act as autonomous distribution managers. Sitti’s statement sharply captures the essence of this transformation:¹⁰

“I am not just a wife. I help calculate expenses, help guard the catch, and sometimes I’m the one who takes it to the market. We are used to working this way, there is no boss, no one giving orders.”

The key phrase “there is no boss, no one giving orders” is a powerful symbolic declaration. It signifies the collapse of the hierarchy that characterized the *punggawa-sawi* relationship, replaced by an egalitarian ethos of partnership. Sitti positions herself not as a subordinate but as an equal working partner who holds authority in economic decision-making. It is a tangible form of empowerment born from below, where a change in the economic structure directly alters gender and power dynamics at the micro level.

Ultimately, by taking over the functions of production, distribution, and risk management, the independent fisherman’s household has effectively become a new moral-economic institution. From Scott’s perspective, the family now fulfills the protective and subsistence-guaranteeing functions that the patronage system failed to provide. The solidarity that is built is no longer based on indebtedness to a patron but on affective ties, shared responsibility, and the collective goal of a better future. Thus, the reorganization of production within the household is not merely a technical adjustment but a profound social and symbolic praxis that lays the foundation for the sustainability of the alternative social structure they are building.

E. The Subsistence Ethic in Practice: Adaptive Strategies and Horizontal Networks

Breaking away from the patronage structure does not automatically place independent fishermen in a secure and stable economic space. On the contrary,

¹⁰Sitti, Interview, Ujung Baji Village, May 28, 2022.

they are directly confronted with various risks—ecological, market, and social—without the buffer of a patron. In this state of vulnerability, they develop a series of survival strategies that are not based on profit maximization logic. Their strategies, however, are based on what Scott refers to as the subsistence ethic. This principle prioritizes security and livelihood sustainability over wealth accumulation, which is manifested in three primary practices: ecological adaptation, income diversification, and the strengthening of horizontal solidarity networks.

The first practice is a profound adaptation to the rhythms and uncertainties of nature. Unlike large-scale fishermen who attempt to conquer nature with technology, the independent fishermen of Ujung Baji Village work with nature. They rely on local knowledge accumulated over generations to manage risk. Rahman, who only uses a small boat, describes this strategy clearly:¹¹

“When the moon is bright, I don’t go far. The fish usually go deeper, they’re hard to catch. I wait for the dark moon, then I go sea fishing at night. If the wind is strong, I just stay home, mend my nets, or help my wife sell things.”

Rahman’s actions demonstrate a sophisticated ecological rationality. His decision not to go to sea in unfavorable conditions is not a sign of laziness but an intelligent calculation to save on operational costs and energy. His knowledge of lunar cycles, fish behavior, and wind patterns becomes his primary capital. It is a form of proactive risk management rooted in a deep understanding of the maritime environment, a crucial asset that allows them to survive with limited resources.

The second prominent practice is household income diversification as a form of economic safety net. When income from the sea declines due to bad weather or a nil catch, the families of independent fishermen activate alternative sources of income on land. The logic behind this is to ensure “the kitchen fire keeps burning,” a tangible embodiment of the subsistence ethic. Halimah, a fisherman’s wife, recounted:¹²

“If the sea is quiet, I start selling cakes in front of the house. My husband helps deliver them to the neighbors on his motorbike. The money isn’t much, but it can buy rice and oil.”

This strategy confirms that the relevant unit of analysis is not the individual fisherman but the household as an adaptive economic unit. The “cake selling” business run by Halimah, though seemingly small, serves a vital function in stabilizing the family’s economy. It demonstrates flexibility and creativity in the face of uncertainty. The primary priority is the fulfillment of basic needs (“to buy rice and oil”), not the mere pursuit of profit.

¹¹Rahman, Interview, Ujung Baji Village, May 29, 2022.

¹²Halimah, Interview, Ujung Baji Village, May 30, 2022.

The third practice, perhaps the most socially significant, is the construction of horizontal solidarity networks. This finding directly challenges the view of [Satria and Matsuda \(2004\)](#), who emphasize the vulnerability of fishermen outside the patronage system. While it is true that independent fishermen lose access to the vertical protection of a *punggawa*, they do not become isolated, atomized individuals. Instead, they actively build collective protection mechanisms based on reciprocity and mutual trust. Nurdin, an independent fisherman, explained the logic behind this network:¹³

"I know how hard it is to find buyers if you don't have regular customers. So if someone asks me to sell their fish, I help. The next day, if I need help, they help me too. We all know each other's situation."

The statement "we all know each other's situation" is the key to this ethic of solidarity. The resulting network functions as a substitute for the institution of patronage but with egalitarian and non-hierarchical relations. This network is established through the sharing of equipment, ice, and mutual assistance in marketing. In Giddens's framework, these practices of reciprocity become institutionalized through repeated and continuous action. This process ultimately creates an alternative social structure that serves as a communal safety net. Thus, the survival strategies of independent fishermen are not merely individual tactics but a collective praxis that consciously builds a new, more just and resilient social order.

F. The Micro-Politics of the Everyday: Structural Reproduction and Autonomous Sovereignty

The implications of the emergence of independent fishermen in Ujung Baji Village transcend a mere shift in economic patterns. This phenomenon marks the emergence of a new social order, characterized by fundamentally different practices, values, and power relations. This transformation is not mobilized by external forces, such as state or NGO intervention, but instead grows organically from below ([Chalid & Manji, 2021](#)). This process can be analyzed as a form of "micro-politics"—an arena of power contestation and negotiation that occurs within the routine, small-scale practices of everyday life. This politics does not take the form of demonstrations but is embodied in every autonomous decision made by the independent fishermen.

In the *punggawa-sawi* system, power is hegemonically centralized in the figure of the patron. He controls not only capital but also work schedules, the flow of market information, and even the domestic decisions of his clients. In contrast, the structure built by independent fishermen is decentralized. Power is now distributed among household units that operate autonomously. This shift gives rise to what the fishermen themselves interpret as a form of sovereignty.

¹³Nurdin, Interview, Ujung Baji Village, June 1, 2022.

Syamsuddin, who was a *sawi* for many years, articulated this feeling very clearly:¹⁴

“Before, I couldn’t choose what time to leave, or who to sell to. Now, I can arrange everything myself. Whether I want to sell at the market, or to a collector, it’s up to me. I am the one who decides.”

The “sovereignty” felt by Syamsuddin is the core of this micro-politics. It is sovereignty over their bodies (when to work), over the fruits of their labor (to whom to sell), and over information (setting the price). In the framework of Giddens’s structuration theory, every time an independent fisherman like Syamsuddin makes an autonomous decision—“I am the one who decides”—he is performing a praxis. This action, when replicated by other independent fishermen and repeated day after day, cumulatively not only challenges but also actively reproduces an alternative social structure that operates outside the logic of patronage control.

Viewed from the perspective of Scott’s moral economy, this micro-politics is a manifestation of sustained moral resistance. It is a quiet yet firm rejection of an order perceived as exploitative. Every independent decision is a renegotiation of the meaning of labor and the legitimacy of power. Instead of accepting their fate as subordinates, independent fishermen actively redefine their position as sovereign economic actors. Their actions are based on the principles of fairness and sustainability they believe in, not on obedience to a hierarchy.

One of the main pillars of this new sovereignty is the democratization of information. In the old system, information about fish prices and market conditions was a scarce resource monopolized by the *punggawa* to maintain his bargaining position. In the new structure built by independent fishermen, information becomes a communal asset shared horizontally to strengthen their collective position. This practice was expressed by Makkulawu, *“if I get a good price at the market, I also tell my neighbors. So they don’t get sold short. We look out for each other.”*¹⁵

This act of “looking out for each other” is a highly significant micro-political practice. It transforms information from a tool of domination into an instrument of solidarity. By sharing knowledge about prices, the independent fishermen collectively build an “economic knowledge sovereignty” that allows them to negotiate with the market more fairly. This practice not only strengthens the horizontal networks among them but also directly weakens one of the primary foundations of the patron’s power. Thus, the social transformation in Ujung Baji Village demonstrates that significant structural change in maritime society can emerge from the accumulation of small, decentralized actions, which slowly but surely build a new, more autonomous and dignified social order.

¹⁴Syamsuddin, Interview, Ujung Baji Village, June 2, 2022.

¹⁵Makkulawu, Interview, Ujung Baji Village, June 3, 2022.

G. From Strategy to Identity: The Cultural Meaning and Future Projections of Independence

The analysis of the independent fishermen phenomenon in Ujung Baji Village reaches its apex when the discourse shifts from the realm of economic strategy to that of cultural meaning. The choice to become independent, in the end, is not merely a series of survival tactics but has transformed into a profound identity project. It is a process in which fishermen actively redefine their identities. They shift from the position of a *sawi*, synonymous with subordination and compliance, to become autonomous and dignified social actors. Independence, thus, has become an ethos—a life principle that is internalized and fought for.

This shift from strategy to identity is articulated with great force in Daeng Malik's narrative. After nearly five years of operating independently, he reflects on his choice not in the framework of profit and loss, but in the framework of self-worth and a moral legacy for the next generation:¹⁶

"I no longer want to be someone who just takes orders. Not because I'm arrogant, but because I want my children to see that we can live sufficiently through our own efforts. Now I am at peace, my children are in school, and my wife no longer worries."

The phrase "no longer want to be someone who just takes orders" is a symbolic declaration of self-liberation. It is a firm rejection of the social identity of a dependent client. Furthermore, his primary motivation is to serve as a role model for his children ("I want my children to see"). It shows that the act of being independent is a performance of identity directed at its most important audience: the family. The inner peace he feels ("now I am at peace") signifies that independence has successfully restored a sense of control over his life and his family's future. It is an achievement far more valuable than a mere increase in income.

From a moral economy perspective, this transformation can be read as the culmination of the "moral rebellion." When the patronage system fails to meet the norms of fairness, the ensuing response is not only material but also ideological (Hamzah et al., 2021). Independent fishermen actively construct a counter-narrative that legitimizes their life choices. They no longer see themselves as "dissenters," but as individuals who uphold the principles of hard work and honesty. Thus, being independent is an everyday practice that consistently affirms the rejection of the old structure deemed immoral.

Moreover, this identity project is inherently future-oriented. Independence is not only aimed at improving current conditions but also at breaking the intergenerational chain of dependency. This hope was revealed in the account of Ramlah, the wife of an independent fisherman, who sees their hard work as an

¹⁶Daeng Malik, Interview, Ujung Baji Village, June 5, 2022.

investment in her children's future:¹⁷

"We work like this so that our children do not have to become a sawi like their father once was. If possible, they should get a higher education, so they have choices. We live sufficiently now, as long as we are not wasteful."

This narrative demonstrates that independence is a project of emancipation that transcends a single generation. Its ultimate goal is to provide "choices" for the next generation, a luxury they did not possess in the past. By directing their children towards formal education ("if possible, they should get a higher education"), they are consciously trying to open pathways for social mobility outside the capture fisheries sector. In Giddens's framework, this is the highest manifestation of reflexive agency, where actors not only change current practices but also actively imagine and shape a different future.

Ultimately, to be an independent fisherman in Ujung Baji Village is to undergo a total reconstruction of the self and the social world. This process begins with a moral evaluation of injustice, is realized through a series of autonomous economic practices, is sustained by family solidarity, and finally crystallizes into a new identity rooted in dignity, freedom, and hope. They demonstrate that amidst intense structural pressures, the most profound social changes are often born from the courage to redefine the meaning of life and work according to the values one holds to be most true.

CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

This study finds that the existence of independent fishermen on the coast of Ujung Baji Village is a form of social praxis that emerges from the tension between the established patron-client structure and the need for a more just economic independence. In the context of a fishing community long bound by patronage relations based on the hierarchy between *punggawa* and *sawi*, the choice of some individuals to become independent fishermen is not merely a response to economic factors but a form of moral resistance against a social structure perceived as exploitative and no longer fulfilling the values of fairness.

Using Scott's moral economy approach, it can be concluded that the independent actions of these fishermen are an expression of the subsistence ethic, which emphasizes a decent livelihood rather than wealth accumulation. When patrons fail to provide protection and distributive justice, the fishermen demonstrate their rejection of the system through a more autonomous life choice, without resorting to open confrontation. They create new, horizontal solidarity networks and develop survival strategies based on local knowledge, income diversification, and the values of reciprocity.

Within the framework of Giddens's structuration theory, the actions of independent fishermen also show that social agents do not merely reproduce

¹⁷Ramlah, Interview, Ujung Baji Village, June 6, 2022.

structures; they can reflect upon, negotiate, and even create alternative structures. The independent fisherman's household becomes a new center of production and decision-making, blurring the lines between the domestic and economic spheres. In their daily practices, they demonstrate the capacity to transform a structure of dependency into a more flexible and adaptive one.

The independence constructed by these fishermen is not only technical but also contains a symbolic dimension: it represents a rejection of subordination and a means of building a dignified social identity. They not only reorganize their way of working but also envision their families' futures in a more open and hopeful manner. Therefore, the independent fishermen in Ujung Baji are not an anomaly, but a reflection of the possibility of a new social structure emerging in coastal society—one built from below, through reflection and everyday practices.

Thus, this study not only contributes to the anthropological understanding of the dynamics of fishing communities, but it also opens a space for re-reading maritime social practices from the perspectives of morality, resistance, and structuration. It is an approach that allows for the agency of local actors in responding to social and economic changes in an era of ongoing structural inequality.

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