International Journal of Environmental Sciences
ISSN: 2229-7359
Vol. 11 No. 24s, 2025
https://www.theaspd.com/ijes.php

From Adaptation To Transformation? Empowerment, Culture, And Social Capital In Derawan's Butonese Fishing Community

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Abstract
This article examines how cultural values and social capital shape processes of empowerment among Butonese migrant fishers in Derawan Island, Berau Regency, East Kalimantan, Indonesia. While empowerment in small-scale fisheries is often framed in terms of livelihood improvement, this study argues that empowerment is best understood as a layered and contested process—anchored in resources, agency, and achievements (Kabeer, 1999), mediated by social capital (Putnam, 1993, 2000), and legitimized through symbolic cultural repertoires (Bourdieu, 1986). Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in 2023–2024 across five settlements, the study combines participant observation, in-depth interviews, and documentary analysis to explore how Butonese migrants negotiate belonging and recognition in a multiethnic coastal frontier.
Findings reveal that empowerment manifests in both social and economic domains: collective organization for infrastructure and decision-making, partial participation in village forums, diversification of livelihoods, and women's growing role in processing and trade. Cultural values such as padoma (collective work) and binci-binciki kuli (mutual respect) provide solidarity, conflict management, and legitimacy, but also reproduce hierarchies that limit youth and women's agency. Social capital operates as an indispensable safety net, market channel, and governance resource, yet its benefits are unevenly distributed, often controlled by patrons and community elites. Ultimately, empowerment remains partial—resilient yet stratified, solidaristic yet politically constrained.
The article contributes conceptually by demonstrating the ambivalence of empowerment in migrant fishing communities: it is not only about material gains but also about the cultural and symbolic resources that shape authority and belonging. Empirically, it enriches scholarship on coastal migration and empowerment in Indonesia through fine-grained ethnography. Practically, it highlights the need for inclusive governance strategies that democratize social capital, reinterpret cultural values in transformative ways, and strengthen bridging ties between migrant communities and formal institutions.
Keywords: *empowerment, Butonese migrant fishers, cultural values, social capital, coastal adaptation*

INTRODUCTION

Coastal communities across the Global South face intensifying social–ecological pressures that reshape livelihoods, institutions, and identities. Fisheries volatility, enclosure of marine space through conservation and tourism regimes, and increasingly financialized value chains have narrowed the room for maneuver of small-scale fishers. In these contexts, "empowerment" cannot be reduced to income gains or access to new technologies. It is a relational and contested process through which people mobilize resources, exercise agency, and secure recognition within uneven fields of power. For migrant groups, whose legitimacy is often questioned and whose claims to land and sea are precarious, empowerment is entangled with struggles over belonging, rights, and voice.

This article examines these dynamics through the case of Butonese migrant fishers on Derawan Island, Berau Regency, East Kalimantan, Indonesia. The Butonese (Orang Buton) have a long history of mobility in eastern Indonesia, with diaspora communities embedded in coastal economies from Sulawesi to Kalimantan. On Derawan, they occupy an ambivalent position: economically vital to artisanal fisheries and related value chains, yet socially and institutionally peripheral as "newcomers" within village governance and marine management. Many households operate with insecure housing and settlement status, intermittent access to fishing grounds, and dependence on informal patronage relations. At the same time, the community has cultivated notable adaptive capacities: technological shifts in gear and grounds, diversification into processing and petty trade, and the reproduction of moral economies anchored in Butonese cultural values.

Building on this paradox, we conceptualize empowerment as a layered, open-ended trajectory rather than a terminal state. Following community-based perspectives, empowerment involves three interlocking dimensions: access to and control over resources; agency expressed in meaningful decision-making; and achievements that alter life chances and social positionalities. We bring these concerns into dialogue with

debates on social capital and cultural value. Bonding and bridging ties can lower transaction costs, pool risk, and enable collective action—but they also sort and exclude. Likewise, cultural norms can animate solidarity, authority, and obligation, while simultaneously reproducing hierarchy or disciplining dissent. Treating culture as symbolic capital foregrounds how shared values confer legitimacy and authority that matter for who speaks, who benefits, and who decides.

Against this backdrop, the case of Butonese fishers is analytically instructive for three reasons. First, it highlights empowerment as a migrant project that must be negotiated at two frontiers at once: inside the community—across generations, gender, and class—and outside it—in dealings with village authorities, market intermediaries, conservation actors, and tourism businesses. Second, it illuminates the ambivalence of solidarity: the same networks that provide protection and opportunity can be mobilized to gatekeep access to programs, entrench patronage, or mute younger voices. Third, it shows how moral economies travel: values such as binci-binciki kuli (mutual respect, care, and conflict avoidance) and padoma (collective work and mutual aid) anchor everyday cooperation and dispute resolution, but also set boundaries around legitimate claims and tactics of contention.

Empirically, the article draws on an ethnographic case study conducted in 2023–2024 in five settlements within the Derawan subdistrict: Derawan, Tanjung Batu, Teluk Semanting, Kasai, and Pegat Batumbuk. We combine participant observation with in-depth interviews across social positions—first-generation migrants, second- and third-generation youth, women fish processors, punggawa (boat owners/patrons) and sawi (crew), religious and customary figures, village leaders, and market actors. This design allows us to trace how resources, authority, and recognition are produced and contested within households, occupational groups, and interethnic interfaces. The approach privileges emic categories and practical logics while situating them in wider regimes of marine governance and rural political economy.

The study is guided by three research questions:

1. How do Butonese fishers on Derawan mobilize cultural values and social networks to adapt to social–ecological and market pressures?
2. In what ways do these cultural–networked strategies translate into social and economic empowerment, and for whom?
3. Where are the limits and frictions—internal and external—that hinder a more transformative redistribution of power, resources, and recognition?

Our contribution is threefold. Conceptually, we advance an integrated framework that links community-based empowerment to social capital and symbolic capital, treating culture as both resource and repertoire of power. This helps move beyond binary readings that romanticize solidarity or pathologize patronage by showing how they co-exist and co-evolve. Empirically, we offer a fine-grained account of a migrant fishing community embedded in a tourism-conservation hotspot, adding to scholarship on mobility, livelihood adaptation, and marine tenure in eastern Indonesia. Practically, we distill implications for inclusive coastal governance: empowerment initiatives must reckon with internal hierarchies and build bridging ties that widen participation, while also securing procedural recognition of migrant communities in village and marine decision-making.

The argument proceeds in four steps. We first situate empowerment within the Derawan context, outlining the community's historical settlement, livelihood structure, and governance environment. We then analyze indicators of socio-economic empowerment—collective organization, political participation, market strategies, and household diversification—showing uneven gains structured by access to boats, capital, and networks. Next, we examine the role of cultural values as moral infrastructures for cooperation and conflict management, and the ambivalences that arise when these values legitimize seniority or circumscribe critique. We subsequently assess the functions and limits of social capital—its protective, economic, and institutional effects alongside exclusionary dynamics tied to patronage and kinship. We close by tracing tensions between adaptation and transformation, highlighting emergent initiatives led by youth and women that begin to re-scale claims, reframe identities, and renegotiate representation.

Overall, we argue that empowerment among Butonese fishers on Derawan is best understood as a negotiated, multi-layered process: resilient yet partial; solidaristic yet stratified; culturally grounded yet politically contested. Recognizing this complexity is essential for designing interventions that do not merely help communities cope, but expand their substantive freedoms to shape the social, economic, and symbolic terms of coastal life.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

To understand how the adaptive strategies of Butonese migrant fishers on Derawan Island translate into empowerment, this study draws upon an integrated theoretical framework that combines community-based empowerment, social capital, and cultural values as symbolic capital. Together, these perspectives allow empowerment to be examined not as a fixed outcome, but as a socially embedded and contested process shaped by access to resources, the mobilization of networks, and the deployment of cultural repertoires.

Community-based empowerment emphasizes that empowerment is not merely about improving income levels or gaining access to material assets, but about expanding people's substantive freedoms to make choices, exercise agency, and transform their social position. Kabeer (1999) defines empowerment through the interaction of resources, agency, and achievements, where empowerment becomes visible when individuals or groups gain the capacity to make meaningful decisions in areas where they previously lacked control. In the case of migrant fishing communities, empowerment also encompasses the ability to negotiate belonging, participate in decision-making processes, and challenge the structural inequalities that limit their recognition within local governance and marine resource regimes.

This relational understanding is enriched by insights from social capital theory, which highlights the role of trust, reciprocity, and networks in enabling collective action. Following Putnam (1993, 2000), social capital can be distinguished between bonding ties—those that reinforce solidarity and mutual aid within homogenous groups such as kin or ethnic communities—and bridging ties, which connect communities to external actors, institutions, and opportunities. For the Butonese in Derawan, bonding social capital is evident in dense kinship networks and cooperative practices that provide everyday security in the absence of state support, while bridging social capital is visible in emerging connections with village leaders, traders, or tourism actors. Yet, as Bourdieu (1986) warns, social capital is not inherently egalitarian: it can consolidate the power of elites, exclude marginal groups, and reproduce dependency if access to networks remains uneven. Thus, examining social capital helps illuminate both the protective and exclusionary functions of Butonese communal ties.

A third lens is offered by cultural values, which operate as forms of symbolic capital that structure legitimacy and authority. Among the Butonese, cultural norms such as binci-binciki kuli (mutual respect and conflict avoidance) and padoma (collective work and mutual aid) are not only moral guidelines but also social instruments that shape cooperation, conflict management, and leadership. These values provide a moral infrastructure for sustaining solidarity and resilience, yet they also carry ambivalence. Respect for elders and loyalty to patrons, for example, can strengthen cohesion but also silence younger or marginalized voices, reproducing established hierarchies. In Bourdieu's (1986) terms, symbolic capital is both enabling and constraining: it can be converted into authority and trust that sustain collective projects, while simultaneously legitimizing the dominance of community elites.

Taken together, these three perspectives conceptualize empowerment as a layered and negotiated process that unfolds at the intersection of resources, networks, and cultural repertoires. Empowerment is not evenly distributed, but mediated by differences of gender, generation, and class; it is not only about survival and adaptation, but also about recognition, legitimacy, and voice. This framework therefore directs attention to critical questions: which members of the Butonese community gain or lose from adaptive strategies? How do bonding and bridging ties facilitate or constrain inclusion? And in what ways do cultural values serve as both resources of resilience and instruments of control?

By situating empowerment within this integrated lens, the study highlights the ambivalent nature of adaptation among migrant fishers: resilient yet partial, solidaristic yet stratified, culturally grounded yet politically contested. This approach resists overly linear or romantic readings of empowerment and instead situates it within the complex interplay of power, culture, and social organization in a multiethnic coastal frontier.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative approach with an ethnographic case study design in order to capture the everyday practices, cultural meanings, and social relations through which Butonese migrant fishers on Derawan Island build and negotiate empowerment. The ethnographic orientation makes it possible to observe how strategies of adaptation are embedded in community life, how values are enacted in practice, and how power dynamics are expressed in interactions both within the community and with external actors. Fieldwork was conducted between 2023 and 2024 across five settlements in the Derawan subdistrict of Berau Regency: Derawan, Tanjung Batu, Teluk Semanting, Kasai, and Pegat Batumbuk. These sites were chosen because they represent long-standing centers of Butonese settlement and reveal the intersections of fishing

livelihoods, migration histories, and integration with broader village and marine governance systems. The focus on multiple sites allowed the research to compare intra-community variations while situating the Butonese within the multiethnic social and economic landscape of the Derawan Islands.

Data collection relied on a combination of in-depth interviews, participant observation, and documentary analysis. Twenty-five core informants were selected purposively to represent diverse perspectives, including first-generation migrants who experienced the original settlement process, second- and third-generation youth born in Derawan, women fish processors and traders, punggawa (boat owners or patrons) and sawi (crew members), religious leaders, customary elders, village officials, and local non-Buton community members. Additional informants were recruited through snowball sampling, expanding coverage to market intermediaries, tourism workers, and fisheries officers. This design ensured that data reflected both internal community dynamics and external perceptions of Butonese integration.

In-depth interviews explored personal migration histories, experiences of livelihood adaptation, community organization, gender roles, and perceptions of recognition or exclusion. Interviews were complemented by extended participant observation in fishing, processing, and community activities, allowing the researcher to grasp the tacit practices and symbolic dimensions of cooperation, leadership, and conflict management. Observational immersion also facilitated trust building and reduced the distance between researcher and participants. To contextualize field findings, relevant documents—including village records, migration archives, family genealogies, maps of settlements, and local media coverage—were collected and analyzed.

Data analysis followed an inductive thematic procedure. Field notes and interview transcripts were coded in stages: open coding identified recurrent themes such as migration motives, networks of reciprocity, and local authority structures; axial coding explored relationships among these themes; and selective coding integrated them into broader categories of empowerment, social capital, and cultural value. The analysis was guided by the theoretical framework of Kabeer (1999), Putnam (1993, 2000), and Bourdieu (1986), while remaining attentive to the emic categories and narratives of participants.

To ensure validity, triangulation was applied by comparing narratives across informant categories and settlements, and by cross-referencing interview accounts with observational evidence and documentary records. Credibility was enhanced through the inclusion of direct quotations from participants and member-checking discussions with community leaders, who confirmed the accuracy of interpretations. The researcher maintained reflexive field journals to critically reflect on positionality as an outsider, documenting the challenges and strategies involved in entering community life, negotiating trust, and interpreting cultural practices.

This methodological design provides a robust foundation for analyzing how empowerment is constructed, constrained, and negotiated among Butonese migrant fishers in Derawan. It enables the research to move beyond abstract theorization and ground the analysis in the lived realities, everyday practices, and contested meanings that define the community's social world.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Indicators of Social and Economic Empowerment

The empowerment of Butonese migrant fishers in Derawan is not a single achievement but the cumulative result of adaptive strategies forged under ecological, economic, and social pressure. Following Kabeer's (1999) framework of resources, agency, and achievements, empowerment manifests both in the strengthening of collective capacities and in differentiated individual trajectories. Two broad dimensions stand out: social empowerment, reflected in community organization, participation, and recognition, and economic empowerment, evident in livelihood diversification, reduced dependence on patrons, and new forms of autonomy.

a. Social Empowerment

One of the clearest indicators of empowerment is the emergence of collective institutions and practices of self-organization. In several Butonese settlements, residents have formed informal groups to repair footpaths, build prayer houses, and coordinate the use of fishing grounds. These initiatives are not formally registered cooperatives, but they function as decision-making spaces grounded in consensus and reciprocity. A middle-aged community leader explained: "We do not wait for village assistance. If a roof leaks or a path break, we gather, contribute money, and work together. That way we stand on our own feet."

Political participation also signals a gradual shift from marginalization to partial recognition. Whereas Butonese residents were once excluded from village forums, some now serve as neighborhood heads, mosque committee members, or local development board officers. As one informant noted: "Before, we only listened. Now we are sometimes invited to speak in meetings." While representation remains selective—largely limited

to respected elders or patrons—this trend reflects expanding avenues for voice in local governance. Such positions provide symbolic recognition of the Butonese presence in the multiethnic village landscape.

b. Economic Empowerment

In the economic domain, empowerment is visible in strategies that reduce dependency on tengkulak (middlemen). Some fishers bypass local patrons by selling directly to traders in Tanjung Redeb or Tarakan, securing better prices and greater autonomy. A younger fisher described: "I used to follow a boss, but now I sell directly. It is harder work, but the income is more rewarding." Others have invested in their own boats and gear, marking a significant shift from labor dependence to ownership.

Women play a crucial role in household empowerment through fish processing and petty trade. Groups of women collectively produce dried fish, fish crackers, and shredded fish (abon) for local markets and social media sales. As one processor put it: "We used to only help our husbands. Now we can contribute to fuel costs or children's schooling." These activities not only strengthen household economies but also create spaces of agency for women in a domain often dominated by men.

Livelihood diversification further illustrates adaptive empowerment. Families combine fishing with seasonal tourism services, small shops, or boat transport (ojek laut). This diversification cushions households against fluctuations in fish catch or market prices and offers younger generations alternative pathways.

Yet empowerment is unevenly distributed. Those with capital to invest in boats, engines, or processing facilities enjoy greater mobility and independence, while younger crew members (sawi) remain bound to patronage and debt cycles. As a youth fisher lamented: "If the catch is low, we go into debt again. No cooperative wants to lend to us." This highlights internal stratification within the community, where access to empowerment hinges on prior resources, social networks, and status.

From a theoretical perspective, these dynamics reveal the interplay of multiple forms of capital. In Bourdieu's (1986) terms, actors who can convert economic capital (boats, credit), social capital (networks with patrons or traders), and cultural capital (status as elders or leaders) are better positioned to achieve empowerment. In Putnam's (2000) framework, strong bonding capital sustains cooperation and safety nets, but limited bridging capital restricts broader inclusion and structural change.

Overall, social and economic empowerment among Butonese migrants in Derawan demonstrates both resilience and inequality. While collective organization, partial political recognition, and household-level diversification signal positive transformations, empowerment remains partial and stratified. Without broader institutional support and inclusive access to networks and resources, empowerment risks consolidating for some while leaving others trapped in cycles of dependency.

The Role of Cultural Values in Strengthening Empowerment

Cultural values within the Butonese migrant community are not peripheral traditions but central moral infrastructures that anchor adaptation and shape the pathways of empowerment. They provide both the ethical guidelines and the symbolic capital that enable cooperation, resilience, and legitimacy in a context where migrants must negotiate belonging and recognition. Three sets of values are especially salient: padoma (collective work and mutual aid), binci-binciki kuli (mutual respect and conflict avoidance), and reverence for religious and customary authority. Each functions as a resource for empowerment, while also containing ambivalences that may constrain transformative change.

a. Solidarity and Social Resilience

The principle of padoma fosters collective responses to crises and everyday challenges. In times of poor catch, fluctuating prices, or sudden accidents at sea, the community mobilizes work parties, mutual assistance, and resource pooling. Shared labor in house-building, boat repairs, or fishing expeditions demonstrates that survival is rarely an individual endeavor but is embedded in cooperative obligations. As one elder noted, "At sea, no one can stand alone. Helping each other is our custom, not just a choice." Such practices translate into empowerment by building social safety nets that reduce vulnerability and sustain dignity even in precarious livelihoods.

b. Conflict Management and Social Harmony

The value of binci-binciki kuli underpins mechanisms of conflict resolution within the community and in interactions with outsiders. It stresses the importance of avoiding public humiliation, maintaining harmony, and resolving disputes through quiet negotiation. In multiethnic Derawan, where frictions with local communities or other migrant groups can easily escalate, this ethic of restraint is a powerful cultural asset. As a woman informant explained, "If problems arise, we speak inside the house, not outside. That is how we remain respected." By minimizing open conflict, this value contributes to the community's acceptance and recognition within a contested social landscape.

c. Legitimacy and Cultural Authority

Cultural values also function as sources of symbolic capital that grant legitimacy to leaders and shape patterns of authority. Religious leaders, respected patrons, and elders derive influence not only from their wealth or seniority but from their perceived moral integrity, fairness, and adherence to cultural norms. For instance, a patron who distributes catch fairly and refrains from exploitation gains enduring authority and trust. As one fisher explained, "People trust not because of money, but because of honesty and fairness. That is what our parents taught us." Here, symbolic capital strengthens community governance and enhances internal cohesion, thereby reinforcing empowerment at a collective scale.

d. Emotional and Spiritual Dimensions

Cultural values also provide emotional resilience and spiritual grounding in the face of uncertainty. Values of patience (sabar), sincerity (ikhlas), and perseverance are frequently invoked as cultural legacies of seafaring life. These dispositions sustain morale and enable households to endure hardship without succumbing to despair. A young fisher reflected, "If we did not hold on to patience and sincerity, we would have long returned home. These values keep us strong." This emotional resilience constitutes an often-overlooked dimension of empowerment, emphasizing dignity and meaning alongside material security.

e. Ambivalences and Constraints

Yet cultural values are not universally liberating. They can also reinforce hierarchy and silence dissent. Deference to elders and loyalty to patrons, while fostering cohesion, may discourage younger generations from challenging inequitable practices or proposing innovations. A youth fisher noted, "Sometimes we want to speak, but it is seen as disrespectful. So we keep quiet." In this sense, symbolic capital may be appropriated by community elites to preserve authority and suppress alternative voices. Such ambivalence underscores the dual character of culture: it can be both a resource for empowerment and an instrument of social control.

f. Cultural Values as Dynamic Resources

Overall, Butonese cultural values act as dynamic resources that strengthen solidarity, legitimate authority, and provide emotional resilience, but they also risk reinforcing conservative structures if left unexamined. From a Bourdieusian perspective, these values represent symbolic capital that can be converted into trust, recognition, and influence—yet their transformative potential depends on how they are mobilized and by whom. Empowerment becomes durable and inclusive only when cultural values are continually reinterpreted and democratized, ensuring that they serve the collective rather than entrench elite dominance.

The Functions and Limits of Social Capital in Empowerment

For the Butonese migrant community in Derawan, social capital constitutes one of the most vital non-material resources that sustains livelihoods and underpins empowerment. In the absence of formal state protection, reliable access to credit, or institutionalized welfare, networks of kinship, trust, and reciprocity function as the community's primary infrastructure of security and opportunity. Yet, as both Putnam (2000) and Bourdieu (1986) emphasize, social capital is never neutral—it can foster solidarity and cooperation, but it can also entrench exclusion and reproduce inequality. The Butonese case illustrates both sides of this duality.

a. Protective Function: Networks as Informal Safety Nets

One of the most important functions of social capital is its protective role. When fish catches fail, accidents occur at sea, or sudden health expenses arise, households rely not on formal insurance schemes but on community-based support systems. Informal loans without interest, collective fundraising, or sharing of fuel and equipment are common practices. A younger fisher explained: "We have no insurance here. If someone is injured or loses a boat, everyone contributes what they can. Today it is him, tomorrow it could be me." These reciprocal arrangements reduce vulnerability and maintain a sense of collective security in highly uncertain conditions.

b. Economic Function: Networks as Channels of Trade and Information

Social capital also operates as an economic resource by linking fishers to markets and enabling information exchange. Many Butonese fishers rely on kin or extended networks to connect with traders in Tanjung Redeb, Tarakan, or beyond. These ties allow them to secure higher prices than those offered by local tengkulak (middlemen). As one fisher recounted, "Without connections, we sell cheap. But through a cousin who works in transport, I can send fish directly to the city." Here, social ties are converted into economic capital, enabling mobility and partial independence from exploitative intermediaries.

c. Institutional Function: Networks as the Basis of Collective Governance

Beyond individual transactions, social capital supports the organization of collective action and community governance. Informal institutions for building prayer houses, repairing village roads, or regulating fishing grounds emerge from the capacity of networks to mobilize resources and coordinate decisions. A woman fish processor described how local groups organized to fund processing equipment: "If we wait for government help, it never comes. So we make our own agreement, collect contributions, and share the benefits." Such

examples illustrate what Cleaver (2005) terms institutional bricolage, where communities adapt cultural norms and social ties to craft their own governance arrangements.

d. Limits and Exclusions of Social Capital

Despite these strengths, social capital is not universally accessible. Entry into influential networks often depends on kinship proximity, loyalty to patrons, or alignment with powerful families. Young crew members, poorer households, or recent migrants may find themselves excluded from cooperatives or denied access to advantageous connections. A young fisher complained: "If you are not close to the big patrons, it is hard to join groups or get support. We have to struggle on our own." Such selective inclusion demonstrates how bonding social capital can create protective in-groups but simultaneously marginalize those outside their circles.

e. Reproduction of Patronage and Inequality

At times, social capital reinforces rather than challenges existing hierarchies. Patron figures (punggawa) may monopolize access to state aid, donor programs, or fishing equipment, distributing them selectively to loyal followers. This reproduces dependency under the guise of solidarity. From a Bourdieusian perspective, social capital thus becomes a form of symbolic currency wielded by elites to consolidate authority. What appears as collective cohesion can mask unequal access to resources and decision-making.

f. Toward Inclusive Social Capital

The Butonese experience underscores that social capital is a double-edged sword: indispensable for survival and empowerment, yet prone to reinforcing stratification if left unmediated. For empowerment to become more inclusive and transformative, existing networks must be opened and democratized. This means creating mechanisms that extend benefits beyond kinship lines, ensuring transparency in the distribution of opportunities, and cultivating bridging ties with external actors such as local government, NGOs, or tourism businesses. Only then can social capital evolve from a protective shield for some into a collective resource that sustains empowerment for all.

Tensions Between Adaptation, Local Power, and Social Transformation

The empowerment of Butonese fishers in Derawan does not occur in a vacuum. It unfolds within a contested social field shaped by both internal hierarchies and external structures of governance and authority. Adaptive strategies—whether in livelihoods, organization, or culture—are often double-edged: they sustain survival and partial autonomy, yet they also encounter, and sometimes reinforce, the very power relations that constrain deeper transformation. This section highlights three key sites of tension: internal community hierarchies, external political inequalities, and emergent pathways toward transformation.

a. Internal Power: Between Solidarity and Hierarchy

Although the Butonese community is celebrated for its cohesion, solidarity does not eliminate hierarchy. Authority within the community is concentrated among senior figures—elders, patrons (punggawa), and religious leaders—whose legitimacy derives from both symbolic capital and control of resources. While these leaders maintain order and continuity, their dominance often restricts the initiatives of younger generations. As one elder explained, "Youth have ideas, but decisions must first be weighed by us. We must avoid division." This emphasis on harmony reinforces collective stability but sidelines more innovative or disruptive proposals.

For younger fishers and women, this dynamic can be frustrating. Some youth expressed dissatisfaction that ventures into tourism or digital marketing were dismissed as premature or inappropriate. A young fisherman remarked: "We proposed boat rentals for snorkeling tourists, but the seniors said it was not the right time. We had to drop the idea." Here, cultural deference and respect become intertwined with structural limits on agency. What functions as solidarity for the collective may simultaneously restrict empowerment for subgroups within it.

b. External Power: Inequality in Formal Structures

Beyond the community, the Butonese face structural disadvantages in village governance and marine resource management. Despite decades of settlement, their status as migrants is used by local leaders to justify exclusion from decision-making and resource allocation. As one local official bluntly stated, "Butonese are welcome, but they must follow our rules. They are still guests here." Such perceptions perpetuate a hierarchy of belonging that marginalizes the Butonese in negotiations over fishing zones, access to aid, or representation in formal village bodies.

Consequently, adaptive strategies remain largely reactive—designed to cope with decisions made elsewhere rather than to shape them. Empowerment in this context is functional rather than transformative: it helps households endure hardship but rarely shifts the broader structures of inequality. This aligns with Cornwall's

(2007) critique that adaptive practices cannot be equated with empowerment unless they alter the distribution of voice and power.

c. Toward Social Transformation: Emerging Countercurrents

Despite these constraints, new currents of change are visible. Younger Butonese generations are experimenting with digital tools to sell fish, promote products, and engage with external networks. Women's groups are leveraging collective processing enterprises to secure income and visibility. Some individuals have begun forging alliances with NGOs, researchers, and conservation programs, carving out spaces of influence beyond the immediate authority of local patrons or village elites.

These initiatives represent what Scott (1985) terms "everyday forms of resistance," where marginalized groups slowly reshape the field of power not through confrontation but through innovation, negotiation, and quiet subversion. A youth leader explained, "We cannot wait for recognition. We build our own channels, through social media, through friends in the city. Slowly, people will see us differently." Such strategies may not yet dismantle entrenched inequalities, but they signal pathways toward a more autonomous and reflexive empowerment.

d. Adaptation versus Transformation

The Butonese case illustrates the delicate balance between adaptation and transformation. Adaptive practices ensure continuity, cohesion, and resilience, but without challenging structural inequalities, they risk becoming mechanisms of survival rather than levers of change. Transformation requires more than coping; it demands renegotiation of authority, redistribution of resources, and recognition of marginalized voices within both community and governance structures.

Thus, empowerment for the Butonese remains partial and contested. It is resilient but uneven, solidaristic but stratified, culturally grounded but politically constrained. Its future trajectory depends on whether emergent initiatives—driven by youth, women, and bridging networks—can expand beyond adaptive resilience to reconfigure the institutional and symbolic boundaries of coastal life.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined the ways in which Butonese migrant fishers on Derawan Island construct and negotiate empowerment through cultural values, social capital, and adaptive strategies in the face of social–ecological pressures and political marginalization. By applying an integrated framework that combines community-based empowerment (Kabeer 1999), social capital (Putnam 1993, 2000), and symbolic capital (Bourdieu 1986), we have shown that empowerment in this context is neither a fixed achievement nor a linear trajectory, but a layered and contested process.

First, indicators of social and economic empowerment reveal both resilience and inequality. Community members have organized informal groups to manage local infrastructure and decision-making, gained partial representation in village forums, and diversified livelihoods through direct fish sales, processing, and petty trade. Yet these gains remain uneven, with younger crew members and poorer households still trapped in patronage and debt cycles.

Second, cultural values such as padoma (mutual aid) and binci-binciki kuli (mutual respect) underpin solidarity, conflict resolution, and the legitimacy of leadership. These values provide emotional resilience and moral cohesion, anchoring empowerment in shared cultural repertoires. However, they also carry ambivalences: respect and loyalty can reinforce hierarchical authority and suppress innovation, particularly among youth and women.

Third, social capital functions as both shield and gatekeeper. Bonding ties furnish safety nets in times of crisis, facilitate economic exchanges, and sustain collective governance, but they can also exclude marginal actors and reproduce dependency under elite control. Without bridging ties to external institutions and markets, empowerment risks remaining insular and partial.

Finally, the study highlights enduring tensions between adaptation and transformation. Adaptive strategies help the Butonese endure vulnerability but often reinforce existing hierarchies, both internally and in relations with village authorities. Emerging initiatives—from youth-led digital marketing to women's processing enterprises—signal the beginnings of more transformative change, yet these remain fragile in the face of structural inequalities and persistent stigma as "migrants."

Conceptually, the article contributes to empowerment debates by foregrounding its ambivalence: empowerment is not only about resources and agency, but also about the cultural and symbolic repertoires that legitimize authority and shape inclusion. Empirically, it offers a fine-grained ethnographic account of a migrant fishing community negotiating belonging and recognition in a multiethnic coastal frontier. Practically, the findings underscore that empowerment initiatives in such contexts must be sensitive to

internal stratification and external exclusion. Efforts to strengthen coastal governance will only be meaningful if they democratize social capital, reinterpret cultural values in inclusive ways, and expand bridging ties that connect marginalized groups to broader institutional frameworks.

In conclusion, empowerment among Butonese fishers in Derawan is best understood as a negotiated and dynamic process: resilient yet unequal, solidaristic yet stratified, culturally rich yet politically constrained. Moving beyond adaptive survival toward substantive empowerment requires not only strengthening community capacities but also reshaping the structures of recognition, authority, and opportunity that condition life in Indonesia's coastal margins.

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