

Sailing to Another World: Fishermen Ritual Practices in Batang Central Java

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Abstract. Fishermen always face the cruel environment of the sea, high tides, strong winds, storms, and even the full moon, which reduce their ability to catch fish. These situations are considered common among fishermen in Batang, Central Java. Facing the harsh environment of the sea, fishermen would likely to use help from certain individual and their ritual to support them to be able to enter the harsh and cruel sea environment. The study explores the challenges faced by fishermen in Batang, Central Java, as they confront the unpredictable and often hostile marine environment. It examines how natural phenomena such as high tides, strong winds, storms, and lunar cycles impact fishing productivity. The research investigates the coping mechanisms employed by these fishermen, particularly focusing on their reliance on specific individuals and ritualistic practices. These strategies are analyzed in the context of enabling fishermen to navigate and survive in the harsh sea conditions. The findings contribute to our understanding of the interplay between traditional beliefs, environmental challenges, and occupational practices in coastal communities.

Keywords: Fishermen, Marine environment, Environmental challenges, Ritualistic practices, Coastal communities.

1 Introduction

Sea is frequently portrayed as a perilous environment, one that is inherently hostile to human presence [1, 3, 5]. This perception stems from the vast and unpredictable nature of the ocean, with its powerful currents, sudden storms, and hidden dangers beneath the surface. The sea's reputation as a treacherous domain has been reinforced through generations of maritime experiences, where countless lives have been lost and vessels destroyed in its unforgiving waters.

The sea's formidable image is further perpetuated by a rich tapestry of folklores and tales that have developed around it over centuries [8]. These narratives, passed down through generations of coastal communities, often feature mythical creatures, supernatural phenomena, and cautionary tales of those who dared to challenge the ocean's might. Such stories serve not only as entertainment but also as a means of transmitting crucial knowledge about the sea's dangers and the importance of respecting its power.

These deeply ingrained perceptions and cultural narratives play a significant role in shaping and driving fishermen's attitudes and behaviors towards the sea (Semedi, 1998). The combination of real-life experiences and folkloric traditions creates a complex relationship between maritime communities and their oceanic environment. This relationship influences how fishermen approach their work, make decisions about when and where to fish, and develop strategies to mitigate risks associated with their profession. Consequently, the sea becomes not just a physical space but a cultural and psychological landscape that fishermen must navigate in their daily lives.

The perception of local taboos and rituals in shaping people's actions has been extensively studied in various practices worldwide. In Ghana, local taboos have been found to increase engagement in turtle conservation efforts [2]. Similarly, ritual practices have been linked to how fishermen maintain resilience and sustainability in fisheries [4].

Beyond resource management, rituals also play a significant role in how fishers perceive and engage with the sea environment [4, 9]. This connection between ritual practices and environmental perception highlights the complex relationship between cultural beliefs and resource management. The North Coast of Java, particularly in Central Java, has long been recognized as a productive fishing ground for coastal communities. These communities heavily rely on the sea for their livelihoods, emphasizing the importance of sustainable fishing practices in the region.

According to Bailey (1987), the Java Sea accommodates 37% of boats from all around Indonesia, indicating its significance as a fishing ground. This high concentration of fishing vessels underscores the need for effective management strategies to ensure the long-term sustainability of marine resources.

Despite the density of fishing activities in the Java Sea, myths and stories about spirits continue to persist among the people, especially those living in the coastal areas of Central Java. These beliefs may influence local fishing practices and resource management strategies. The interplay between traditional beliefs, fishing practices, and resource management in the Java Sea region presents an interesting area for further research. Understanding how these factors interact could provide valuable insights for developing culturally sensitive and effective conservation strategies.

Literature studies form the foundation of this research, serving as a crucial method to overcome the inability to obtain firsthand experiences. By leveraging existing scholarly works and publications, this approach allows for a comprehensive exploration of the subject matter without direct access to primary data. The utilization of secondary data from other writings provides a rich source of information, enabling a thorough analysis and synthesis of existing knowledge. This research methodology not only compensates for the lack of primary data but also offers several advantages. It allows for the

examination of a broader range of perspectives and findings from multiple studies, potentially spanning different time periods and geographical locations. By critically analyzing and integrating these secondary sources, this research aims to identify patterns, trends, and gaps in the current understanding of the topic. This approach also facilitates the development of new insights and theoretical frameworks by building upon the collective knowledge accumulated in the field.

2 Acknowledgement

Due to lack of English language skill in writing, in this article we utilize Artificial Intelligence which is Paperpal. The function of paperpal in this writing is to help us in fixing our grammar and help in academic writing.

3 Findings

The Kusno's exploration of shamanic practices among fishermen in Batang provides valuable insights into the intersection of traditional beliefs and maritime livelihoods [7]. This work delves deeper into the specific aspects of shamanism as practiced by the fishing community, examining the rituals, beliefs, and cultural significance associated with these practices. The shamanic traditions observed in Batang's fishing community serve multiple purposes, including ensuring safety at sea, improving catch rates, and maintaining harmony with the natural environment. Kusno's research highlights the intricate relationship between the fishermen and their spiritual beliefs, demonstrating how these practices are deeply ingrained in their daily lives and decision-making processes. By focusing on the shamanic practices specific to Batang's fishermen, this work aims to provide a more nuanced understanding of the role of traditional beliefs in contemporary maritime communities. It will explore the ways in which these practices have evolved over time, adapted to changing environmental and social conditions, and continue to shape the cultural identity of the local fishing population.

The sea has always been a realm of uncertainties, presenting challenges in both safety and catch for fishermen worldwide. This unpredictable nature of maritime life affects fishing communities across the globe, including those in Central Java, Indonesia. In Batang, Central Java, a unique cultural response to these uncertainties has emerged, as documented by Kusno [7]. The study reveals that shamans and their associated rituals have become an integral part of the fishing community's practices, serving as a perceived requirement for fishermen before venturing out to sea. Interestingly, the role of a shaman in this context is not necessarily a specialized occupation. While some individuals do work exclusively as shamans, Kusno's research indicates that the role can be assumed by various members of the community. Often, family members of the fishermen, such as the father of the helmsman, may take on the responsibilities of a

shaman. This flexibility in who can perform shamanistic duties highlights the adaptability and inclusivity of this cultural practice within the fishing community.

Fishermen in Batang encounter numerous uncertainties in their daily lives, as highlighted by Kusno [7]. These challenges primarily revolve around the unpredictability of fish catch, safety concerns while at sea, and the ever-changing weather conditions. The fluctuating nature of fish populations and their movements in the ocean make it difficult for fishermen to guarantee a consistent catch, impacting their livelihoods and economic stability. Safety issues are paramount, as fishermen often face treacherous conditions at sea, including storms, rough waves, and potential equipment failures. The weather, being a critical factor in their profession, can drastically affect their ability to venture out to sea and return safely. These combined uncertainties create a constant state of vulnerability for the fishing community in Batang, forcing them to adapt and develop coping mechanisms to navigate their challenging profession. In response to these uncertainties, fishermen in Batang have turned to traditional practices such as rituals and shamanism as a means of seeking protection and attempting to exert some control over their unpredictable environment. These cultural practices serve multiple purposes within the fishing community. Firstly, they provide a sense of psychological comfort and reassurance in the face of danger and uncertainty. Rituals and shamanistic practices often involve invoking supernatural forces or deities believed to have influence over the sea and its bounty. Secondly, these traditions foster a sense of community and shared identity among fishermen, strengthening social bonds and providing mutual support. Lastly, these practices can be seen as a form of traditional knowledge transmission, where experienced fishermen pass down their understanding of the sea and its patterns to younger generations through symbolic and spiritual means. While these rituals and shamanistic practices may not directly influence the physical realities of fishing, they play a crucial role in helping the Batang fishing community cope with the psychological and social challenges posed by their uncertain profession.

The essence of the shaman's role in this context lies not in the individual performing the rituals but in the prayers and ceremonies themselves. These rituals are believed to provide protection and ensure a bountiful catch, addressing the twin concerns of safety and productivity that dominate the lives of fishermen. The prayers and rituals performed by the shaman are seen as a means of negotiating with the unpredictable forces of nature, offering a sense of control and reassurance in the face of the sea's inherent risks. This practice in Batang exemplifies how traditional beliefs and customs can persist and evolve alongside modern fishing practices. It demonstrates the resilience of cultural traditions in providing psychological and spiritual support to communities engaged in high-risk occupations. The integration of shamanistic practices into the routine of fishing expeditions reflects a holistic approach to maritime life, where spiritual preparation is considered as crucial as physical readiness.

The ritual for new helmsmen before their first sail, as described by Kusno, serves as an important cultural practice in maritime communities [7]. This ceremony is designed to bestow blessings upon the novice helmsman, with the primary aim of ensuring their safety and fostering prosperity during their seafaring endeavours. The ritual underscores the significance of tradition and spiritual beliefs in maritime professions. By participating in this ritual, new helmsmen not only receive the community's support and well-wishes but also become integrated into the rich tapestry of maritime culture. This practice reflects the deep-rooted connection between seafarers and the unpredictable nature of the ocean, highlighting the importance of spiritual preparation alongside technical skills in navigating the challenges of life at sea.

Ocean fishing is portrayed as a perilous endeavor, fraught with intense competition and inherent dangers. Tofa, a boat owner interviewed by Kusno, emphasizes this point, stating:

Tofa: *"Sering, hampir dikatakan seluruh usaha itu persaingan gak sehat. Seluruh usaha kayak gitu, gak di darat gak di laut selalu ada, apalagi di laut. Di laut sendiri lebih seram dari daratan."*¹

This translates to an acknowledgment that unfair competition is prevalent in all businesses, but particularly so at sea, where the environment is even more frightening than on land. But further inquiry on Kusno's work, explaining that this unhealthy competition refer to the use of black magic to attack other people's business or boats during their fishing trip which resulted in decreasing fish catches.

To navigate these challenges, fishermen often turn to spiritual practices for protection and success in their ventures. One such practice involves the use of prayers, especially by helmsmen, who play a crucial role in guiding the fishing boats. These prayers are believed to aid in catching more fish and ensuring the safety of the crew. An example of such a prayer was shared by a helmsman during Kusno's interview. The prayer begins with:

*"Bismillahirrahmanirrahim niat ingsun arep ngobong menyan, sing tak obong menyan dupo putih. Siro tak kongkon munggaho nang prahu, nemonono dayang endang pekayangan, sumurupo ning prahu kene, yen wis teko siro mangano kembang putih nemonono, temonono ing prahu kene, yen wis teko lan wis mangan, rewangono rejekiku sing sak akeh-akehe."*²

¹ almost can be said every business (fishing) have unhealthy competition, especially at the ocean because the ocean are scary.

² In the name of Allah, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful. I intend to burn incense, and what I burn is white incense. I command you—rise and board the boat. Go to the place that brings fortune. Be present in this boat. If you have arrived, eat the white flower we offer. Find your place in this boat. Once you have come and eaten, assist me in bringing abundant sustenance.

It then continues in Javanese, expressing the intention to burn incense and invoking spiritual entities to come aboard the boat and assist in the fishing endeavor. The use of these prayers reflects the blending of Islamic and traditional Javanese beliefs in the fishing communities. This syncretism is evident in the prayer's content, which combines Islamic invocations with references to local spiritual concepts such as "dayang endang pekayangan" (water spirits). The prayer also mentions offerings of white flowers, further illustrating the complex spiritual practices that fishermen employ to navigate the challenges of their profession.

The reliance on shamans and rituals also underscores the deep-rooted connection between the fishing community and their environment. It reflects an understanding of the sea not just as a resource to be exploited, but as a powerful entity with which one must maintain a respectful and harmonious relationship. This worldview incorporates elements of animism and traditional ecological knowledge, suggesting a complex and nuanced approach to marine resource management that goes beyond mere economic considerations. Furthermore, the prevalence of these practices in Batang raises interesting questions about the intersection of traditional beliefs and modern fishing techniques. As fishing communities face increasing challenges due to climate change, overfishing, and economic pressures, the role of traditional practices like shamanism may evolve. Future research could explore how these cultural practices adapt to changing circumstances and whether they continue to provide meaningful support to fishing communities in an ever-changing world.

Fishing trip preparation in certain cultures involves intricate rituals that go beyond merely gathering equipment and supplies. The helmsman, in particular, plays a crucial role in these preparations by assembling a collection of items known as *Sawanan*. This carefully curated set of objects holds significant spiritual and cultural importance, serving as essential components for the rituals performed before and during the fishing expedition. The *Sawanan* typically includes a variety of items, each with its own symbolic meaning and purpose. These may consist of traditional offerings such as betel leaves, areca nuts, tobacco, and specific types of flowers or herbs. Additionally, the collection might incorporate talismans, amulets, or other objects believed to bring good fortune, protection, or enhance the chances of a successful catch. The helmsman, often regarded as a spiritual leader for the fishing crew, meticulously prepares these items, ensuring that each element is present and properly arranged according to customary practices. The rituals involving the *Sawanan* are believed to appease local spirits, seek blessings for a bountiful harvest, and safeguard the fishermen from potential dangers at sea.



Fig 1. Sawanan.

Source: Kusno's documentation.

The *Sawanan*, a crucial component of the boat preparation process, requires careful timing and application. Typically, this mixture is prepared and distributed across the vessel's surface one to two days prior to the scheduled journey. This strategic timing allows the *Sawanan* to properly adhere and integrate with the boat's structure, ensuring optimal effectiveness. The process involves evenly spreading the mixture across various parts of the boat, paying particular attention to areas that may be more susceptible to wear or environmental factors. By applying the *Sawanan* in advance, it has sufficient time to set and provide the intended protective or functional benefits, contributing to the overall readiness and seaworthiness of the boat for its upcoming voyage.



Fig 2. *Sawanan* being spread around the boat.
Source: Kusno's Documentation.

4 Conclusion

The study reveals the complex interplay between traditional beliefs, environmental challenges, and occupational practices in the fishing communities of Batang, Central Java. Fishermen in this region face numerous challenges posed by the unpredictable and often hostile marine environment, including high tides, strong winds, storms, and lunar cycles that impact their fishing productivity. To cope with these challenges, the fishermen rely on specific individuals and ritualistic practices, which serve as crucial support mechanisms for navigating the harsh sea conditions.

The research highlights the significant role of shamans and shamanistic rituals in the fishing community's practices. These rituals, often performed by family members or designated individuals, are considered essential for ensuring safety at sea and improving catch rates. The flexibility in who can assume the role of a shaman demonstrates the adaptability of this cultural practice within the community. The rituals and prayers associated with shamanism are seen as a means of negotiating with the unpredictable forces of nature, offering a sense of control and reassurance in the face of the sea's inherent risks. The findings of this study contribute to our understanding of how traditional beliefs and customs persist and evolve alongside modern fishing practices. The integration of shamanistic practices into fishing expeditions reflects a holistic approach to maritime life, where spiritual preparation is considered as crucial as physical readiness.

This worldview incorporates elements of animism and traditional ecological knowledge, suggesting a complex and nuanced approach to marine resource management that goes beyond mere economic considerations. As fishing communities face increasing challenges due to climate change, overfishing, and economic pressures, further research is needed to explore how these cultural practices adapt to changing circumstances and continue to provide meaningful support to fishing communities in an ever-changing world.

The relationship between fishermen, shamans, and the sea is deeply intertwined, reflecting the complex interplay between human culture, spirituality, and the natural world. In the face of the unpredictable and often dangerous maritime environment, fishermen have long sought ways to navigate both the physical and metaphysical aspects of their profession. Shamans, with their perceived ability to communicate with the spiritual realm, serve as intermediaries between the human world and the mysterious forces of the sea. Their rituals and practices offer fishermen a sense of control and understanding in an otherwise chaotic environment, providing psychological comfort and a framework for interpreting the sea's moods and behaviors. This spiritual guidance not only bolsters the fishermen's courage but also helps them perceive the sea as a more manageable entity, fostering a sense of connection and respect for the marine world that sustains their livelihood.

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