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Farmers' Dependence On Middlemen As Patron-Client In Lowland Rice Farming Activities (A Case Study In Atula Urban Village, Ladongi District, East Kolaka Regency)

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze the patron-client relationship pattern between farmers and middlemen (tengkulak) in lowland rice farming in Atula Urban Village, Ladongi District, East Kolaka Regency. The study was conducted from October 2025 to June 2026 using a descriptive qualitative approach. Informants were selected through purposive and snowball sampling, consisting of 7 farmers as clients and 3 middlemen as patrons. Data were collected through direct observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation. The data were analyzed using the Miles and Huberman interactive model, which comprises data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. The results show that the patron-client relationship between farmers and middlemen in Atula Urban Village is dyadic and personal. The relationship is characterized by direct interaction between farmers and middlemen, an association of long standing, a high level of trust, and routine communication. In this relationship, middlemen act as patrons who provide capital assistance and easier marketing of the harvest, while farmers, as clients, depend on that support. The relationship is based not only on economic exchange but is also shaped by social ties, trust, and reciprocity that continue over time. Thus, the patron-client relationship between farmers and middlemen reflects a socio-economic relationship that is personal and mutually dependent, yet marked by unequal standing and bargaining power.

Keyword: Patron-client; Farmers; Middlemen; Lowland rice farming; Socio-economic relationship.

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INTRODUCTION

The agricultural sector in Indonesia plays a strategic role in sustaining the national economy, particularly for rural communities that largely depend on farming for their livelihoods. In addition to contributing to Gross Domestic Product (GDP), the agricultural sector also plays an important role in maintaining food security and supporting the economic sustainability of communities. Perwitasari et al. (2023) explain that the agricultural sector makes a significant contribution to the national economy. According to the 2025 report of Statistics Indonesia (Badan Pusat Statistik, BPS), the agricultural sector contributes around 14.35% of national GDP. This condition shows that the agricultural sector serves not only as a provider of food but also as a source of income and a mainstay of rural livelihoods.

In carrying out their farming activities, farmers face various problems, especially limited access to capital, production inputs, price information, and marketing networks. These conditions mean that farmers do not always have the freedom to choose how to finance their farming or how to market their harvest. Anwarudin et al. (2020) explain that the agricultural sector plays an important role in regional economic development and in improving the welfare of rural communities. However, limited resources and limited access to formal institutions remain challenges for farmers in developing their farming activities. One party that has come to play an important role in addressing these limitations is the middleman (tengkulak), who acts not only as a buyer of the harvest but also provides capital assistance and production inputs.

The relationship between farmers and middlemen in agriculture is not always limited to buying and selling transactions but can develop into a continuing socio-economic relationship. Middlemen often provide assistance in the form of cash loans, fertilizer, pesticides, and easier marketing of the harvest. In return, farmers tend to sell their harvest to the middlemen who have provided this assistance. Agustina et al. (2024) show that farmers' dependence on middlemen is part of the dynamics of the agricultural product distribution system, especially when farmers have limited access to alternative marketing channels. This phenomenon can be analyzed through the patron-client theory proposed by Scott (1972), namely an exchange relationship between two parties of unequal socio-economic standing who nevertheless need each other. In this context, middlemen act as patrons who provide resources and market access, while farmers become clients who supply their produce and maintain a cooperative relationship with the patron.

The patron-client relationship also has characteristics that are determined not only by economic exchange but are also influenced by trust, personal closeness, and the intensity of interaction between the two parties. Wu et al. (2023) explain that the relationship between

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middlemen and farmers can reflect a pattern of patronage, in which middlemen provide financial support and market access while farmers provide their produce as a form of reciprocity. Meanwhile, Salomo and Rahmayanti (2023) show that the imbalance of standing in this relationship can affect farmers' bargaining position, especially in determining prices and transaction terms. Thus, the patron-client relationship between farmers and middlemen needs to be understood as a relationship with both economic and social dimensions, formed through continuous interaction and the exchange of interests.

This phenomenon is relevant to the conditions of the community in Atula Urban Village, Ladongi District, East Kolaka Regency, which has potential for lowland rice farming. According to the 2024 data of the Regional Development Information System (SIPD) of East Kolaka Regency, the area of rice fields in Atula Urban Village is recorded at 479 hectares, with a productivity of 5,152 kg per hectare. Data from the Agricultural Extension Center (BPP) of Ladongi District also record 523 active farmers managing rice fields in the area. Based on this land area and level of productivity, the potential lowland rice production is estimated at around 2,469 tons per planting season. This condition shows that lowland rice farming is one of the important economic activities for the people of Atula Urban Village.

Based on initial observations, the relationship between farmers and middlemen in Atula Urban Village takes place not only at the time of buying and selling the harvest but is also established from the production preparation stage. A number of farmers obtain capital, fertilizer, and pesticides from middlemen to meet the needs of their farming activities. As a form of reciprocity, farmers tend to sell their harvest to the middlemen who have provided this assistance, with the selling price of unhusked rice (gabah) ranging from Rp5,000 to Rp6,200 per kilogram. In addition, limited marketing alternatives further strengthen the role of middlemen in farming. BULOG (the National Logistics Agency) is not yet an easily accessible option for all farmers because of transportation needs and the requirements for delivering unhusked rice. Meanwhile, rice mills in the area tend to buy milled rice rather than freshly harvested dry unhusked rice (gabah kering panen). This condition shows that middlemen hold an important position in meeting production needs while connecting farmers to the market.

Based on the above description, this study focuses on analyzing the patron-client relationship pattern between farmers and middlemen in lowland rice farming in Atula Urban Village, Ladongi District, East Kolaka Regency. The study is directed at understanding the characteristics of the relationship that has formed, the forms of interaction between patron and client, and the mechanisms of exchange and reciprocity that sustain the relationship. This study is expected to provide an empirical picture of the patron-client relationship pattern in agrarian

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community life, particularly in the relationship between farmers and middlemen.

METHOD

This study was conducted in Atula Urban Village (Kelurahan Atula), Ladongi District (Kecamatan Ladongi), East Kolaka Regency (Kabupaten Kolaka Timur), Southeast Sulawesi Province, from October 2025 to July 2026. The research location was determined purposively on the grounds that most of the community works as lowland rice farmers and that there is a cooperative relationship between farmers and middlemen in production and in marketing the harvest. This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach to understand the patron-client relationship pattern between farmers and middlemen based on the interactions and experiences of both parties.

Informants were selected using purposive sampling and snowball sampling techniques. Informant selection was based on direct involvement in lowland rice farming and a cooperative relationship with middlemen. There were 10 informants, consisting of 7 lowland rice farmers as clients and 3 middlemen as patrons. The research data consist of primary and secondary data. Primary data were obtained through interviews and direct observation of the interactions between farmers and middlemen, while secondary data were obtained from documents of relevant agencies, books, and scientific articles relevant to the study.

Data were collected through direct observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation. Observation was carried out to observe the interactions and cooperative activities between farmers and middlemen. The in-depth interviews used a semi-structured guide to explore information on the characteristics of the relationship, forms of interaction, exchange patterns, and reciprocity between farmers and middlemen. Documentation was used to complement the data through archives and documents related to agricultural conditions at the research location.

Data were analyzed using the interactive model of Miles and Huberman (1994), which comprises three stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. Data reduction was carried out by selecting and grouping information relevant to the patron-client relationship pattern. Next, the data were presented narratively and thematically to identify the characteristics of the relationship, the interactions, and the forms of exchange between farmers and middlemen. The final stage was conclusion drawing and verification to gain an understanding of the patron-client relationship pattern that has formed and continues in lowland rice farming in Atula Urban Village.

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RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Patron-Client Relationship Pattern between Farmers and Middlemen

Lowland rice farming in Atula Urban Village, Ladongi District, East Kolaka Regency is one of the community's main economic activities. Farmers carry out production through the stages of land preparation, planting, maintenance, and harvesting. In this process, farmers deal not only with farmer groups and agricultural extension workers but also with middlemen, who play a role in providing capital and marketing the harvest. Based on the results of research with 10 informants, consisting of 7 farmers and 3 middlemen, it was found that the relationship between the two parties is not limited to buying and selling transactions but has developed into a continuing socio-economic relationship. This relationship pattern was analyzed based on the characteristics of the personal relationship, reciprocal exchange, and differences in standing between patron and client.

1. Dyadic and Personal Pattern

The dyadic and personal pattern is a relationship that takes place directly between patron and client and is built through interaction, trust, and social relations over a certain period. Scott (1972) explains that the patron-client relationship has personal characteristics because it involves the exchange of resources and social ties that continue over time. In this study, the pattern can be seen in the length of the farmers' relationship with the middlemen, the level of trust, and the intensity of communication between the two parties.

The results show that the relationship between farmers and middlemen in Atula Urban Village has lasted for a relatively long time. Based on respondent data, 4 farmers (57.14%) have had a relationship with middlemen for 10 years, while 3 farmers (42.86%) have had one for 15 years. The average length of the relationship is 12.14 years. This condition shows that the relationship is not merely cooperation within a single harvest period but has developed into a relationship maintained from one planting season to the next. This is as stated by informant GMA:

> *"Kalau mengenal tengkulak di sini sudah sekitar 15 tahun lebih, karena memang dari dulu sudah sering berhubungan dalam urusan pertanian." (Wawancara, 15 Februari 2026).*
>
> Translation: *"As for knowing the middlemen here, it has been more than 15 years, because we have long dealt with each other in farming matters." (Interview, February 15, 2026).*

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This statement shows that the relationship between farmers and middlemen was formed through interaction over a long period. Farmers have come to know middlemen as a party who can help meet farming needs, while middlemen gain a cooperative relationship that allows for a continuous supply of unhusked rice. The length of the relationship demonstrates the social and economic attachment that underlies the continuity of the patron-client relationship. This finding is in line with Hardian et al. (2024), who show that the relationship between farmers and middlemen can develop into a continuing personal relationship because of trust and interlinked interests.

In addition to the length of the relationship, trust is an important element in maintaining the patron-client relationship. The results show that the provision of capital assistance by middlemen to farmers is generally not accompanied by a written agreement or any particular collateral. Assistance is given on the basis of a cooperative relationship that has already been established. Informant GT stated:

> *"Pernah. Biasanya saya pinjam untuk tambahan modal turun sawah, beli pupuk, dan kebutuhan lain kalau dana lagi kurang. Tidak ada surat perjanjian, hanya berdasarkan kepercayaan." (Wawancara, 15 Februari 2026).*
> Translation: *"Yes, I have. Usually I borrow for extra capital to start the planting season, to buy fertilizer, and for other needs when I am short of funds. There is no written agreement, just trust." (Interview, February 15, 2026).*

A similar point was made by GMA:

> *"Pernah, saya malah sering pinjam modal sama beliau kalau lagi butuh untuk kebutuhan di sawah. Tidak ada surat perjanjian, karena selama ini hanya berdasarkan saling percaya." (Wawancara, 15 Februari 2026).*
> Translation: *"Yes, in fact I often borrow capital from him when I need it for the needs of the rice field. There is no written agreement, because so far it has been based only on mutual trust." (Interview, February 15, 2026).*

These two statements show that trust is the main mechanism in the implementation of cooperation between farmers and middlemen. Farmers gain easy access to assistance without complicated administrative procedures, while middlemen provide assistance in the belief that farmers will fulfill the agreements that have been built. Thus, the relationship does not depend

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entirely on formal agreements but is maintained largely through trust and moral responsibility. This finding corresponds to Scott's (1972) concept of the patron-client relationship, which emphasizes the importance of trust and loyalty in maintaining the personal relationship between patron and client.

These personal characteristics can also be seen in the intensity of communication between farmers and middlemen. Communication takes place not only when the buying and selling of the harvest occurs but also during the production process, especially when farmers need capital, fertilizer, pesticides, or other assistance. Informant GT explained:

> *"Cukup sering. Kalau ada masalah pupuk, obat-obatan, atau kebutuhan sawah biasanya saya komunikasi dengan tengkulak." (Wawancara, 15 Februari 2026).*
> Translation: *"Quite often. If there is a problem with fertilizer, pesticides, or the needs of the rice field, I usually communicate with the middleman." (Interview, February 15, 2026).*

In addition to communication about farming needs, interaction also takes place through face-to-face meetings in daily life. Informant WS stated:

> *"Karena tetangga sawah saya makanya kita itu sering bertemu, kadang-kadang satu minggu bisa tiga kali." (Wawancara, 16 Februari 2026).*
> Translation: *"Because he is my rice-field neighbor, we meet often, sometimes up to three times a week." (Interview, February 16, 2026).*

This statement shows that communication between farmers and middlemen takes place routinely because of neighborhood proximity and economic interests. The interaction relates not only to marketing activities but also includes the exchange of information and the fulfillment of needs during the farming process. This condition strengthens the personal relationship because both parties have the opportunity to get to know each other and understand each other's needs. This finding is in line with Hardian et al. (2024), who show that the relationship between farmers and middlemen can be maintained through communication and social closeness that continue over time.

Based on these three indicators, the relationship between farmers and middlemen in Atula Urban Village displays the characteristics of a dyadic and personal pattern. A relationship lasting more than a decade, assistance provided on the basis of trust, and routine

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communication show that the relationship has developed beyond an ordinary economic transaction. Thus, the continuity of the patron-client relationship is determined not only by buying and selling interests but also by the social closeness and trust that have formed between the two parties.

2. Reciprocal but Unequal Exchange Pattern

The reciprocal but unequal exchange pattern is a characteristic of the patron-client relationship that shows an exchange of benefits between two parties with different control over resources. Scott (1972) explains that patrons provide assistance, protection, and access to resources, while clients provide loyalty and some form of return for the assistance received. Although both parties benefit, the relationship does not take place on a fully equal footing because the patron controls greater resources.

In this study, the reciprocal but unequal exchange pattern is seen in the assistance given by middlemen to farmers and in farmers' unwritten obligation to sell their harvest to the middlemen who have given the assistance. The results show that the middlemen's assistance includes capital loans for farming activities, the purchase of fertilizer and pesticides, and financial help when farmers face urgent needs. Informant GT stated:

> *"Pernah. Biasanya saya pinjam untuk tambahan modal turun sawah, beli pupuk, dan kebutuhan lain kalau dana lagi kurang." (Wawancara, 15 Februari 2026).*
> Translation: *"Yes, I have. Usually I borrow for extra capital to start the planting season, to buy fertilizer, and for other needs when I am short of funds." (Interview, February 15, 2026).*

The provision of this assistance shows that middlemen play an important role in supporting the continuity of farmers' production activities. The capital provided helps farmers meet farming needs when their own funds are insufficient. The ease of obtaining assistance also makes middlemen one of the sources of financing that farmers rely on. This finding is in line with Hardian et al. (2024), who explain that middlemen function not only as buyers of the harvest but also as providers of capital and a buffer for farmers' economic needs.

The assistance provided by middlemen subsequently creates a reciprocal obligation for farmers as recipients. The results show that the main form of return given by farmers is selling the harvest to the middlemen who have helped meet their capital and production input needs. Informant GT stated:

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"Kewajibannya menjual hasil panen kepada tengkulak yang sudah membantu modal." (Wawancara, 15 Februari 2026).
Translation: *"The obligation is to sell the harvest to the middleman who has helped with capital." (Interview, February 15, 2026).*

A similar statement was made by GMA:

"Kalau sudah dibantu modal, ya hasil panennya dijual ke beliau." (Wawancara, 15 Februari 2026).
Translation: *"Once we have been helped with capital, then the harvest is sold to him." (Interview, February 15, 2026).*

These statements from the farmers were reinforced by the statements of middlemen IMS and NL, who expressed their expectation that farmers sell their harvest to the party that provided the assistance. One of the middleman informants stated:

"Iya, harus dijual kepada saya."
Translation: *"Yes, it must be sold to me."*

This statement shows that selling the harvest is the form of return that middlemen expect for the assistance they have provided. Farmers obtain ease in meeting production needs, while middlemen obtain certainty of unhusked rice supply for their trading activities. This exchange shows a relationship in which both parties benefit but which is not entirely balanced, because middlemen hold the resources that farmers need, particularly capital and marketing access.

This finding reinforces Scott's (1972) concept of *reciprocal but unequal exchange*, namely a reciprocal relationship that takes place in an unequal position. The assistance provided by the patron creates a social obligation for the client to reciprocate through loyalty and commitment within the cooperative relationship. The results of this study are also in line with Hardian et al. (2024) and Arumandani et al. (2024), who show that capital assistance from buyers can be followed by an unwritten obligation for farmers to sell their harvest to the party that provided the assistance.

Thus, the reciprocal pattern between farmers and middlemen in Atula Urban Village is formed through the exchange of capital assistance and production inputs for harvested crops. Farmers obtain support to carry out their farming activities, while middlemen obtain certainty

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of unhusked rice supply. The relationship is maintained through agreements and moral obligations that develop in the interaction between the two parties, even though they are not always set out in a written agreement.

3. Layered Hierarchy Pattern

The layered hierarchy pattern shows differences in standing between patron and client based on control over resources and influence over economic activity. Scott (1972) explains that patrons hold a stronger position because they control the resources that clients need, while clients are in a position of greater dependence on that assistance. In the relationship between farmers and middlemen in Atula Urban Village, the difference in standing is seen in the middlemen's position as providers of capital and market access, while farmers are the party that receives assistance and sells their harvest.

The results show that middlemen occupy the position of patron because they are able to provide capital assistance, production inputs, and access to harvest marketing. When facing urgent needs, farmers tend to contact middlemen whom they already know and trust. Informant GS stated:

> *"Kalau ada kebutuhan mendadak biasanya yang pertama kami hubungi memang tengkulak, karena selama ini sering membantu modal untuk usaha tani." (Wawancara, 15 Februari 2026).*
> Translation: *"If there is a sudden need, the first ones we usually contact are indeed the middlemen, because they have often helped with capital for farming." (Interview, February 15, 2026).*

This statement shows that middlemen hold an important position in farmers' economic activities because they can provide the resources needed to sustain farming. This position was not formed through formal rules but developed through the provision of assistance and a cooperative relationship that has continued over time. This condition accords with Scott's (1972) patron-client theory, which explains that patrons have greater control over resources so that they can provide assistance and protection to clients.

The difference in standing is also visible in the direction of capital flow in the patron-client relationship. The results show that capital moves from middlemen to farmers in the form of cash loans and assistance in procuring fertilizer and pesticides. Assistance is generally given from before the planting season through the crop maintenance stage. Informant GT explained

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that capital assistance is usually provided in the period from before planting through crop care. This condition shows that middlemen are involved in meeting farmers' needs from the production stage, not only once the harvest is available.

The flow of capital from middlemen to farmers shows a resource dependence in the patron-client relationship. Farmers obtain support to carry out production activities, while middlemen build an attachment with farmers who are expected to supply unhusked rice after the harvest. This finding is in line with Agustina et al. (2024) and Arumandani et al. (2024), who show that limited access to formal financing drives farmers to use informal sources of financing to meet their farming needs.

In addition to control over capital, the hierarchy of the relationship can also be seen in middlemen's influence over decisions on marketing the harvest. The results show that middlemen do not directly force farmers to sell their harvest to them. However, capital assistance and a cooperative relationship of long standing lead farmers to tend to sell their harvest to the middlemen who previously provided assistance. Informant GT stated:

> *"Biasanya setelah panen langsung dijual ke tengkulak yang memberi modal." (Wawancara, 15 Februari 2026).*
> Translation: *"Usually after the harvest it is sold straight away to the middleman who provided the capital." (Interview, February 15, 2026).*

This statement shows that farmers' marketing decisions are influenced by the cooperative relationship formed during the production process. Selling the harvest to middlemen is understood as a form of responsibility and return for the assistance received. This condition is reinforced by the statement of informant KS, a middleman:

> *"Kalau mereka sudah merasa punya utang ya otomatis dia menjual ke kami."*
> Translation: *"If they already feel they are in debt, then naturally they sell to us."*

This statement shows that capital assistance and the existence of a payment obligation influence farmers' decisions in choosing a marketing channel. Although there is no direct coercion, the economic relationship that has formed gives middlemen influence over farmers' decisions on selling their harvest. This finding is in line with Hardian et al. (2024), who show that capital assistance from middlemen can encourage farmers to maintain a marketing relationship with the same party.

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Based on the research results, the layered hierarchy pattern between farmers and middlemen in Atula Urban Village is seen in the middlemen's control over resources, the direction of capital provision, and their influence on decisions about marketing the harvest. Middlemen hold a more dominant position because they provide needs that farmers find difficult to meet on their own, while farmers maintain the relationship by selling their harvest. Thus, the patron's dominance is manifested not through coercion or formal rules but through control over resources, relationships of trust, and reciprocal obligations that have been formed over the long term.

Overall, the research results show that the patron-client relationship pattern between farmers and middlemen in Atula Urban Village is formed through three main characteristics: the dyadic and personal pattern, the reciprocal but unequal exchange pattern, and the layered hierarchy pattern. The dyadic and personal pattern is reflected in the long-standing relationship, trust, and routine communication. The reciprocal but unequal exchange pattern is seen in the provision of capital assistance and production inputs by middlemen, which is repaid by farmers' sale of their harvest. Meanwhile, the layered hierarchy pattern is seen in differences in control over resources and in middlemen's influence on farmers' marketing decisions. These three characteristics show that the patron-client relationship in Atula Urban Village is based not only on economic interest but is also maintained through social ties, trust, and reciprocal obligations that continue over time.

CONCLUSION

The patron-client relationship pattern between farmers and middlemen in Atula Urban Village is dyadic and personal. This relationship is formed through mutual trust, social closeness, and continuous communication. It is marked by a reciprocal but unequal exchange, in which middlemen provide capital assistance and production inputs while farmers give loyalty by selling their harvest to the middlemen. This condition shows a relationship of mutual need, but with a stronger bargaining position on the part of the middlemen.

Based on the research results, farmers are expected to maintain a good cooperative relationship with middlemen while still paying attention to their independence and bargaining position in marketing their harvest. The local government is expected to support farmers by providing easier access to capital and marketing. In addition, future researchers are expected to examine the patron-client relationship between farmers and middlemen from different aspects in order to obtain a deeper understanding.

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