

CHAPTER IV

THE SALT-DRIED FISH INDUSTRY

The towkays here are mainly concerned with salt-dried fish industry. It is, therefore, appropriate that some space should be devoted to discussing the processes of making salt-dried fish as found in Beserah. Then a discussion of the defects of the present methods and their cure follows. The next section that follows is on trade itself. Here, the writer wishes to make an apology to the reader because, as a result of the unwillingness of the towkays to co-operate with him, the writer failed to get the necessary figures of salt-dried fish production for the previous months, thus making the work of comparison impossible. In this section, therefore, the writer can only give a brief discussion of trade as carried out in June of this year. The last part of this chapter will be on the significance of the industry in Beserah.

The salt-dried fish can be grouped into two major classes: big and small salt-dried fish.

Big Fish Salting and Drying:

In this area, fish such as snappers (Ikan Merah), pomfret (Ikan Bawal), and horse mackerel (Ikan Selar) are usually made into salt-dried fish. As soon as these fish are taken to the curing sheds they will be gutted, washed clean and then put into long rectangular tubs or round cemented rings, which contain the salt "pickle". This pickle is used over and over again with an

occasional addition of a little fresh salt. Between 25 and 35 kati of fresh salt are required for every pikul of these fish. The preservation of fish in this manner takes about two to three days and, when they are ultimately put out to dry, they emit a very offensive odour. They have also lost a considerable amount of their former bulk by decomposition. It is estimated that the weight of these fish in their dried form is about 50-55 percent of their former weight.¹

Small Fish Salting and Drying:

The term "small-fish" here refers mainly to anchovy or Ikan Bilis, which forms the most important salt-dried fish in Beserah. Once taken to the curing shed, Ikan Bilis is first washed clean and then is put into small round basket trays. About fourteen trays can contain one pikul of fresh Ikan Bilis. Each basket is then gradually lowered into the boiling salt water in the cauldron for a minute or two. It is then taken out until it cools down. Usually there are four or five cauldrons at one curing shed. This means that four or five trayfuls of Ikan Bilis can be boiled at the same time if they are managed by one skilful man. The boiling is usually done in the morning at about seven or eight o'clock because Ikan Bilis is in most cases caught in the early morning.

As soon as the trayfuls of Ikan Bilis which have been put into the boiling water cool down, and if the sunlight is strong,

1. Source: Fisheries Office, Kuantan Pahang.

Ikan Bilis is then spread out on the drying platform or sometimes on the mats on the beach. The laying out on the drying platform usually takes about two hours. This is a very cumbersome process. The significance of spreading out carefully is that, if improperly done, the quality of the fish will be affected. Drying of Ikan Bilis takes one day only if the sunlight is strong; otherwise the drying requires two days and the Ikan Bilis has to be reboiled. It is estimated that the weight of dried Ikan Bilis is about one-third of the original one.¹

It seems a very inefficient policy to carry on a process which allows a considerable amount of the actual bulk to liquefy and thus be lost altogether. Moreover, the very method of drying and laying out the fish takes such a long time. Possibly, the best remedy is to instal, at least, one fish-drying apparatus which would bring improvement in the industry.² But since this apparatus is very costly, one would not expect the Federation Government to introduce some demonstration drying plant into Malaya immediately because the present limited financial resources can be used for establishing and expanding credit co-operative societies in the rural areas. As regards the fish salting system, the immediate step to improve it is to make a more liberal use of salt and to throw away the pickle before it becomes a smelly fluid, which much affects the quality of the salt-dried fish.

1. Source: Fisheries Office, Kuantan, Pahang.

2. Source: David G. Stead: General Report Upon The Fisheries of British Malaya, 1923, p.244.

ILLUSTRATIONS

Photo 1.



A Typical Curing Shed
in Beserah.

Photo 2.



A Typical Dried Fish
Platform in Beserah.

Photo 3.



Drying Ikan Bilis on the
Ground. (N.B. The Curing Shed
is at the back.)

Photo 4.



Five Cemented Rings
in which Big Fresh
Fish are salted.

The Salt-Dried Fish Trade:

The total quantities of salt-dried fish excluding Ikan Bilis exported by the towkays to Kuantan and Kuala Lumpur amounted to about 118 pikuls and of dried Ikan Bilis amounted to about 230 pikuls in June.¹ While exact figures of fish exported for previous months were not obtainable, the writer understands that the quantities of dried Ikan Bilis alone caught during the first six months of 1952, were extremely low in comparison with those obtained during the first six months of the past few years. One towkay complained that he exported hardly over five hundred pikuls of Ikan Bilis from January to June, as against more than two thousand pikuls over the same period last year.

As a result of the small quantity of Ikan Bilis obtained in the month of June, the price, though fluctuating daily, did not fall below the fifty-dollar level per pikul and ^{the} highest price was ninety-five dollars per pikul.² But one is wrong to conclude that the towkays made a handsome profit during this period. Among all the towkays, Towkay C, who owns the most fishing equipment, as explained in Chapter II, is perhaps the only one who made much profit because out of 280 pikuls of Ikan Bilis exported Towkay C alone claimed about 190 pikuls.³

To whom do these towkays sell their fish? Prior to the import restriction on salt-dried fish into Indonesia imposed by the

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1. See Appendix IV for details.
 2. See Appendix IV for details.
 3. See Appendix V for details.

Indonesian Government towards the end of 1954, two towkays, Towkays B and C, used to export their commodity to Indonesia via Singapore. But after that year, these two towkays have always sent their commodity to their wholesale agents in Kuala Lumpur, who will redistribute the fish to inland towns in Malaya. The other three towkays usually send their commodity through Kuantan wholesale agents who will then send either to local retail shops or to Kuala Lumpur. This intermediary process is mainly a result of the outstanding debt owned by the three towkays in Beserah to the wholesale agents in Kuantan, incurred from the ^{purchase} ~~sale~~ of fishing nets on credit.

The price of the salt-dried fish closely follows the current market price. Before a towkay sends his commodity to his wholesale agent he will first make a phone call to find out the market price. If he calculates that he can make much profit, he will then despatch the goods by lorry transport. If the market price is not very attractive, he may then withhold the sale of his commodity for a day or two. But he cannot keep the commodity in the store for too long because the quality of the fish will be affected. The wholesale agents will usually settle the account with the towkays once a week.

The Economic Significance of the Industry:

One significant function of the towkays as salt-dried merchants is that, through this industry, they provide employment for a large number of people. Of the approximately 1955 fishermen

in 1954 residing in this area about 1,173 persons, for about 60 percent, worked for the towkays.¹ One can, therefore, judge how important this industry is in Beserah. Moreover, casual employment is also provided for some of the housewives of Malay fishermen whose job is to select dried Ikan Bilis from other small dried fish like dried silver bream. The wage is extremely low, only \$1.50 per big basketful of fish, which is usually worked by three women for about two or three hours; this means that each woman will get only fifty cents for a few hours of work.

Other types of employment like fish boiling, laying out of fish for drying, pecking dried fish into boxes are also provided by this industry. The employment of a large number of people in Beserah indirectly explains the existence of many retail and coffee shops the business of which chiefly depends on the income of the fishermen.

1. Source: Co-operative Department. East Pahang, Kuantan.