MALAY FISHERMEN:
THEIR PEASANT ECONOMY

by

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LONDON

Issued in Coöperation with the Royal Institute of International Affairs and the Institute of Pacific Relations

KEGAN PAUL, TRENCH, TRUBNER & CO., LTD.
BROADWAY HOUSE: 68-74 CARTER LANE, E.C.4
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CHAPTER I

THE FISHING INDUSTRY IN MALAYA AND INDONESIA

In the reconstruction of Far Eastern societies after the war attention must be paid to the native peasantry. They are an integral part of the economic fabric there. Yet their needs have often been looked upon as more social and administrative than economic. Legal, educational, medical, nutritional problems have often been tackled without a full realization that these are bound up with fundamental difficulties of income—depending in turn on difficulties in the organization of marketing, the supply of capital and the technical utilization of resources. These problems have become more urgent with the entry of large-scale development by Western interests. This has brought the impact of new techniques of production, immigration of foreign labour, a more widespread use of money, a greatly increased range of consumer’s goods on offer, and a closer dependence on the price fluctuations of international markets in commodities such as rubber, copra and tin. Each of these factors has at times given new opportunities to the peasant. The establishment of plantations, as those of rubber in Malaya, can show him profitable new crops and, if he learns the lesson, can teach him useful ways of improving his cultivation. The opening up of new roads and railways can give him a wider market among the labourers for the local sale of his fruit and vegetables. It can give him also a chance of earning money as a labourer himself during the slack season in his agriculture. Though he does not work in the tin mines himself, a boom in the mining industry, reflected in a larger labour force and possibly also in increased wages, tends to increase the demand for the areca nut, dried fish and other products which he exports to the larger centres. But all these things challenge his traditional way of life and set him problems of adaptation. Moreover, the more successful he is in widening his economic universe and moving away from his basic subsistence economy, the more he is liable to be faced by insecurity. To the risks of nature in drought and flood he has added the hazards—equally incalculable to him—of world prices regulated by overseas demand and supply. A change from rice to rubber, lucrative
as it may be at the time, may involve him in an economic depression which whittles down the cash income on which he has now come to rely to take the place of his reduced growing of food. To achieve a wise balance between subsistence production and production for cash is a problem which is difficult if not impossible for him to solve by his own efforts and initiative.

After the war the welfare of the peasantry will be one of the basic indices by which the administration will be judged, however successful be the restoration of the extractive industries, the improvement of the conditions of industrial and plantation labour, or the revival of commercial enterprises.

The claims of the peasant fishermen must also be borne in mind. They too are an important part of the total economy. Their importance lies not only in their actual population—which is considerable although but a fraction of the whole Malay and Indonesian peoples—but also in their contribution to the economic and nutritional system of the community. Fish, sometimes fresh but more often dried or otherwise cured, is the normal accompaniment to rice in the peasant meal in most Far Eastern countries. In Malaya even the immigrant labourer relies largely upon it. Since meat is scarce, and dear even when obtainable, the fish component gives the invaluable major part of the animal protein and much of the fat in the native diet. And as an alternative to fish or a substitute for it large quantities of shrimps, prawns, crabs and other marine foods are eaten. A little canned fish was imported into these countries before the war, but its consumption by the mass of the population was negligible. For a long time to come they must continue to depend upon locally produced supplies. The furnishing of these supplies to the country at large creates work and income for a large number of people apart from the fishermen themselves. Timber-cutters, cord-makers and boat-builders; people who cure or cook the fish; people who transport it to market; middlemen of many types, from wholesalers to retail stall-holders—all tend to rely on the fishing for a livelihood.

It is difficult to envisage what may be the situation of these Malay and Indonesian fishermen immediately after the war—whether, for instance, they will have been deprived of many of their boats and nets to supply Japanese wants for transport and equipment; whether they will have been organized and outfitted along modern Japanese lines to increase food production; or whether they will have been left largely alone to continue their
traditional methods. But in any event they cannot be left out of programmes for general reconstruction and development.

Before the war the fishing industry was not ignored, in either the British or Netherlands Malayan and Indonesian territories. But by comparison with peasant agriculture it was late in arousing official interest, the range of its problems was only slowly understood (especially on the economic side) and the funds and personnel allotted to assist it were small. The fishing industry is not an easy one to help in any country, and its problems are especially difficult in regions such as Malaya and Indonesia. Many of the fishing communities are small and scattered. Most of them are relatively isolated. It is hard to disseminate ideas through printed material among men whose literacy is mostly of a low grade, and hard also to get personal contact with them when they are so often at sea, ranging from one fishing ground to another. Their many local variations of equipment, technique and organization make it difficult to work out a policy and adapt it to their requirements. All such factors in the past have tended to inhibit any speedy comprehensive plans for the improvement of their conditions.

In shaping any programme for Malayo-Indonesian fishing it is essential to understand the nature of the industry and its problems. From even the most general point of view it is necessary to know the answers to a few broad questions. What is the productivity of the industry? Is there full utilization of the natural resources of the Malayo-Indonesian waters? How efficient is the use of equipment and of labour? What is the regularity of employment, and what subsidiary or alternative occupations are available? How is capital supplied to the industry—how much by local saving and how much by outside investment? Is the industry under-capitalized or over-capitalized? Are marketing facilities well developed? How well are the consumers' interests served? How do the income and standard of living of the fishermen compare with those of other groups—say, peasant agriculturalists or middlemen?

Some indication of the answers is available from government reports and other material. But very little detailed systematic work has been published on the subject; the data comprise mainly annual statistics of equipment and yields (the latter often no more than rough estimates), and the results of small-scale experiments on new fishing grounds, methods of curing and canning, adaptations of net styles, etc. Most of the attention
has been given to technical research. But the economic and social organization of the industry needs special investigation too. A thorough knowledge of this demands a series of regional surveys—which do not exist so far. All that can be done as yet is to give a general picture by collating the scattered information available and supplementing it wherever possible by sample studies.

The primary aim of this book is to give the results of one such sample study, the first detailed analysis of a Malay fishing economy. The region concerned is the east coast of Malaya, which is of major importance in the fishing industry of the Peninsula. Over a period of nearly a year a general survey was made along the coast from the mouth of the Kelantan River to the mouth of the Kuantan River, covering nearly all the fishing communities in the states of Kelantan and Trengganu, and some in the north of Pahang. In particular, an intensive study was made for sample purposes of the Perupok area of Kelantan, a group of fishing villages comprising over 1,000 people, who are important suppliers to the Kelantan inland markets. Their intricate economic organization illustrates many of the principles found elsewhere not only in Malaya but also in other parts of Indonesia.

Before presenting the results of this special study it is advisable to sketch out the main features of the fishing industry in the Malayo-Indonesian regions as a whole. This brief review, like the whole of this book, is concerned only with sea fishing, though fishing in inland waters, particularly fish farming, has great importance also, especially in Java and Malaya.

GENERAL CHARACTER OF MALAYO-INDONESIAN SEA FISHING ¹

Around the coasts of Malaya and of Java, Sumatra, Borneo and other islands of the Indonesian archipelago, there are many native communities drawing their living mainly from the sea. In Java, for instance, fishermen are found all along the north coast and in some areas, as Tegal, fishing is a main occupation; in Sumatra, fishing is especially important on the east coast and

¹ Owing to war conditions, I have had access to only a limited range of literature on the Indonesian fisheries. For authorities consulted, see Bibliography at end of the book. Conditions in Malaya and Indonesia have many similarities to those in other Eastern regions—see, for example, the account of nets and fishing by M. Ramaswami Nayudu, "Statistical Analysis of an Inshore Fishing Experiment at Madras during 1919," Report No. 3, pp. 115-33, Bulletin No. 12, Madras Fisheries Department (Madras, 1921).