

ENTERPRISING FISHERFOLK

OUR COLOURFUL FISHING HERITAGE

ALTHOUGH constantly facing life fraught with trials and tribulations, resourceful fisherfolk in the past overcame adversity with courage and even found time to indulge in social and cultural celebrations, writes **ALAN TEH LEAM SENG**

THE popular seaside town of Desaru bustles with activity just as the evening sun makes its final descent towards the distant horizon. Joining the others in making a beeline for the beachfront, I stand at the water's edge with feet lost in the rhythmic percussion of waves on powdery soft sand.

As daylight ebbs, the last few remaining rays of the sun cast a warm glow on nearby buildings forming this renowned Johor resort town's beating commercial and cultural heart. While admiring the picturesque setting, focus falls on Muzium Nelayan Tan-

jung Balau, a well-known repository filled with eye-opening information and interesting artefacts highlighting our local fishing industry's colourful past.

PAST FISHING PRACTICES

Recalling a visit made earlier in the day, thought comes alive about things learnt during the pleasurable walk through galleries dedicated to industrious Kelantan and Terengganu fisherfolk, whose economic and social conditions were, to a large extent, determined by the local landscape and regulated by the annual South China Sea monsoon.

Carved by impregnable moun-

tain ranges into an almost isolated pocket, the two states have coastlines defined by exposed long sandy beaches with few sheltered harbours. Although most fishing crafts until the late 20th century came ashore on open beaches, the vessels, however, could not be left exposed for fear of tempestuous storms which, until today, are a common occurrence. The task of hauling them further inland was severely handicapped by lack of mechanical gear and that restricted boat sizes to what the crew or teams of oxen could handle.

Landings in the late afternoons turned the beach into temporary marketplaces with middlemen, housewives and children arriving as soon as the first of many heavily laden boats start appearing on the distant horizon.

While loved ones impatiently rush to the water's edge to welcome the safe return of their breadwinners, traders bide time until the boats were ashore and contents available for inspection before making their move.

Haggling usually begins at an above-market price set by the *juragan* and continues until the skipper names a final sum that he is willing to accept. Despite the rather boisterous negotiations, relations return to normal upon conclusion of the sale.

Immediately after that, the scenic sandy stretches magically transform into convenient thoroughfares for foot runners, bicycles, hired cars and even small buses and lorries to ferry the freshly caught marine produce directly to surrounding markets, where customers wait eagerly by the droves.

The last deals of the day are conducted by those involved in sun-drying and pickling fish for sale during the monsoon season when fish are scarce due to heavy rains, strong winds and unsettled seas. Buying the remaining odds and ends in bulk at relatively cheaper rates, they are among the last few people to leave the area before evening sets in.

MAKING ENDS MEET

While some are purchased with cash, most of the fish caught are sold on weekly credit terms with payment due each Friday. Prices set on the beach are extraordinarily sensitive as they vary not only from day to day but also from boat to boat. Profit margins are calculated based on estimat-



Sails catch the land breeze as boats head out to sea. PIX COURTESY OF ALAN TEH LEAM SENG

ed prices settled at other landing areas throughout the two states, as well as anticipated demand at the markets, capital layout for storage, salt availability and, more importantly, projected fish landings in the coming days.

Unlike most early west coast padi-planting ventures, the Kelantan and Terengganu fishing industry was not economically isolated. The fisherfolk took part in a general exchange system that involved elaborate marketing and credit arrangements with shopkeepers and other merchants outside the fishing circle. As such, their incomes and living standards were sensitive to external fluctuations like tin and rubber market slumps, upheavals like labour strikes and disputes, government policy revisions and even conflicts abroad.

Constantly mindful of the need to provide for their families in the best possible manner, the seafarers made full use of time-tested fishing techniques to ensure bountiful harvests. Handlines for *kerisi* (bream), trolls for *tenggiri batang* (Spanish mackerel), gill nets for *kembung* (Indian mackerel) at night and *gelama* (jewfish) during the day, purse seine nets for *semilang* (catfish) and shrimp nets for small crustaceans.

Other more interesting techniques included scooping *belanak* (grey mullet) at breakwaters during the height of monsoon season and using intricately designed grapnel contraptions to snare cephalopods during *candat sotong* (squid jiggling).

In the past, most nets used were individually owned and locally constructed using imported cotton yarn. Fitted with wooden floats and sinkers cast from lead, the nets were dyed brown with mangrove bark sap to camouflage their presence in the murky depths when deployed.

FISH SOUNDS

Devoid of motorised mechanisms, fishing boats in the past set out to sea at the crack of dawn with the outward blowing land breeze powering their sails. Venturing no further than 3km from shore, the small flotilla is often accompanied by a smaller *sampan* paddled by the highly skilled *juruselam*, whose job is to find the fish and direct net deployment for maximum harvests.

This traditional form of accurately locating fish involves the *juruselam* regularly slipping over the side of his craft and disappearing underwater to listen intently. Surfacing for breath and repeating the same process again, the *juruselam* only returns to his *sampan* and forges ahead when he is certain that there are no fish around or the ones present are too minuscule in number to warrant the laborious and time-consuming effort of net deployment and their subsequent retrieval.

In order to ensure continuity and the fishing industry's long-term survival, most *juruselam* took promising apprentices under their wings and, for months on end, patiently taught them the work intricacies involved. During the first few outings, the novice hears only the sound of waves but over time, the distinguishing noises of different fish species become apparent.

To the trained ear, *tamban* (herring) twitter like birds when they go into frenzied feeding, and sardine shoals sound like surf on the beach on a quiet night as they dash rapidly through the water. While sound intensity helps to determine fish numbers present, most *juruselam* agree that some fish species are barely audible and locating them depended largely on sight.

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A fisherman using a shrimp net to catch prawns along the shore.



Hardworking fisherfolk look ahead towards a better future.

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NIGHT FISHING

As the crowd thins and twilight begins to embrace Desaru beach like a long-lost companion, the unheralded appearance of two fishing boats off the coast with lights blazing and nets adrift quickly brings to mind ingenious fishing techniques employed by traditional fishermen decades ago that were worlds apart compared with the user-friendly technology-aided processes used

by their peers today.

Despite the dearth of electronic capabilities, fishing expeditions in the past enjoyed recurring successes thanks to the dependable *juruselam*. Two waiting boats each drop a wooden buoy to serve as a starting point marker after the *juruselam* gives the all-clear signal with a raised hand. They deployment of nets in a half-circle-motion stops after making a complete circuit by picking up their counterpart's buoy.

The fully crewed boats have to



Children waiting for the boats to return.

move swiftly by paddle power to make sure that the fish do not escape. After that, the men strike the boat's wooden floorboards or half-submerged bamboo poles. The commotion causes the panic-stricken fish to become entangled in the nets while making a dash for safety. They are later picked out individually once the nets are hauled on board.

On the other hand, night fishing for *kembung* involves the use of only one boat with a single net as shoals appear by the thousands between March and November. Going out on moonless nights, the crew equip themselves with flares to attract the fish. The ignited paraffin filled bamboo tubes provide illumination for easy shoal detection as gathering fish appear as ruffling white patches near the water surface.

Although fishing after dark appears to be relatively easier, it is, however, not without hazards. Seas tend to be rougher at night and boats have to lash spars across gunwales to reduce rolling during bad weather. When caught in severe storms, fishermen go to the extent of leaving their catch in the nets and securing them overboard to lessen weight and allow the boat to ride higher in the water.

Normally, these boats stay out all night and only come ashore at the crack of dawn. It is quite a spectacle to see countless vessels converging towards shore with only paddles as sails are rendered useless by the seaward blowing land breeze that starts picking up as soon as darkness bids farewell.

SOCIAL INTERACTIONS

Much like today, earnings secured in the past were meagre and their division among crew members involved a rather complicated customary scheme. Executed at the end of the week by the captain, half goes to the net owners and the remainder is divided among the boat owner and crew with the basis being a set of equal shares.

The boat owner gets two shares by virtue of vessel ownership and the rest, including the captain, gets a share each. On top of that,

the captain and *juruselam* get additional payment in recognition of their job importance. Finally, a portion of the catch is always set aside and divided among crew members. This *makan lauk* handout is very much looked forward to as it not only provided food for their families but could also be sold to acquire household necessities.

Another rather lucrative supplementary income source came from vegetable growing. The main types planted are pumpkin, cucumber, sweet potatoes, manioc, maize and melons. These enterprising people also keep livestock like cattle, goats and chickens on the side and use their droppings as organic manure for the vegetable plots.

Other subsidiary occupations include rope and fishing line manufacturing, woodcarving, carpentry and boat building. The young and nimble climb coconut trees to harvest the fruits and others keep trained macaques to do the same.

Like men, the Kelantan and Terengganu womenfolk are equally enterprising and often help fray household expenses by weaving mats and selling them together vegetables, flowers and fruits at nearby markets.

For these diligent and independent people, lives, however, did not revolve just around work.

Blessed with ample leisure activities and cultural ceremonies, they set time aside to attend regularly organised bull-fights where the desirable attributes of champion fighting bulls are discussed with just as much enthusiasm as those of football stars. Entire villages turn up for *wayang kulit* and *silat* performances, and main *petri* and *berdikir* sessions are assured of sell-out crowds.

Social occasions like nuptials and circumcision ceremonies saw the involvement of extended family members and helpful neighbours in making the processions and feasts resounding successes and lending weight to fact that the lives of the ordinary fisherfolk in Kelantan and Terengganu in the past were anything but boring and dull.

On the way back, more recent developments related to our national fishing industry jolt memory. Although fisherfolk lives have improved by leaps and bounds over the years thanks to the continuous assistance of government agencies, much still needs to be done to counter rapidly depleting resources.

Exploring new boundaries using holistic approaches can help ensure that the legacy of those who brave the sea to help feed our nation continues to flourish.



Fishermen inspecting their nets before going out to sea.



Muzium Nelayan Tanjung Balau outdoor exhibits showcase a variety of intricately carved fishing vessels.