

# The Food Guardians of Lamalera

A recent workshop in Indonesia brought together customary institutions in fisheries

By **Lily Noviani Batara**, (lily\_noviani@yahoo.com), of Bina Desa, an NGO working for empowerment of farmers, fisherfolk and women of rural and coastal Indonesia

*“O Gods in the Highest Place, O the Spirit of Ancestors  
Let the fishes in the sea lose their way. Lead them to us.  
So that we can catch them, to feed our widows and fatherless children  
Who cry out for a meal they have not.”*

This prayer of the elderly of Lamalera, a fishing community from Lembata Island in Nusa Tenggara Timur, Indonesia, captures the essence of the discussions held during a recent workshop in Indonesia. The workshop, which took place from 2 to 5 August 2009 in the city of Lombok in Nusa Tenggara Barat, Indonesia, was titled: “Customary Institutions in Indonesia: Do They Have a Role in Fisheries and Coastal Area Management?”

The workshop provided an excellent platform for representatives of customary institutions and communities in Indonesia to share their experiences on how they have sustainably managed fisheries and other coastal resources, based on age-old local wisdom and customs.

Representatives from the Lamalera community said that the sea was a key part of their livelihood and culture. It provided them with food. It also provided a context for the shared learning of values—moral and ethical, educational, or even the value of safety. For the

Lamalera community, who hunt whales during certain seasons, not all whales in the sea can be killed. Pregnant female whales, courting whales, or breastfeeding females must be left alone. The sustainability of the sea mammal is also the sustainability of the Lamalera.

Similar principles were shared by the Haruku community of the Maluku Islands, where the *sasi* system is observed. There are traditional ways to regulate and conserve fish resources, for example, observing open and closed seasons. Representatives of a fishing community from North Sulawesi described the *mane’e* customs they observe. Fish can only be caught, for example, for some months in a year, at selected locations. The community from North Lombok shared the way in which the *awig-awig* system has been revived. Under this, the use of explosives and poison has been prohibited, and fishing in certain zones and with certain gear is regulated.

Although the workshop discussed several issues related to the life and livelihood of fishing communities, one aspect that was not adequately represented was the role of women in the communities. Fishing is a male-dominated activity and many cultures define ‘fishing’ as an exclusively male occupation. However, as one of the workshop participants from Bina Desa, an NGO that has worked for many years with rural and coastal communities, pointed out, women of fishing communities may not go out into the open sea but they do play vital supportive roles. They help prepare for fishing trips by cooking meals, carrying out safety rituals, and even making and repairing fishing boats and nets. While planning the logistics of the voyage, women sometimes negotiate deals with the local trader in order to secure a loan, to be repaid once the catch is sold. When the men are at sea, women work to support the family. They weave mats, trade in domestic products, collect leftover fish from boats, collect edible molluscs, and so on. Once the men come home with the catch, women are responsible for sorting out the fish, salting, drying and selling it.

In the traditional fishing *kampung* (village) of the Lamalera, much before men go fishing, the women collect and prepare raw material to make a special rope called the *tale* or *leo*. This rope, made of several locally-available

KAREL BATAONA AND WILLY KERAF



Women traditionally observe the ceremony of *tobu nama fat*, a special ritual for the safety of the fishermen

fibres—cotton, the *waru* tree bark and *gebang* leaves—is used to catch whales and other types of fish. Closer to the fishing season, women traditionally observe the *tobu nama fat*, a special ritual for the safety of the fishermen. Once the whale is on the beach, women cut, clean, dry, and prepare the meat for domestic consumption as well as for marketing. Dried whale meat is commonly bartered with other food staples such as nuts, fruits, vegetables and corn. Often, Lamalera women walk long distances inland with baskets of whale meat, and other products such as dried fish, salt, *kapur-sirih* and the meat of pig, goat or dog. These are traded with food staples produced by the inland community. Such trips could involve more than a day of walking, and sometimes women have to stay out overnight before heading back home.

The Lamalera recognize at least seven different seasons. *Musi Lerâ* is the dry season—the right time to go out fishing to sea. It normally lasts from May to September. During other seasons, unfavourable for fishing, the Lamalera fishermen usually find other things to do. During the non-fishing months women traditionally take over the role of breadwinner. In addition to weaving and making rope, they process salt and burn limestone collected from the sea to be traded with inland populations. Such activities have helped the Lamalera community tide over difficult times.

The hard labour of women in the Lamalera community benefits not only their families, but the whole community. Although the Nusa Tenggara Timur province is one of the poorest in Indonesia, the Lamalera community has never experienced famine or widespread hunger. All thanks to the Lamalera women! ❏