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The Role of Bilik Port in The Export of The Smallholder Rubber in Labuhan Batu and Padang Lawas Area Before The Economic Depression in 1930

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Abstract

Before the opening of Belawan Port in the early 20th century, Labuhan Bilik Port was one of the largest and most important ports in East Sumatra. Trading and shipping activities at Labuhan Bilik Port were supported by its geographical conditions with many rivers surrounding it that could even reach the hinterlands. Due to this condition, coupled with the limited land route infrastructures, residents in hinterlands utilized river transportation to sell agricultural products, especially the smallholder rubber. Labuhan Batu and Padang Lawas areas were known as large rubber plantation areas. To distribute their crops, residents in this area relied on Labuhan Bilik Port. It was a transit port for rubber farmers and traders. They could directly export the rubbers to the peninsula, such as Penang and Singapore. The discussion about the role of Labuhan Bilik Port for hinterland was explained by descriptive analysis. The use of sources such as periodic reports, colonial archives as well as other literature sources was needed to describe and explain the port activities in Labuhan Bilik. The role of Labuhan Bilik Port was significant considering that it was located at the confluence of two large rivers; Bilah River and Barumun River. The two rivers crossed the enclave of smallholder rubber farming even to the Padang Lawas (Tapanuli) area. In addition, the close distance between Labuhan Bilik and the Peninsula was also considered important due to the fact that there were a large number of traders exported smallholder rubber to Penang and Singapore

Keywords: port; export; smallholder rubber; Labuhan Bilik; and Padang Lawas.

1. Introduction

A port is a gateway or seaward gate, a meeting place for traders who market their commodities from mainland cultivation in exchange for commodities from across the region. [1] Trading activities that occurred between the supporting areas (hinterland) with the port as a transit point for the distribution of agricultural commodities were usually supported by both land and river transportation modes. The existence of this mode of transportation could increase the trading activity in the region. One of the ports whose trading activities were supported by the hinterland region was Labuhan Bilik. Labuhan Bilik was one of the largest and most important ports in East Sumatra before the opening of Belawan Port by the Dutch colonial government. (see table 1).[2] [3]

One of the main commodities exported through Labuhan Bilik Port was rubber. Labuhan Bilik, supported by the large number of rubber plantation areas in East Sumatra and Tapanuli, became an entrepot for the rubber trade for the Dutch East Indies and the Malay Peninsula. The hectic pace of rubber trading activities in Labuhan Bilik was highly affected by its geographical conditions where many rivers passed through it, especially the two large rivers; Bilah River and Barumun River which could reach up to Padang Lawas (Tapanuli) area. This condition helped Labuhan Bilik Harbor survived and became one of the most important ports in East Sumatra until the economic depression hit the world in 1930.

2. Smallholder Rubber Plantation

Before getting introduced by a more structured agricultural system, people in East Sumatra, including in Labuhan Batu area, still relied on obtaining products from the forest. Forest products that were usually traded were rattan, latex, wax, laka wood, resin and so on. [4] This agricultural system continued until East Sumatra was fully under Dutch colonial rule. Initially, the residents of Labuhan Batu implemented a shifting cultivation system by clearing the land. If the land was considered less profitable, they would re-open a new land. They chose rice as their cultivated plant. [5]

Apart from rice, the residents also cultivated rubber plant known as *ficus elastica*. Before being cultivated, *ficus* was a forest product that was collectively collected with other forest products such as resin, gums and rattan. *Ficus* sap was increasingly in demand by the people due to its very high selling price. Therefore, many people in Labuhan Batu cultivated it in 1905. In addition, it was also because of the decrease in *ficus* trees in the forest due to the tapping by cutting branches which resulted in the death of tree. Besides, the increasingly massive exploitation of forests for plantations had resulted in fewer *ficus* trees. [6] Meanwhile, for Padang Lawas area, the people's farming was similar to that of Labuhan Batu. The case of *ficus* cultivation had yet to know; however, one of the export products in Tapanuli, including Padang Lawas region, was *ficus* sap. [7]

Ficus cultivation continued to be carried out by the residents until East Sumatra region was declared a *cultuurgebied*. When large plantations cleared land and cultivated more profitable perennials, people certainly followed it. The new cultivated plant was the rubber plant typed *hevea brasiliensis*, even though it did not rule out the fact that the people still maintained *ficus* as one of their cultivated plants. The reasons were because it produced more latex and had a rather shorter tapping period than *ficus*. In addition, it was also because of its maintenance and the high selling price. [6]

Originally imported from the Malay Peninsula, *Hevea* seeds were brought by Chinese traders and pilgrims returning from Mecca. Then, the seeds were obtained from rubber plantations in East Sumatra since the 1920s. In 1925, for example, the people could buy rubber seedlings at a price of 1 cent per seed ready for planting. Furthermore, after the *Hevea* trees produced their own seeds, seedlings could be obtained from local people's farms or from their own farms. [8] For *hevea* seeds in Tapanuli, they obtained it from Malay Peninsula such as Malacca and Penang regions. They bought *Hevea* seeds either directly or through representatives. Apart from Semananjung Malaya, they also bought the seeds from the government-owned agricultural agency. [8]

The production of smallholder rubber in Labuhan Batu and Padang Lawas continued to increase and was slightly disrupted when the world was hit by the economic crisis. For instance, in the 1920s, smallholder rubber exported in Labuhan Bilik reached their highest peak after the population succeeded in planting and producing *Hevea* rubber. In 1922, the smallholder rubber production exported through Labuhan Bilik Port was the highest in East Sumatra and this volume continued until 1930. [9] The amount of smallholder rubber production was not only imported from around the Labuhan Bilik area, but from other areas such as Bilah, Kota Pinang and the Tapanuli region through which the Bilah River and the Barumun River passed. [10]

3. The Connectivity between Labuhan Bilik with *Hinterland*

Barumun River and Bilah River. Therefore, the territory covered by Labuhan Bilik Port was the provinces passed by both rivers. There were many settlements and *onderneming* in which both rivers flowed. In addition, the area covered by Labuhan Bilik Port was half part of Tapanuli area which was located at the headwaters of Bilah and Barumun River. The beginning of the Berumun River was Tanjung Sarang Elang upstream, Bilah River from Tanjung Kupiah upstream and Panai River from Tanjung Sarang Elang downstream to the Straits of Malacca. In Panai River, there were Labuhan Bilik villages, Durhaka River, Lumut River, Sanggul River, Berombang River, Sakat River, Ikan Duri River, Pantai Pukat and Bagan Situkang River. [10]

There were at least hundreds of villages from the streams and tributaries that utilized the river as the main transportation route. The trading activities from these villages usually used raft or canoe to carry rubber to Labuhan Bilik. In addition, there were also Chinese traders who bought rubber by tracing the villages on the riverbank. [11] Apart from it, there were exporters who bought rubber by visiting the markets in each riverbank such as Barumun, Bilah and Panai River. [8]

The smallholder rubber trade in Labuhan Batu area was generally carried out in the general market or the special market for smallholder rubber. The smallholder rubber trading market was generally divided into two; supporting markets and main markets. Supporting markets were usually located at the district level, while the main markets were located in the capital city of *onderafdeling*. The main market usually doubled as an export port like Labuhan Bilik. The supporting market functioned to accommodate regional productions that were relatively far away, where many intermediary traders bought smallholder rubber directly from the producers. Furthermore, products traded in supporting markets were delivered to the main market and sold to exporters. [8] Sometimes, there were goods that were directly exported to Penang and Singapore from the supporting markets, such as in Sei Jawi-Jawi where the traders directly traded their agricultural products through exporters to Penang and Singapore. [11]

Oftentimes, the smallholder rubber trade crossed the government administrative boundaries. For instance, the trading activities in Barumun River extended to Padang Lawas area in the Tapanuli region. The tariff for transporting smallholder rubber to Labuhan Bilik was adjusted to the distance and condition of the respective rivers. For the Barumun River area to Labuhan Bilik to Penang and Singapore, a tariff of 2 guilders per picul was applied. [6]

Apart from water transportation infrastructure, the rubber trading network in Labuhan Bilik also relied on land transportation modes. The road construction carried out in 1925 had a positive impact on Labuhan Bilik Port, although its role was not as large as the water transportation mode.

The road constructions in 1925 were as follows:

1. The 16 km road from Mesjid to Kampung Djawi-djawi,
2. The 60 km road from Rantauprapat to Kota Pinang,
3. The 4 km road from Sennah Rubber Ondernemingen to Negeri Lama,
4. The 12 km road from Biyawak to Pangkatan,
5. The 15 km road from Marbau to Masihi,
6. The 32 km road from Negeri Lama to Labuhan Bilik,
7. The 12 km road from Labuhan Bilik to Berombang River,
8. The 12 km road from Kampung Mesjid to Tanjung Mangedar.

Therefore, the road from Rantauprapat to Kota Pinang and Rantauprapat to Labuhan Bilik via Negeri Lama had been connected since 1925. [10] From the two modes of transportation, it could be concluded that Labuhan Bilik was an entrepot for the southern part of East Sumatra.

4. Labuhan Bilik as an Entrepot

The construction of transportation facilities in Labuhan Batu area had a positive impact on Labuhan Bilik. It made Labuhan Bilik one of the most important ports and was the third largest export-import port in the Cultuurgebied region. The trading and shipping activities at Labuhan Bilik Port can be seen in table 1. The table below explains the export-import activities per port in East Sumatra including shipping activities to Labuhan Bilik Port.

Table 1. Shipping, Export and Import Activities per Port in East Sumatra (*Cultuurgebied*) 1879-1890

Name of Port	1879				1888				1890			
	E	I	A	V	E	I	A	V	E	I	A	V
Belawan	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	477.482	353.250	907	871
Labuhan Deli	47.846	45.631	514	592	48.886	166.695	842	834	-	-	-	-
Labuhan Bilik	683	1.950	40	41	2.219	2.223	37	17	5.486	19.262	101	43
Tanjung Balai	5.451	1.614	55	198	34.585	37.292	147	146	108.831	106.241	329	310
Asahan Bandar	-	-	-	-	2.117	3.134	37	26	4.911	4720	47	48
Khalifah Rantau	2.706	2.560	61	60	7.093	6.929	50	62	1.727	1.080	18	22
Panjang Tanjung	-	-	-	-	1.015	1.137	10	10	12.357	17.076	94	67
Tiram Tanjung	9.202	11.912	183	133	53.968	52.864	164	165	-	-	-	-
Pura												

Note: **E**= Export, **I**= Import, **A**= *Aankomst* (number of ships arrived), **V**= *Vertrek* (number of ships departed)

Source: taken from *Statistiek van den Handel, de Scheepvaart en de In- en Uitvoerrechten in Nederlandsche-Indie over het Jaar 1879*, Batavia: Landsdrukkerij, 1880; *Statistiek van den Handel, de Scheepvaart en de In- en Uitvoerrechten in Nederlandsche-Indie over het Jaar 1890*, Batavia: Ogilvie & Co. 1891.

The data in the table above proves that Labuhan Bilik Port was one of the most important ports in East Sumatra. This could be proven by its trading activities, both import and export, and the shipping activities. The volume of exports and imports at Labuhan Bilik Port had fluctuated; the biggest development occurred since 1890. In terms of export and import volume, Labuhan Bilik Port was in the third position behind Belawan Port and Tanjung Balai Asahan. In terms of the shipping activities, it also occupied the third position with the sum of ships coming to and leaving from Labuhan Bilik Port.

However, even though Labuhan Bilik Port was in the third position in terms of its total number of trading and shipping, it actually took the first position in terms of the quantity of its smallholder rubber exports. This was also supported by the number of plantations, both large and smallholder plantations. It resulted in plantation products becoming the main export commodity from Labuhan Bilik Port. For more details, see the data below.

Tabel 2. The Total export of Smallholder Rubber per Port in East Sumatera 1920-1930 in Ton

Port	1920	1921	1922	1923	1924	1925	1928	1929	1930
Belawan					930	2.290	1.880	2.334	613
T. Beringin			26	253	344	105		14	708
P. Berandan		253	317	576	704	735	931	1.010	848
T. Pura		486	544	862	899	815	1.048	1.210	1.105
Kualuh		118	179	143	157	300	26	23	14
L. Bilik	497	253	701	1.127	1.868	3.250	3.760	4.132	2.948
T. Balai	4		234	646	646	670	672	959	518
T. Tiram	16		25	198	198	400	87	210	128

Source: data from 1920-1925 were collected from the report of C. G. Slotemaker, *De Bevolkingsrubbercultuur in Nederlandsch-Indie, VI, Riouw en Onderhorigheden, Oostkust van Sumatra en Atjeh en Onderhorigheden, 1926*, pg. 17-18; year 1928-1930 *Verslag van de Handelsvereniging te Medan over het Jaar 1928-1930*.

The data presented above illustrates that the role of Labuhan Bilik Port was significant for smallholder rubber export activities. The high volume of smallholder rubber exports even exceeded the number of smallholder rubber exports through Belawan Port, even though it was designated as the central port in East Sumatera. As discussed above, the large role of Labuhan Bilik Port in exporting smallholder rubber was influenced by its geographical location that was traversed by large rivers and tributaries. It surely could reach remote villages or plantations even in the middle of the forest where the rivers passed through, making it very easy to transport crops even only by raft.

In addition to the construction of transportation facilities, the location of Labuhan Bilik which could cover the surrounding area expanded its coverage area. Furthermore, it was considered an entrepot due to its close proximity to the Penang and Singapore Port. It was located on the bank of Panai River which was the confluence of two rivers; Barumun River and Bilah River. Panai River emptied into the Malacca Strait. It had a large river mouth with a size of approximately 4.85 nautical miles. The position of the port was approximately 11 nautical miles from the Strait of Malacca. This port was located between Durhaka River and Perdamaian River (tributary of Panai River). The coordinates of Labuhan Bilik Port were 1000 3 '54 "East Longitude and 20 30'36" North Latitude. [10]

As previously explained, Labuhan Bilik Port was the main market for its coverage area. As the main market, it carried out export and import activities. The imports and exports at Labuhan Bilik Port basically came from and sent to the same regions, especially for rice, which was the main import commodity from Thailand and the Dutch East Indies. The origins of imports from the Dutch East Indies were Java Island and areas of East Sumatera outside the coverage area of Labuhan Bilik Port, such as the Kualuh Landschap and Afdeling Asahan, Simalungun and other areas. Meanwhile, the other imported commodities came from the Dutch East Indies region, Europe and America. For imported commodities from Europe and America, some went directly to Labuhan Bilik and some transitted in Penang and Singapore. Just as the export origin areas for Labuhan Bilik Port, the destination areas for imports to Labuhan Bilik Port were also similar, which were areas in the Barumun and Bilah River streams and their tributaries. Therefore, Labuhan Bilik Port was the gateway for its coverage area. From the outside areas, the imported commodities were then brought and distributed to the hinterland, and from the hinterland, the exported commodities were delivered to the areas outside Labuhan Bilik.

Smallholder rubber was clearly the main commodity based on the export data through Labuhan Bilik Port from 1914 to 1926. For more information, see the table below:

Tabel. 3. The Total Export of Smallholder Rubber through Labuhan Bilik Port 1914-1926 in percentage
Source: gathered from *Verslag van de Handelsvereniging te Medan over het Jaar 1914-1926*

Year	Percentage	Year	Percentage
1914	42,15	1921	18,37
1915	34,58	1922	51,80
1916	33,25	1923	56,94
1917	33,42	1924	68,77
1918	32,75	1925	72,95
1919	26,07	1926	78,24
1920	19,41		

Based on the data above, the percentage of smallholder rubber exports through Labuhan Bilik Port fluctuated every year. The data was compiled from *Verslag van de Handelsvereniging te Medan over het Jaar 1914-1926*. From these data, it can be seen that the export of smallholder rubber in Labuhan Bilik was the largest in East Sumatra from 1924 to 1930.

5. Conclusion

Labuhan Bilik Harbor played a big role in exporting smallholder rubber to Labuhan Batu and Padang Lawas areas due to its geographical and economic factors. Geographically, it was due to the fact that it's located at confluence of two major rivers, therefore it could be reached by any river transportation connecting villages close to Barumon and Bilah Rivers, as well as their tributaries. Apart from that, in terms of the economic factor, it was because Labuhan Bilik was close to Singapore and Penang that it could minimize transportation costs.

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