

The Craft of the Fishermen

Posted on

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Boats on the beach (Ranjith Senaweera).

The catamaran has a somewhat adventurous and romantic sound about it. Actually, the name is an anglicization of the composite Tamil word kattumaram (literally tied trees), where a number of logs are lashed together to form a craft. It is the simplest and most primitive form of navigable craft in Sri Lankan waters.

A typical catamaran could be 20 to 25 feet long and is made of five logs. The wood preferred is lunumidilla (*Melia dubia*), a light and durable timber.

There is a tradition that the best lunumidilla is found in and around the Kalutara district on the south-western sea coast of Sri Lanka. And thereby hangs a tale.

In “Tales of Fish & People of the Ceylon Estuary”, JAR. Grenier relates how every year, with the first few gentle puffs of the northeast monsoon, when the sea on the western coast calms down, three or four large catamarans anchor off the mouth of the Kalu Ganga (the Dark River) in Kalutara South. Two score dusky sailors disembark from the vessels and establish a camp on the shore. These visitors hail from South India and the main purpose of their visit is to purchase and take away with them large logs of lunumidilla. In this particular spot in the Island of Ceylon their ancestors had found that the trees were superior in lightness and size. This practice came to an end in 1944 with certain restrictions placed by the island’s government of the time.

The catamaran is a simple craft, cheap to maintain and practically unsinkable. It is a great favorite for fishing in coastal waters, and even in the present day it has adapted itself very well to use with outboard motors.

The larger type of catamaran made of five logs has the central log extending from bow to stern as the frame to which the other logs are lashed together by ropes. A

smaller type is the teppam, mostly three logged, 9 to 15 feet in length. The logs in a teppam are joined together by means of wooden pegs.



After prolonged use in the sea, catamarans become water-logged, and are then dismantled after use and sun dried on the sands. When the craft is launched, it is rowed out for a short distance by a hand paddle. The catamaran rides half submerged in the water and the crew, usually of three, are continually drenched by the waves. The sails are spread out when the craft is some distance from the shore to catch and ride the light winds that play over this area. Extensively using the gill net, the craft cover the inshore fishing grounds, going out to a distance of three or four miles. A number of catamarans sailing in close formation, with their short masts and triangular sails, makes a picturesque sight, viewed from the shore.

In sharp contrast to the primitive and simple catamaran is the elaborate oru, the outrigger canoe. M.D. Raghavan in his definitive work on 'The Karava of Ceylon' says the oru is the most distinctive of the deep-sea craft of Sri Lanka. The outrigger canoe has an elaborate technology perfected in the long course of its development. That the attachment of a log float parallel to the canoe improves its balancing qualities in rough waters is a shrewd discovery, taken to the zenith of its efficiency at the hands of the master boatbuilding craftsmen of Negombo. The beauty of the canoe and the outrigger attachment are the two main units of an oru. The canoe proper is shaped of the durable trunk of a tree of requisite proportions. The wild bread-fruit tree (*Autocarpus nobili*) and the jak (*Autocarpus integrifolia*) are the woods that are preferred. The rough shaping is done at the spot where the tree is felled, which takes three to four days. An elephant helps to bring the tree trunk to the main road from where it is transported by lorry or cart to the boatbuilding yard. On an average an outrigger canoe of the bigger dimensions takes three months to completely rig out.



Fishermen get their nets ready in preparation for a trip out to sea.

Here is how a veteran fisherman described to Grenier the work of the master boat-builders on a duvana oru (literally a running canoe), the great orus that venture 20 to 30 miles out to sea after the big fish like marlin, tuna and shark.

First, the log is carefully measured and tested for any weak spots like flaws and knots and then the exact size of the canoe, when it would be completed, could be reckoned. On that basis the outer side is barked and shaped with adzes. Then the process of hollowing it out follows with the axe and adze, and these implements are used to reduce weight and remove all the unnecessary meat in the wood. Once the canoe takes shape the adze is put away and chisels of a special round design hollow out the internal sides while the external sides are made beautifully smooth with planes. So skilled are these men that in a short time a great chunk of wood is reduced to a sleek, hollow shell which is no more than an inch thick in most places and resounds like a drum at the slightest tap. Any knots and flaws are removed and hardwood ingeniously substituted with copper rivets.

The rest of the work is of a subsidiary nature, involving meticulous attention to detail. Well seasoned jack wood planks, half an inch in thickness and 15 inches in breadth, serve as bulwarks, standing up from the edges of the hollowed trunk of the tree. The fixing of these boards requires great patience and care and only experienced workmen can handle the job. Holes are bored in the planks at close and regular intervals and corresponding holes are made on the top of each side of the canoe. The two ends are then cunningly sewn together with thin, specially made coconut coir rope. The joint is made waterproof by packing it with leaves from the branches of the coconut palm, wedged tightly in between the wood and the stitches. The holes are plugged with small, round wooden pegs from the outside and several coatings of kil (resin melted down in coconut oil) are applied over the seam. The ends of the patharu, as this wooden extension from the top of the canoe is called, point slightly upwards and inwards towards the outrigger at the stem and the bow, so that when the two are lashed together there is no undue strain cast on the planks. The top edges of the bulwarks are reinforced and finished off with rounded beading of lunumidilla.

The kolawa (outrigger) is a slim, long, cigar-shaped piece of hardwood held in place by two long arms about 14 feet from the canoe. It is this contrivance that gives the narrow canoe stability and helps it to skim the waters at great speed. The arms that

hold the outrigger are bent branches from the domba tree (*Calophyllum inophyllum*), noted for strength, pliability and long life. About 10 feet from the canoe, these arms are fortified with thin branches of pinibaru (*Eugenia moonia*), a stick unsurpassed for bearing great strain and for elasticity. Eight'pieces of pinibaru are whipped on to each outrigger arm with many bindings of coir rope. They form the shock-absorbers of the oru. (This could be the origin of the torsion bar concept, discovered centuries before the Volkswagen Beetle exploited it so successfully.)

The oru uses a square sail supported by two bamboo masts. All the joining and fastening is done with coir rope. Besides the copper rivets used for patches, and a few others which support the woodwork for the masts, there is not a single nail driven in to hold the boat together. When the canoe is completely rigged, it is like a living thing on the water: light, supple and in its own way immensely strong.

Apart from these two craft, the catamaran and the oru, two types of traditional boats seen in the coastal waters of Sri Lanka are the padavu and the paru. The padavu is a larger version of the vallam, the canoe of the northern Jaffna coast, and has a beam of 8 feet and a length of 45 feet with a remarkably wide interior and a large sloping stem. The paru is a large flat-bottomed boat, 18 to 35 feet long, with a square-type of base on two keels made of logs. The ends of the boat slope upwards at an angle of 45 degrees from the water. Propelled by oars, it has great buoyancy and rides the surf extremely well.

Both these types are used in beach seine fishing which contributes to a large share of the total fish landings and forms an important labour-intensive aspect of Sri Lanka's fisheries.

The paru carries the beach seine net, the ma dal-a monster net and the largest used in Sri Lanka-to sea. To set the net, the end of one hauling rope is fixed on shore and the boat goes out with the rest of the net, laying it out along an arched course till the free end of the second rope is brought to the shore at a point over 100 yards from the front end. Then it is a matter of hauling in the net. This takes a tremendous effort. When the current and wind are against the course of the net, the hauling operations require 40 to 50 men on either side.

The catamaran and outrigger, the vallam of the North and the duvana oruwa of the south, the padaru and paru which dot the shoreline in Sri Lanka are the workhorses of the fishermen, the symbols of human activity on the beaches of Sri Lanka. Even the briefest stroll along the beach will bring you to a fishing craft. While a few will

be beached in isolation, most of them will be the eager bidding for fresh fish being taken out of shallow holds, near others there will be fishermen mending their nets. Some may have been chosen by tourists as the ideal backdrop for their souvenir photos to be sent back home and near others visitors would be striking a bargain for a ride out to sea the next morning.

Both at dawn and dusk the many fishing craft of Sri Lanka add to the beauty of the beach. Either setting out to sea or coming in, or just blending with the scenery of palms and lapping waves, the fishing craft are as much a part of the scenery as the surf and the golden sand.



Preparing to set sail for a catch.