

# VERNACULAR NAUTICAL ARCHITECTURE IN TRANSITION: A CASE STUDY OF TRADITIONAL SRI LANKAN FISHING CRAFT

Somasiri Devendra

This paper concerns the so-called "catamarans" often considered archetypal Sri Lankan craft. These are of great antiquity although their age can only be guessed. The vernacular form evolved from the available bio-resources and the nature of inshore waters. The craft were made only of wood with all fastenings being, by choice, of coconut coir rope, a common Indian Ocean till technology till comparatively recently. They were dual-element craft, comprising of dug-out hull connected to outrigger float by spars. The entire craft was "flexible" and thus could cope with surf-induced torque. The hull being a monoxylon, its tough, rounded bottom could withstand frequent abrasion from crossing sand spits and being hauled up the beach. It was essentially a "skimming" craft, without a displacement hull and, hence, completely different from the double-outrigger craft of south-east Asia and Madagascar and the east African coast. Its origin can, perhaps, be linked to those of Oceania. The Sri Lankan craft remained unchanged for what must have been millennia. In the last quarter of the last century, changes manifested themselves: the gradual use of iron nails; the increasing use of GRP and of nylon cordage; the use of outboard motors and the consequent morphological changes such as the

substitution for the double-ended configuration of a fixed bow and stern and others. The reasons for change included deforestation, changing priorities in life, cost of manufacture, loss of skills etc. that are dealt with in the paper. An important aspect is that, even the use of new materials and techniques has not changed the basic dual-element form of the craft. This apparent contradiction raises a fundamental question: when, in the course of transition, does a vernacular form cease to be vernacular? This paper is the first attempt to record the process of the ongoing transition of these craft.

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