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## **THE LOST SHIPS OF LANKA**

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### **Introduction: Winnowing Fact from Fiction**

When I began a search for the roots of our nautical culture, the prevailing view was simple: “There was no such animal”. First propounded by colonial Administrators and Christian missionaries, this myth is yet believed by many.

That the Sinhalese never went to sea is patently indefensible, but most “educated” Sinhalese were (and are) of little help to me. So I dug into maritime history, archaeology, ethnography, nautical architecture and 20<sup>th</sup> century scholarship and, after about a decade of scrabbling through the debris and wreckage of that culture, I was personally convinced that we had developed a home-grown boat-building culture, the vestiges of which yet exist in numbers. This culture requires recognition as a specific one and I have coined the term “ORU culture” to describe it. (Note: as this is a thesis I have but recently propounded, I use Capital letters: the same word, when used to refer to an individual craft, and all other non-English words are shown in italics,).

The *oru* is not a mere fishing craft but the last, still vibrant, survivor of a long tradition. It was vernacular by definition, and its birth, growth and decline can be traced step by step from dug-out log to cargo ship: a regional sub-culture of the north Indian Ocean which, though paralleled in the Pacific, was not an import.

The colonial, Eurocentric view is best expressed below [Toussaint: 1966] which, even at first reading, does not make sense.

*“The Sinhalese people never looked towards the sea and the navigators whom history records were always foreigners. The outriggers themselves are of foreign origin, and it is not in Ceylon that we shall really comprehend the ocean’s story”*

Much later, a writer [Kentley: 2003] whose hands-on approach and honesty in research, as well as his field-work on our watercraft are commendable, expressed a different view altogether.

*“Although the boats of Sri Lanka share with several other boat types of the Indian Ocean a common technique in fastening planks, indeed a special method of sewing, this is a single attribute and not sufficient to place Sri Lanka within a broad ‘Indian Ocean boat building culture’. In terms of maritime ethno technology, Sri Lanka has a distinctive culture: sewing may be the only imported trait (though it cannot be ruled out that it developed here first).”*

By that time I, too, had understood that our watercraft were possibly outside ‘a broad Indian Ocean shipbuilding culture’: that our ORU culture was distinctive and vernacular, though with some borrowed features incorporated into the base form.

Finally, I could show how and why this culture developed into its fully-fledged form [Devendra (1):2011] and how European colonial power made it regress, leaving untouched only inland and coastal craft [Devendra (2): 1995]. Of these, the “*oru*”, not only survived, but thrived, in a rapidly changing environment [Devendra (3):2011]. This island – itself a “Child of the Sea” – is home are many peoples, all of whom (all but the ‘First Peoples’, the *Adivasis*) came here by sea [Devendra (4):2010]

### A diversion : a definition of the word “Oru”

Before I get on to ships, it has been suggested that I define this craft for the benefit of non-Sri Lankan readers (and many Sri Lankans, too: *vide* opening paragraph.) The *Oru* – to use its plural, or stem form in Sinhala (*oruwa* being the singular form) – is a single outrigger sailing canoe. It is a dual-element craft: a marriage of a dugout log hull and a balance log (or outrigger). They are, incorrectly, called “catamarans” in English. This is an unfortunate accident of history. A “catamaran” is actually a raft, the word being derived from the Tamil word *kattu-maram* which denotes a shaped-log raft. For further details please refer “*From Aak to Zumbra: A Dictionary of the World’s Watercraft*”. Published by the London Mariners’ Museum with contributions by M.H.Parry *et al*, in 2001

Read, Sri Lankan readers: heed your heritage and hear the music of the sea.

### How old is the “ORU culture”

How do we count an island’s age? From the day it becomes an island. When the sea level rises, islands are born: when it recedes, they re-unite with the mainland. This island became one approximately 7,000 years ago. People living here, then, remained in this little space. In the vast landmass of India, where this phenomenon was not experienced, sophisticated societies developed, as did ship-building and sea-borne trade. It was these traders who came to know of, and trade with the people here. We believe the first settlement of these merchant-sailors was on the date of the Buddha’s *parinibbāna* 2,600-odd years ago, in 543 BCE. Hence this is the beginning of our History. Vijaya, our iconic “first settler” came, of course, in an Indian-built ship. But did we have any? There is no historical or epigraphic record. But, in the Colombo Museum, we have an *oru* which has been <sup>14</sup>C dated to a mere 40 years after Vijaya’s arrival. It was found in Kelaniya, which is far away from where he made his landfall. That *oru* is a work of skilled workmen, not primitives (**Fig. 1**) and gives us a glimpse of the pre-Vijayan culture and technology.



Fig.1. The earliest *Oru* (Colombo Museum)

So: how old is the “ORU culture”? Answer: as old as (probably older) than the Sinhalese people.

## The Sinhala Vernacular Idiom

From what remains today, we can identify the *pahura*, *oru* (**Fig.2**), *angula*, *paru* (see Chart below), and *ma-del paru* as the last of the old forms.



Fig.2. An Oru fleet a-sail (Gerhard Kapitan)

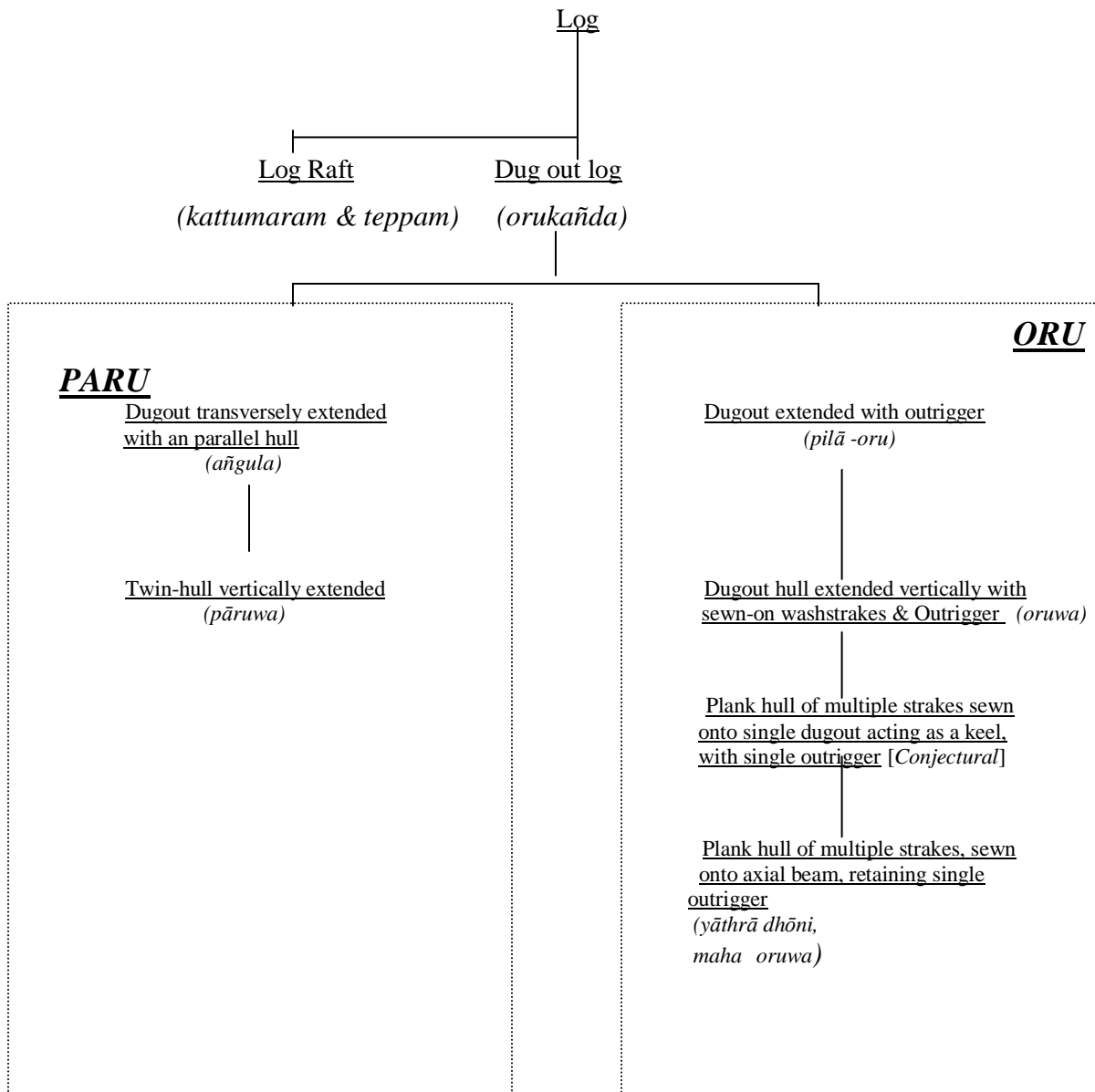
The first is a basic bamboo raft: and thus, is not a “boat”. The rest are all dual-elements craft: having either twin (log) hulls or a single (log) hull and attached outrigger. Single-hull craft appear later. The hulls of the earlier craft are all dugout logs and they were, and yet are, used mainly in inland waters: only the *ma-del paruwa* is used on the beaches to carry the big drag-net offshore. The cradle of this technology was the western and south-western coasts; and so I have argued elsewhere why that was [Devendra (1):2011]

The *oru* alone reached the sea and developed into a handy sea-going craft, transforming itself to fit every type of fishing at sea. But it remained a fishing craft, only, until it cut its umbilical cord to the dugout log. When the dugout was replaced by a keel-log, then a keel-plank, and plank-built hulls were adopted, the sea-going cargo ship with an outrigger – the *yathra dhoni*, or *maha oruwa* – was born. We recognize two lines of development in our vernacular tradition the ORU (or the hull+outrigger form) and the PARU (or twin hull form) and it is from the former that our nautical culture developed. The chart below shows the development: read it to understand the next part of this narrative.

[Devendra 6: 2002]

### From fishing boat to cargo ship

The final form of the Sinhala vernacular tradition was the *yathra dhoni*, which was a cargo ship, with a hull built of planks – like most other ships – but with a large single outrigger carried on two booms. It was unique. No other ship built like this has been recorded anywhere in the world. Today, we have none: but they sailed till the mid-1930s, the last being the “Amugoda Oruwa” [Devendra 5:2009] about which the balladeers sang dirges, some verses of which are recorded by Vitharana (see “Recommended reading”). Models exist, and so do photographs and architectural drawings. The best model is in the Colombo Museum (**Fig.3**), presented by the late Ven. Dodanduwe Dharmasena whose grandfather built it as a child, at his home, about 125 years ago. The model won a gold medal in the 1890s.



This model was, measured, lines taken off, and analyzed using specialized software. The same view of the model at Fig.3, is shown (Fig.4) in a line drawing generated, giving names of the different sails and rigging in modern terms.



Fig.3. Colombo Museum *yathra* model: showing side view with outrigger  
(Somasiri Devendra)

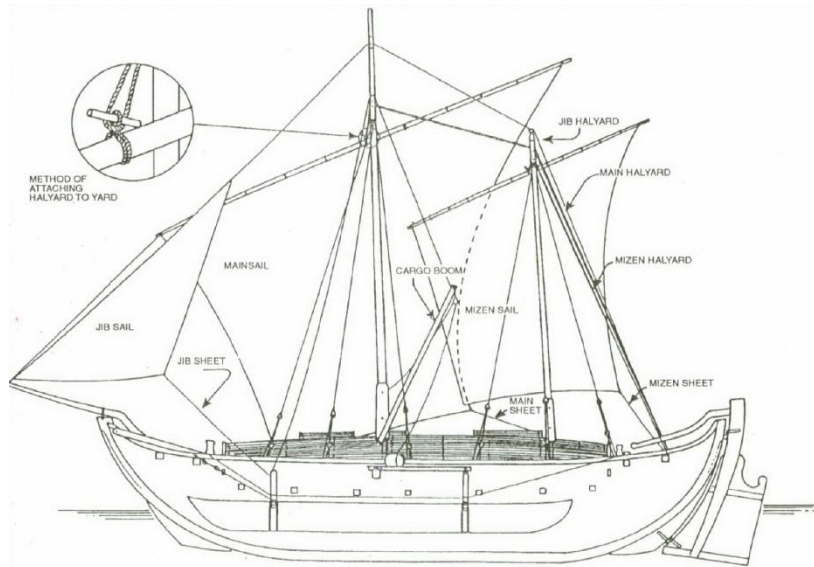


Fig.4. Drawing of same view, with details of sails and rigging (Tom Vosmer)

Other models exist in foreign Museums and (**Fig.5**) is a beautiful one from London.

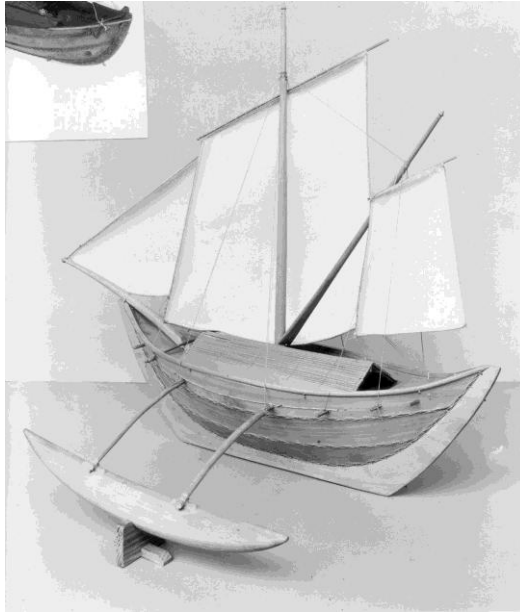


Fig.5. Photograph of a model in London (present location not known)  
(*London Science Museum*)

Drawings, too, also exist: Hornell's inexplicably single line drawing [Hornell: 1943] and the beautiful mid-19<sup>th</sup>. Century drawing by the French Adm. Paris [Reith: 1993] which notes that it was used both on the Coromandel coast and this country.

Finally, photographs, of which we have two: (**Fig.6**) is a photo by J.P.Lewis [1913] of a *yathra* anchored off Kalpitiya (he calls it a "Calpentyn Coaster"), where the outrigger is seen on the port side.



Fig.6. Photograph of a *yathra* at anchor in Kalpitiya (*J.P.Lewis: 1913*)

**(Fig7)** is a photograph of one beached showing the enormous outrigger and booms, the signature of the *yathra* [Palinda de Silva 1]. Here too, the outrigger is to port. Like all the craft of the ORU culture, which had two elements, the *yathra* could be beached in an upright position.

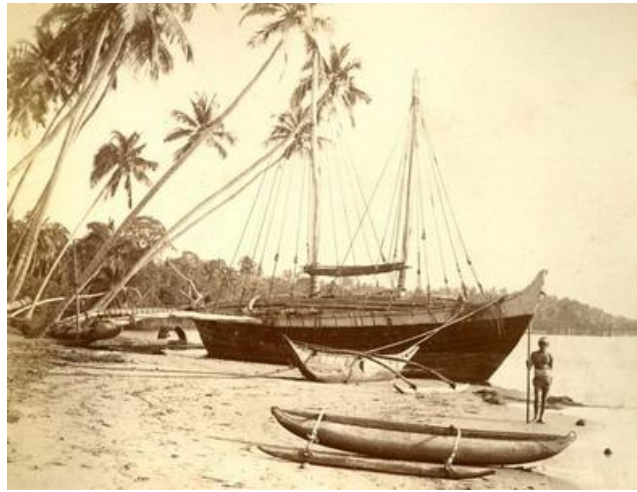


Fig.7. Photograph of a beached *yathra* ( Palinda de Silva.)

There are, as indicated above, also models in foreign Museums. In London I saw another, simpler type of **(Fig.8)** *yathra* which is undeniably a *yathra*, but with only a single lugsail and, significantly, the outrigger to starboard, unlike all other images.



Fig.8. Model of a simpler type of *yathra* ( Museum of Mankind, London)

I also came across one, which it had been gifted to the Museum in 1894, of a ship of the same basic hull form but with some major differences. Its differences are: (a) there is no outrigger; (b) it has a semi-circular platform for the steersman which extends beyond the gunwales – very reminiscent of Maldivian ships; and (c) it has a much sturdier keel plank. Obviously it could not be beached. **(Fig.9)**



Fig. 9. Model of a *Warakan Oruwa* (London Science Museum)

Labeled “*Warookang Ooor*”, we can decipher this as *Warakan Oruwa*, a name still in use for large, deep-sea *oru*. This model shows a ship that was probably built to weather the heavy seas of the *Warakanna*, as the south-west monsoon is called in Sinhala. The platform for the steersman was probably necessary for him to wrestle with the tiller in heavy seas. The indications are that this was either the product of an altogether different line of development or a further step forward in the ORU culture. Given the lack of an outrigger, I would favour the former alternative.

The *yathra* was a cargo ship, not a voyaging ship; and that’s what makes it unique. Sri Lanka was a trading nation and these ships probably carried no special facilities for passengers. It was divided into three parts by two transverse bulkheads (*i.e* plank “walls”), just as the cargo carriers of the inland waterways (*paru*) were. Even today, the *paru* and other boats used by sand-miners, have this feature. The bow and the stern parts necessary for the crew to sail the ship were small and to reach one from the other the crew had to come along plank walkways skirting the centre section. This section comprised one large cargo hold roofed over with *cadjan* or split-bamboo, with sliding hatches for loading and unloading (a feature also found in the Jaffna *Thoni*, described below.)

### **THE HINDU-TAMIL HYBRID SHIPS**

Two matters need to be clarified here. The Sinhala tradition has been traced from the beginning of history till the last century, and thus it is called a “vernacular”, or “home-grown” tradition. The Hindu-Tamil tradition cannot, or has not yet been traced as such. (My emails to academics of the University of Jaffna, suggesting that a study be undertaken, have elicited no response). Yet there was a healthy and vigorous tradition: one to be proud of. Jaffna had close mercantile and economic ties with South India and followed the Indian practice of building ships based on the prevailing styles off the western coast and, post-1500 CE, on the western warships and armed merchantmen that they encountered. Hence I have called it a “hybrid tradition” and have also identified it as “Hindu” following Hornell’s pioneering work where he shows the way in which the Hindu *Saivites* has influenced this tradition. For the lack of such a religious influence the Sinhala tradition is not termed “Buddhist”.

Like the *yathra*, the Jaffna *thoni* was a cargo carrier, which sailed till the Second World War. Inboard, it was divided into three parts, as the *yathra* and *paru* were, but it looked like a 19<sup>th</sup>.century British man-o’-war: it was not complete, says Hornell, without a row of false gun ports painted on. I think that this was not the only style in which they were built, as any hybrid craft must have produced many variations. One such is the one shown berthed in Colombo harbour which seems to show the “false gun ports” (**Fig.10**) though they are very evident in other photographs



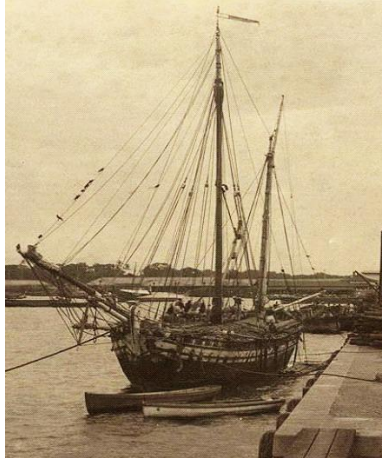


Fig. 10 Jaffna *Thoni* in Colombo port. (Palinda de Silva)

Notwithstanding the *thoni's* superficial similarity to European craft, its interior was that of a typical Asian cargo ship. Its rig, on the other hand, is very nineteenth century British in appearance but rather individualistic, and not conforming to any standard. Hornell's photographs are invaluable. (I wonder why he took no photographs of the *yathra* which fascinated him?). He has also given dimensions of a typical *thoni*: length between perpendiculars, 100 ft.; beam amidships, 21 ft. 2 ins.; depth from gunwale to keel, 14 ft., carrying capacity, 100 tons. Lack of space, alas! prevents me from showing more images of Jaffna ships.

From sources I became aware of recently it is evident that there were several shipbuilding communities in Jaffna, those of Kayts and Velvettiturai being the most active. In Velvettiturai, shipbuilding and seafaring were a community calling in the last two centuries. The vessels built were hybrids, in terms of technology and had no specific design features to merit classification as 'traditional' ships. Many were entirely western in form. Others were salvaged Western ships that had run aground and been abandoned, which were later salvaged and rebuilt in their original form. The photographs, by themselves, are revealing of the shipbuilding skill of the region. There is a list of 114 ships with the names of the owners (mostly Chettiars from Tamilnadu) and the Captains (all from Velvettiturai) which is ample evidence of a healthy seafaring community. The ships traded between Madras, Colombo to Rangoon benefiting from the British imports of rice from Burma – one of the few items that were permitted to be carried in "country ships".

One of these ships made history (**Fig.11.**) The trim lines of the "Annapoorani" caught the eye of a ship owner from Boston, and he bought it, and hired the Tamil crew to sail it to his home town. Registering her with Lloyds' as the "Florence C. Robinson", the chief of the crew (*Thandal*) sailed her to Crete where, in keeping with American regulations, an American qualified Master took over and sailed her to Boston in very unfavorable weather, to be hailed as the "Bounty" come to haunt Cape Ann. The story is fascinating and I have published elsewhere [Devendra7:2009]

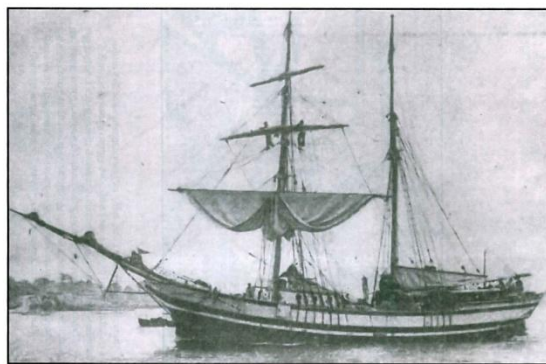


Fig.11. The *Annapurani* / *Florence C.Robinson* (*The Gloucester Times, Boston, 1938*)

There are many more tales to tell of Jaffna ships, but they will have to wait for another day.

### **THE INDO-ARAB SHIPS**

Living in the Trincomalee Dockyard in the 1960s I would see large sailing craft that glided silently past my house, every day. I did not know, then, that these were the last survivors of the Indo-Arab ships that regularly crossed the Indian Ocean, calling only at the thirty anchorages that they had mapped between Beruwela and Trincomalee. I stumbled on one of their old settlements an isolated (not so, now) creek, or cove in the inner harbour, presently called Nicholson's Cove. I found the remains only: a graveyard and the old fresh water wells that made them settle here for, at least, 200 years. This is an ideal spot for sailors to ride out the inter-monsoonal storm periods. It is a narrow, being sheltered from the winds by wooded ridges; a shelving beach where ships could be beached for maintenance, and a supply of sweet water. During the Second World War, this source of water led the British to erect a large campsite here. The best preserved gravestone reads:

**"the noble, the pious (and) chaste lady....daughter of Amir Badru'd-Din Husain, son of Ali al-Halabi"**

who had died on Monday, the 17th. of September of the year 729 or 929 after Hijra (*the slab is damaged here*) which translates to either 12th. September, 1329, or 17th. September, 1523 CE [Devendra 8:1970]

The springs of sweet water that had proved the magnet to both Arabs and British, yet exist. A few years ago the previously wooded site had been cleared and I located a number of wells, one quite old and lined with stone, with uneven stone slabs set into the wall as footholds, spiraling down to water level. I also saw more graves, damaged long ago, but no gravestones.

Were these ships a direct descendent of those Arabs? We cannot be sure. And, what nautical heritage did the Arabs leave behind? The ships, called *battal* belonged to the Muslims at Muttur, but that was in Koddigar Bay, far across the bay from Nicholson's Cove. These *Battal* would transport the rice harvest from the rice-bowl there to the Trincomalee Town Jetty. I had not even photographed them! By the time I started searching for them, it was too late. They had not been sighted since the 1970s. After 1983, Muttur was no longer accessible. And so, the *Battal* sailed into oblivion – but for one photograph that was given to me by a friend. What a beautiful ship she is, even if it was then an open-decked one sailing across Koddigar Bay (**Fig.12**)



Fig 12. Muttur *Battal* in Inner Harbour, Trincomalee (Lt.Cdr.D.C.D.Lecamvasam.)

What size was she? If we take the man in the bows to be 5'4" tall, she was 70 ft long from stem to stern; the mast stood 37 ft above the waterline and her distinctive Arab-type boom – hoisted on a pulley-block – was 42 ft long. They were open decked, for they carried bags of rice, without going out to sea. I remember them with admiration and regret.

But she was the last of the traditional large craft of this country to last, at least, till the in '70s, and perform an economically useful task. And then – like the *Yathra*, the *Thoni* and much of our traditional shipping lore – she sailed into oblivion.

### **THE BEST STORIES ARE YET TO BE TOLD**

There are many other, smaller, watercraft I cannot describe here. Nor the all-but-lost nautical lore; the songs of the sailors, some of whom remember, and pass on orally, verses that are sailing directions; the sea lanes from the Middle East to the Far East; Ruhuna, our maritime kingdom; the "Lay of the Last *yathra*"; recorded voyages to Rome, Cairo, Malacca and China; sea-borne invasions to Burma, punitive raids by small boat actions and landing parties.

And the legends! Of the merchant prince, Simhala, who the *Valahassa Jataka* says was our first King; of Prince Koimala who, the *Divehi*-speaking people say, settled their land; of humble Deval, banished by King Sinhalraj who sailed to become the King of Goghar (Gujarat). Our history is painted on their temple walls, our architecture emulated.

Yes, we are Sri Lankan. Yes, we sailed our ships. And, yes, we are remembered.

***It's only we who have forgotten.***

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