Evolution through Interaction:
Sri Lankan Watercraft in the Pre Portuguese Period And After

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In different parts of the Indian Ocean, people learnt to travel over water and evolved craft that fitted their specific environments and purposes. They were influenced, as time went on, by parallel developments in neighbouring countries. As watercraft became more sophisticated and overseas voyages became more extended, the maritime neighbourhood became a vaster place and technologies that originated in the different corners of the ocean met and interacted. So did those that had developed outside the ocean but had found their way here. The technology of shipbuilding, and of sailing in general, therefore evolved independently in different parts of the ocean, but subsequently came to adopt, borrow and adapt elements that had originated in other areas. In the Indian Ocean, several very specific technologies existed, of which some were limited to the islands only. The resulting interaction produced mutated forms. Some of these mutations, in time, developed into fully-fledged morphologies. These comments cover the Indian Ocean in general. Specific to Sri Lanka is that the morphology of her watercraft is characteristically different from the many types prevalent in mainland India. This is because of the geographical location of the island and its position in relation to the major sea-routes of the ocean; in the inshore environment of the coastal regions; and the biological resources of the island. All of these led to the development of a base form that underwent change through interaction. Hence, even after the arrival of Portuguese ships, this process of evolution continued unchanged. Changing politico-economic priorities caused the traditional forms to gradually decrease in importance. However they did not disappear and continued to play a diminished but economically significant role even in the post-Portuguese period.

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