



Figure 1. A young fisherman in Mactang carrying the *bigiw*, April 2023

Rediscovering the *Bigiw*, the Forgotten Bamboo-Matted Seacraft in the Philippines

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The *bigiw* (pronounced “bee-gyoo”) is a bamboo-matted double outrigger prominent in the Visayas Islands, a characteristically archipelagic region in the Philippines. Unfortunately, it has already become a nonextant maritime technology, an artifact of the past relatively unknown to contemporary Filipino society. It lives on, however, in the collective memories of the local fisherfolks and the knowledge of the few remaining local traditional boatbuilders in the Camotes Islands, located off northeastern Cebu in Central Visayas. As an ethnographer documenting that knowledge, I have become interested in reviving the *bigiw*, and the boat I commissioned is now in the National Museum of the Philippines – Cebu.

The *bigiw*—or *bigiw amakan*, as it is referred to today—is a small deep-sea fishing seacraft propelled using a T-handle wooden paddle. Its hull closely resembles a narrow dugout made from hardwood that is deeply carved and carefully rounded (fig. 3). Framed by small bamboo stakes riveted on the hull (fig. 4), both sides of the seacraft are sheeted with *amakan*, a meticulously crafted interwoven bamboo matting (fig. 5). The *amakan* sheet is then painstakingly caulked with gluey hardwood saps and beeswax from *kiyot* or stingless bees for waterproofing. The bamboo-matted siding heightens the *bigiw*’s freeboard, which makes it suitable for deep-sea voyaging, but keeps it low enough for the wind to pass lightly over it (fig. 6). Also, the distinctive bamboo-matted sidings make the *bigiw* so lightweight that one person can easily carry it on their shoulder (fig. 1). An equally remarkable feature is its structural form, wherein its bow and stern decks are enclosed, with each side intersecting at the center in a triangle-like sleek covering affixed by a narrow ridgepole (fig. 7). Due to the closed-top design, it is virtually impossible for water to get in, making it hard to sink in rough seas. However, in unusual situations, water is difficult

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Figure 2. The *bigiw amakan* in progress, May 2022

to bail out if it gets in. Furthermore, the *bigiw* has an average length of about sixteen to eighteen feet or longer. According to traditional fisherfolks, it is the longest Native-made small seacraft ever built in their locality.

The main body has bamboo outriggers on both sides for stability. Traditional boatbuilders specifically use *kawazan nga tunokon* (thorny bamboo) for the outriggers. It is a local species of bamboo that boatbuilders can purposely bend while it is still in its early stages of growth to achieve the desired curvature as the plant matures. Unfortunately, this bamboo species is hard to acquire locally nowadays (fig. 7).

The overall structural form of the *bigiw* is tailored to cut through the wind and minimize the drag caused by waves. It is common knowledge among local seafarers that the remarkable aerodynamic and hydrodynamic attributes of the *bigiw* are unique among all types of small seacraft ever known in the Camotes Islands. They enable its users to paddle efficiently and provide the edge in speed—making it the prime seacraft for long-distance deep-sea fishing and multiday sojourning voyages.



Figure 3. My wife and our daughter look into the polished hull of the *bigiw*, May 2022. Carving out the hull is a literal back-breaking task. The boatbuilder, at his current age, had to tip his nephew some cash to finish the carving



Figure 4. The interior of the *bigiw* shows the *gusok* (ribs) that serve as the frames for the *amakan* sheets. May 2022



Figure 5. Working on the *amakan* sheets, May 2022



Figure 6. Remelito “Abang” Ilaida, Jr., a master traditional boatbuilder, demonstrating the local way to maneuver the *bigiw*, July 2022

The *bigiw*-voyagers never ventured to faraway places alone. They crossed to distant places in familiar groups of three to five members. They planned ahead, voyaged in an orderly system, and were intimately organized and essentially self-sufficient. When they reached their earmarked fishing ground, they dispersed and worked separately so as to optimize their respective catches. When it was time to call it a day, they regrouped mid-sea and returned to shore together, so no one was left behind. In addition, they had a unique traditional fishing practice called *sangga*, in which they gathered together all the catch, unified the sales, and then equally distributed the income to all who were involved in the pact, regardless of how much or how little each caught. This fishing practice, handed down from previous generations,

is founded on compassion and acknowledgment that the sea can at times be a harsh environment.

Because of the *bigiw*'s technological ingenuity, the sea as a vast economic space was optimized—minimizing risks, expanding our forebears' natural world, and forging social cohesion by turning the sea into a cultural space. A cultural adaptation in the form of a maritime artifact, the *bigiw* carried the fisherfolks' identity and was a tangible testament to their mobility in an archipelagic world.

However, with the widespread industrialization of the fishing industry, the pressures of the neoliberal economy in the social landscape, and the significant decline of native forest resources, the *bigiw* lost its prestige and fell out of use. It has now been superseded by the motorized *pambot* (pump boat), which is unarguably more convenient but



Figure 7. The finished product, ready for use, July 2022. Due to the scarcity of thorny bamboo, the boatbuilder had to get one of the outriggers (the blue painted one) from someone else's *bigiw*. He later assured me that he would repay the owner of that *bigiw* with Tanduay *lapad*, a local rum



Figure 8. Remelito "Abang" Ilaida, Jr. trims the excess *amakan siding*, May 2022



Figure 9. Maria Cecilia B. Cabañes of the National Museum of the Philippines - Cebu shows the temporary storage location of the *bigiw* in a controlled environment, October 2024

is capital-intensive and costlier. Consequently, the knowledge of building the *bigiw* is slowly lost as traditional boatbuilders age without willing heirs to carry on the heritage. Equally unfortunate, nowadays, is that fishing is increasingly perceived as socially disreputable, thereby pushing this sector into the margins of contemporary society.

Despite the odds, three coastal sub-villages in Cagcagan—an agricultural and fishing village in Poro, in the Camotes Islands—quietly persist in using the *bigiw*. Over the years, however, the *bigiw* has undergone technological development in its construction materials to catch up with modernization. Contemporary fisherfolks use marine plywood as siding instead of the traditional *amakan* sheets. Although it has retained its streamlined attribute, the “modified” *bigiw*—now distinguished as *bigiw marin*—is no longer as meticulous and lightweight as the *bigiw amakan*.

Cagcagan’s boat culture, developed over time by our forebears who coexisted well with the hazardous natural elements in the marine environment, is at risk of being forgotten to decay in the complexity of contemporary societal and environmental issues. Moreover, the heritage aspect of small boat cultures is an understudied territory.

In early 2022, I met Remelito Ilaida, Jr., the last active traditional builder in Cagcagan, and commissioned him to recreate the *bigiw* with the traditional *amakan* sidings (fig. 8). It was a personal initiative to revive this technology and revitalize local maritime cultural heritage. Eventually, I made an ethnographic study about it for my master’s in anthropology.¹ After I conducted a couple of sea trials, I entrusted the *bigiw* to a fishing family in Mactang, a sub-village in the neighboring village of Esperanza. They used it for subsistence fishing and, in return, looked after it as if it were their own.

In May 2023, aiming to promote our maritime heritage, it was leased by the Culture and Heritage Unit of the Ramon Aboitiz Foundation, Inc. (RAFI) for the exhibition *Duyan ang Kadagatan (Cradled by the Sea): Cebuano Culture and the Heritage of the Sea* at the Kabilin Center in Cebu. In November 2023, I donated it to the National Museum of the Philippines – Cebu (NMP-Cebu), which will be putting it on display in the near future (fig. 9). The general public will then have the chance to rediscover the ingenuity of our forebears in the form of a small seacraft that embodies the adaptability and mobility of our ancestors’ maritime cultural identity. After all, our world expands as far as we can see—or perhaps, voyage by sea.

1 Ian Dale B. Rios, “Between People and Sea: The *Bigiw* Small Seacraft Amid Changing Environments and Economies in the Camotes Islands, Cebu, Philippines” (master’s thesis, University of San Carlos, 2023).