



Press Release
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PHL CELEBRATES MARITIME HERITAGE: HIGHLIGHTS SEAFARING AND SHIPBUILDING LINEAGE



(Screenshot photos were taken during the virtual conference.)

24 September 2020, Los Angeles – In observance of Maritime and Archipelagic Nation Awareness Month (*MANA Mo*), the Philippine Consulate General in Los Angeles participated in a webinar arranged by the PHL Department of Foreign Affairs-Maritime and Ocean Affairs Office (MOAO), which was held on 23 September 2020 (PHL time) entitled, “*The Balangay through the Lens of Philippine Maritime History and Boat Culture.*”

MANA Mo (your heritage) aims to bring a broader and deeper awareness of the Filipino people’s maritime tradition and seafaring culture. More than expert navigators, Filipinos were boatbuilders, whose lashed-lug boats or *balangays* dominated the erstwhile “Spanish Lake,” now called the Pacific Ocean, in the 16th century.



MOAO Assistant Secretary Igor J. Bailen (*Photo left*), in his opening remarks, encouraged the more than 300 online participants from various PHL government agencies to do their part in retelling the country’s maritime narrative that has been greatly overlooked in Philippine history.

Online lecturers included Dr. Maria Bernadette L. Abrera, History Professor of the University of the Philippines; Dr. Ligay S. P. Lacsina, Curator 1 of the National Museum of the Philippines; Dr. Aurora Roxas-Lim, History Professor of the Ateneo de Manila University; and Mr. Arturo T. Valdez, former DOTC Undersecretary who led Philippine *balangay* expeditions.

According to Dr. Abrera, PHL seafaring and navigation is a story of expansion of Philippine maritime expertise. “*It is something that we are good at, and it has been recognized and affirmed,*” she said. Historical evidence would show that Filipinos have been building boats as early as the 10th century as part of their trading activities and “*pangangayaw,*” or raiding. Contrary to modern-day connotations of raiding, *pangangayaw*, according to Dr. Cabrera, was then a form of traditional statecraft among island states who seek to expand their territories. It was a legitimate practice in the conduct of their economic and political life.

Because of their boatbuilding tradition, Filipino traders maintained inter-island and long-distance trade networks reaching as far as Canton (i.e. Guangdong), China in 982 AD. Historical records of the Song Dynasty from 960 to 1277 AD revealed entries about the arrival of traders from Ma-I, believed to be located in the modern-day Philippine island of Mindoro, as reported by three Bornean *datus* who traded with the islands. According to Dr. Cabrera, this proves that the Chinese did not discover the Philippine islands but learned about them through Bornean traders.

Dr. Roxas-Lim put forward an important historical argument that Austronesians peopled the Philippines by boat migrations, contrary to the initial theory that these seafaring people walked on land bridges during the inter-glacial period. According to her, recent evidence shows that there were at least 150 kilometers of open sea from mainland Asia to Luzon. The only way Austronesians could have migrated was by boats, proving the Filipinos’ maritime lineage. This also shows that, from pre-history, the South China Sea was a major communication and trade highway for the region and the rest of the trading world. According to Dr. Roxas-Lim, China should recognize this historical fact.

Early references to *balangays* appeared in the chronicles of Antonio Pigafetta, Ferdinand Magellan’s rapporteur for his 16th expedition in the Philippines, when he cited local inhabitants as having built a “*baloto*” (small boat) and a “*balangay*” (big boat). Spanish historian and missionary priest, Francisco Alcina, also mentioned them in the chronicles of his 17th century mission in the Visayas.

The existence of *balangays*, however, were not proven, until the discovery of the Butuan Boats in Libertad, Butuan in 1978. Dr. Lacsina described the anatomy of the boats showing the sophistication of Filipino watercraft construction. The boats unearthed in Butuan were lashed-lug boats with edge-joined plank exhibiting the excellent joinery that was typical of Southeast Asian boat-making technology.

To this day, boat builders of Sibutu Islands in Southern Philippines still use the same technology. In fact, a present-day team of Badjao boat builders built a first replica of the

prehistoric *balangays* under the leadership of Mr. Valdez. He named the boat *Diwata ng Lahi*, which made its maiden voyage in 2009 that would then become the beginnings of a Philippine *balangay* expedition team's journey to retrace Philippine maritime history and reclaim a lost heritage.

In addition to the commemorative expeditions of the Philippine *balangay* team in 2009 and 2018, the Philippines today builds upon the remnants of this lost heritage through playing a key role in international maritime affairs and global migration, and serves as a rich resource of seafarers and navigators. More than these, the desire to recover its place in the shipbuilding industry is not lost among its people.

Representing the Consulate General were Consul Rea G. Oreta, Consul Rainier J. Casis, Cultural Officer Maria Dolores C. Sales and Information Officer Mary Grace D. Leaño.

By virtue of Proclamation No. 316, signed by President Rodrigo R. Duterte on 14 September 2017, the Philippines observes MANA Mo every September. END.