

There is a view that the islands which now comprise Indonesia were the birthplace of the kite, and that the first kites were fishing aids. The last reports on kite fishing in this area were for 1994 and were short of detail (see the endnote).

In 2013 Malcolm Goodman decided to investigate further. Research on the internet resulted in a trip that he and Jeanette took following on from the March Thailand Festival with a relatively short hop to the island of Northern Sulawesi in Indonesia (east of Borneo). He had arranged for a guide to take them to meet a fisherman (Jimmy) who used kites at the minute village of Mokupa on the north west coast.



Photo 1

Jimmy usually fishes every day and uses a kite regularly for two types of fish. One involves the lure being moved up and down in the water and the other has the lure drawn along the water surface (possibly for flying fish). The boat is a locally

made 15 ft. double outrigger with an outboard motor. Malcolm was able to go out on a demonstration of fishing though Jimmy would take him only into shallow water whereas the fish would have been further out. Jimmy goes up to two miles offshore, rod-and-line fishing for tuna.

The kite is made from rotan (rattan) and a plastic bag. Rotan is a type of creeper or vine which can grow over 150 yards long draped over trees and along the ground in tropical rainforest. It is solid, with no knots, and dries to being rigid (hence rattan furniture and walking sticks). Jimmy uses it because it doesn't crack like bamboo — which is the first time I've heard that as a criticism of bamboo. He carves it to the thickness needed and makes the basic cross plus the tail-end cross-piece out of straight rotan tied with fishing line.



Photo 2

He then bends the spine against his body to set the curve. The kite is 70 cm. by 70 cm. with afore/aft curve of about 8 cm. and a tailpiece of 13 cm. The cross is 11 cm. from the top of the spine. The slightly curved cross-piece has almost no dihedral. The four edges are framed with line fitting into grooves on the spar ends.



Photo 3

The cover is a plastic bag cut open to maximise the dimensions of the kite. The most fascinating part is the method of producing hemmed edges, spar pockets and the central reinforcement patch. Most readers will probably have seen a mosquito (or midge) coil even if they haven't used one. They are effectively a slow-burning fuse with smoke that deters flying insects.



Photo 4 (Note the mosquito coil.)

After lining up the fabric to the frame, Jimmy folds over a hem and starts with a few large holes at 5 cm. intervals, pressing each one with a finger after touching the plastic with the burning coil. This produces a hole surrounded by a hot-welded area. He then uses many small holes/welds to fix firmly.



Photo 5

He then ties lengths of coarse nylon twist cord around the spine in three places. The top is effectively a single bridle point. All three have enough slack to allow a line to slide behind them in front of the spine.



Photo 6

The lure (there is no bait) consists of hooks fitted in a rubber/plastic device which resembles a small cuttle fish and is non-floating. I would have thought they could have been bought cheaply but, as Malcolm pointed out, the way one is sewn does look like Jimmy's (or Mrs Jimmy's) work.



Photo 7

The line with the lure (or trace) goes up through the three 'bridle points' and is then tied to the fishing line. A bulky knot is tied in the trace 20 to 30 cm. below the kite's tailpiece to stop the kite sliding down.



Photo 8

This is a single-line simple but sophisticated system. Jimmy sat near the back of the boat where the motor is attached and steered by a long rod from the rudder. He cruised quite slowly (6 knots) and can be pulling/letting go of the line every few seconds. This doesn't affect the kite's flight but moves the lure up and down in the sea.



Photo 9

If he wants the lure to skip, the boat speed is increased and variations are used to control the lure. Malcolm didn't see a fish caught but the effect must be to lower the kite's angle and for the kite to go in the water as the fish is landed. The kites seem quite tough — one already in the boat had got considerable sun bleaching. Perhaps rotan is good at resisting salt water.



Photo 10

A few final points. Jimmy had to 'eyeball' the top bridle point but the kite then just flew. Look at the photos of his breeze-cooled workshop below his house.



Photo 11

A video clip of him launching it at sea shows that it just goes up and stays.

All though there are other kite fishermen, Malcolm and Jeanette travelled to two other remote fishing villages to find them but without success.

Children do make and play with kites. They use Malays for fighting or attach a large banner tail from a piece of rotan like the tailpiece of the fishing kite — this is called a crocodile kite.



Photo 12

They were very impressed when Malcolm flew some of his kites. I wonder if they realised he didn't catch fish with them.

If you require more information or would like to visit north Sulawesi to see traditional kite fishing contact Malcolm & Jeanette (malcolm@kiteman.co.uk) who will be able to give details of how to travel there and find a guide.

Note

The last occasion known to me when kitefliers saw fishing with kites in Indonesia was 1994 (see the articles by Fabre and Ohashi and the book by Tal Streeter referred to in Appendix 3.) This was south of Sulawesi at Lampung Bay on the island of Lombok. Interestingly, Tal Streeter mentions the local story that the first kite fishermen came from Sulawesi. Fishing was for garfish using a fish as bait below a noose of line. The garfish, which has a long toothy mouth gets tangled in the noose and is then brought in. The kites used were bamboo and plastic diamonds (possibly home made) and the trace attached to the bottom of the kite. A rod was used to keep the bait moving on the sea's surface. Tal's account has more 'local colour'; he was also interested in the use of leaf kites. These were not involved in the fishing he saw but have been so used further east in the Pacific.

All photographs are by Malcolm Goodman

