

# Bubo and Other Fish Traps

**ILOCANO, ILOCOS NORTE, ILOCOS SUR, ABRA AND LA UNION PROVINCES, NORTHWESTERN LUZON ISLAND, NORTHERN PHILIPPINES.** *Northwestern Luzon in the Philippines is comprised of four provinces: Ilocos Norte, Ilocos Sur, Abra and La Union. It has narrow coastal plains and hilly inland terrain that are traversed by swift flowing rivers and a multitude of streams with their head waters at the rugged heights of the Grand Cordillera mountain range. A greater number of the population is comprised of Ilocano ethno-linguistic communities. They are settled on flat fields or extended embankments of streams and rivers and along narrow coastal plains where they cultivate rice, corn, sugarcane, vegetables and cash crops such as garlic, tobacco and corn. Having their communities along the seacoast, near the mouths of rivers, mangroves, on valleys wedged by streams and on river banks, fishing is an important alternate economic activity for the Ilocano population.*



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The fish trap, *pamurakan*, now upturned for the collection of the catch.

FED BY SEVERAL tributaries from the eastern mountains of the Grand Cordillera, the rivers become gradually wide and deep as they flow westward to the sea. During the rainy-typhoon season from June to November, the rivers turn into enormous rampaging waters, often unwieldy, that they cut out river banks and erode hillsides. During the dry season from December to May, the waters are calm, smooth and sparkling under the summer sun and on clear moonlit nights. The more prominent of these rivers are the Bacarra-Vintar, Laoag-Padsan, Badoc, Banauang-Abra and the Amburayan-Bakun.

It is particularly during summer months that the rivers become the source of protein food for the people. They employ various types of fish traps to ensnare fishes or lames and other riverine creatures such as goby-fry or *ipon*, larger goby-fry or *palileng* and *bukto*, the mature goby carp, *tilapia*, catfish (*paltat*), small flat sturdy-finned fish *araro*, freshwater eels locally known as *kivet* for the small ones and *igat* for the big long black ones, freshwater crustaceans such as crabs (*kappi/kippi*) and shrimps (*udang/lagdang*), plus river-insects such as the tasty-knotty blackish brown *agangga*.

All fish traps are wholly made of strips of the *kawayan* or the giant bamboo variety that grows abundantly in Ilocano settlements. Clumps of bamboo groves often line roads to the fields and river banks. The *kawayan* is a most durable material that can withstand weeks

and even months of submersion in fresh waters of free-flowing rivers and streams. The men-folk usually make the fish traps. They gather the materials, cut them into the desired strips – thick sturdy ones for the framework and fine-even thickness and length for the greater body. The over-all shape of the bamboo fish traps and the funnels inside are fashioned according to tradition and perfected by fisher folks based on their keen and constant observation of the movements of river creatures along with the flow and changes of river tides under the rains and in summer seasons.

A popular fish trap set in big rivers is the *bubo*. It is most remarkable for its fine finish and cylindrical body. It is strategically positioned along the current to ensnare schools of fries going upstream. Large stones are piled on either side of the *bubo* to keep it steady. The body has an inner framework of sturdy bamboo strips that are a centimeter wide on which innumerable strips of extreme fineness are neatly interwoven to form a perfect symmetrical body. The flat thicker strips forming the inner frame are gathered around a circular opening lashed with fine strips of rattan at the tail end and provided with a wooden stopper when set in the river. At the opposite end are small rounded entrances that lead to a funnel-shaped, one-way valve interior where balls of powdered-grilled rice bran are placed as bait. The *bubo*, with five small rounded entrances to the funnel, commonly measures 52-80 centimeters in length and 83 centimeters in diameter. Bigger sized

bubo can be 160 centimeters in length and 113 centimeters in diameter and is provided with nine small, rounded entries leading to funnel-shaped entrapments. A hefty catch can be as much as 10-12 kilos.

The *barekbek* is an all-bamboo fish trap in river streams set as a group (such as in threes or fives) with their openings towards the downflow of the river currents. A barekbek approximates the shape of the bubo but it is much smaller. It measures 43 centimeters in length from base to tip and 35 centimeters in diameter. The barekbek is made of sturdier bamboo strips that are a centimeter in width and woven around a framework of slightly thicker strips. Inside is a pair of funnels: one near the entrance opening at the base and the other at the opposite end near the tip. Dried fermented rice balls are placed inside the funnels as bait. According to fisherfolk, the sour smell of the spoiled fermented rice attracts all types of riverine edible creatures. The barekbek is sure to catch river shrimps, crabs, all kinds of freshwater fishes and eels.

A most formidable fish trap also of kawayan is the *pamurakan* which is shaped like a giant hammock or almost like a halved giant cocoon measuring 2.5 meters in length and 2.3 meters

in diameter. Its body is of sturdy make as its outer horizontal bottom is fortified with a pair of crossed bamboo slats and the surrounding rim-opening firmed up by whole rattan lining. It is of impressive make because of the even spacing of bamboo slatted weaving and perfect symmetry of form. This is important as it is half submerged under brackish water usually with its bottom side up, for at least a month. Underneath are piles of twigs and leafy branches where fishes, crustaceans and other riverine life take shelter during the hot summer months. After a month or two, a couple of fisherfolk, oftentimes a husband and wife team, go into the waters and with their bare hands, deftly flip the pamurakan in one concerted swipe so that the open side is now turned upwards, above the water, and scooping along with it not just the twigs and bundled sticks but more importantly, the fishes and crustaceans that sheltered in them.

The bamboo fish traps are sturdy and durable. The bubo, pamurakan and the barekbek can last for a decade, as long as they are hung to dry under the shade immediately after use or kept under the kitchen roof for constant smoking during the months that they are not in use.

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