The Vinta: A Flag for a Sail

This ship was collected in Zamboaga, a peninsula on the southern half of Mindanao, an island of the Philippines on the Sula Sea. It was collected from the Moro people who inhabited this part of the Philippines. The Moro people are primarily natives to the islands who were converted to Islam in the 13th century by traders and missionaries.

This particular ship model was collected around the turn of the twentieth century. We know that the ship model was exhibited at the Louisiana Purchase Exhibition in 1904 (a year delayed from the actual centennial of 1803.) This model however did not travel to the University of Iowa’s Natural History Museum where the rest of the exhibition’s Filipino items are held, but made its way into the possession of the president of the American Museum of Natural History in New York City. At some unknown point in the early twentieth century it was donated to Harvard University’s Peabody museum.

The model appears to be a model ship that would have been used by children. This is suggested by two main pieces of evidence. First, the relatively simple pattern of sail suggests that the boat is not a replica of an existing ship. This is because a normal Vinta was characterized by a highly specialized and detailed patterning, which distinguished and represented both a particular hull and builder. The relatively simple vertical stripes of the sail do not reflect a more complex imitation of a particular vessel. Secondly, the 1939 film Zamboanga depicts children using model ships which appear similar in size to the model in the Peabody’s collection. While this is only speculation it seems reasonable to believe that an existing model was acquired for exhibition in St. Louis rather than the commissioning of a new model. That
said, this model appears to not have the weathering associated with prolonged water immersion suggesting perhaps that it was never used, or used lightly prior to being exhibited.

Figure 1 Modern Vintas. Note the colorful sails and patterns.

The sail conversely is quite faded. Vinta’s are normally characterized by very bright coloring. Charles Baker Jr. described in 1939 that Vintas “are brown and scarlet, blue and red; tans, yellows with unbleached white.” This suggests that the Peabody model was originally more colorful, but that the color has faded over the years (see figure 1). The Boat is also rigged incorrectly with the Peabody model’s boom and gaff rigged parallel to the boat (see figure 4) in contrast to the correct rigging at 30 degrees (See figure 2).

Figure 2 Diagram of a Vinta

This model boat appears to be scaled to a modern sized Vinta in contrast to the older and larger Vintas dating to the 18th and 19th centuries. This is suggested by the relative size of the 4
oarlocks (figure 3) which are quite large. They give some sense of the average diameter of an oar, which gives a sense of the diameter of a paddle which can in turn be extrapolated to size the boat. Although the ship model does include a paddle it does not appear to be associated with the model. The paddle’s construction suggests a Chinese, rather than Moro origin.

Most of the Moro people are a seafaring community. The Vintas were mainly used for general seafaring in particular the hunting of manatees and pearl diving (both seen in the film Zamboanga.) Additionally the Vinta was used for travel and the transportation of goods between islands. While the Vinta is an ocean going vessel it’s large sail primarily made it fast in light air. In fact the Vinta is actually not all that stable in heavier breeze and chop. In such circumstances, primarily longer trips, other models of boats were used for example the more common proa. The Moro are a primarily Muslim community of indigenous peoples. They were converted in the 13th century by Muslim communities prior to the arrival of the Spanish in the 16th century. Spanish records record that Muslim pirates used Vintas around this time. Additionally there is reason to believe that Vintas were in fact were first used to get to the islands in the Sula Sea. This was evidenced in 1985 by the replica Sarimanok, which was sailed from Bali to Madagascar, suggesting that the Vinta could have been used for longer sea voyages.
Figure 4 Peabody Model