

PLASTIC POLLUTION

Ali Skanda: Lamu's Master Dhow Maker adds Environmentalist to his Name

Over time, the plastic disintegrates into microplastics that are easily digested by marine animals that we eat and plastic trash ends up in our digestive tract.

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY RUPI MANGAT

A dhow of many happy colours stands anchored on the shores of Lake Victoria at the port city of Kisumu on the Kenyan side. It's not any ordinary dhow as the locals find out. This uniquely amazing dhow is made from 100 per cent recycled plastic waste, the first of its kind in the world, the first to sail between the isles of Lamu and Zanzibar and the first to – soon - circumnavigate the world's largest tropical lake – with one clear message: We're dumping the earth and her waters with too much plastic waste!

It's got to stop.

Building the plastic dhow christened the 'Flipflop' is the brainchild of Ben Morrison, your everyday ordinary guy who was relaxing on the beach in Zanzibar one fine day in 2015.

Then came a wave of plastic debris and the pristine powder-white beach turned into a dumpsite.

The angst in Morrison turned into a call for action. Something

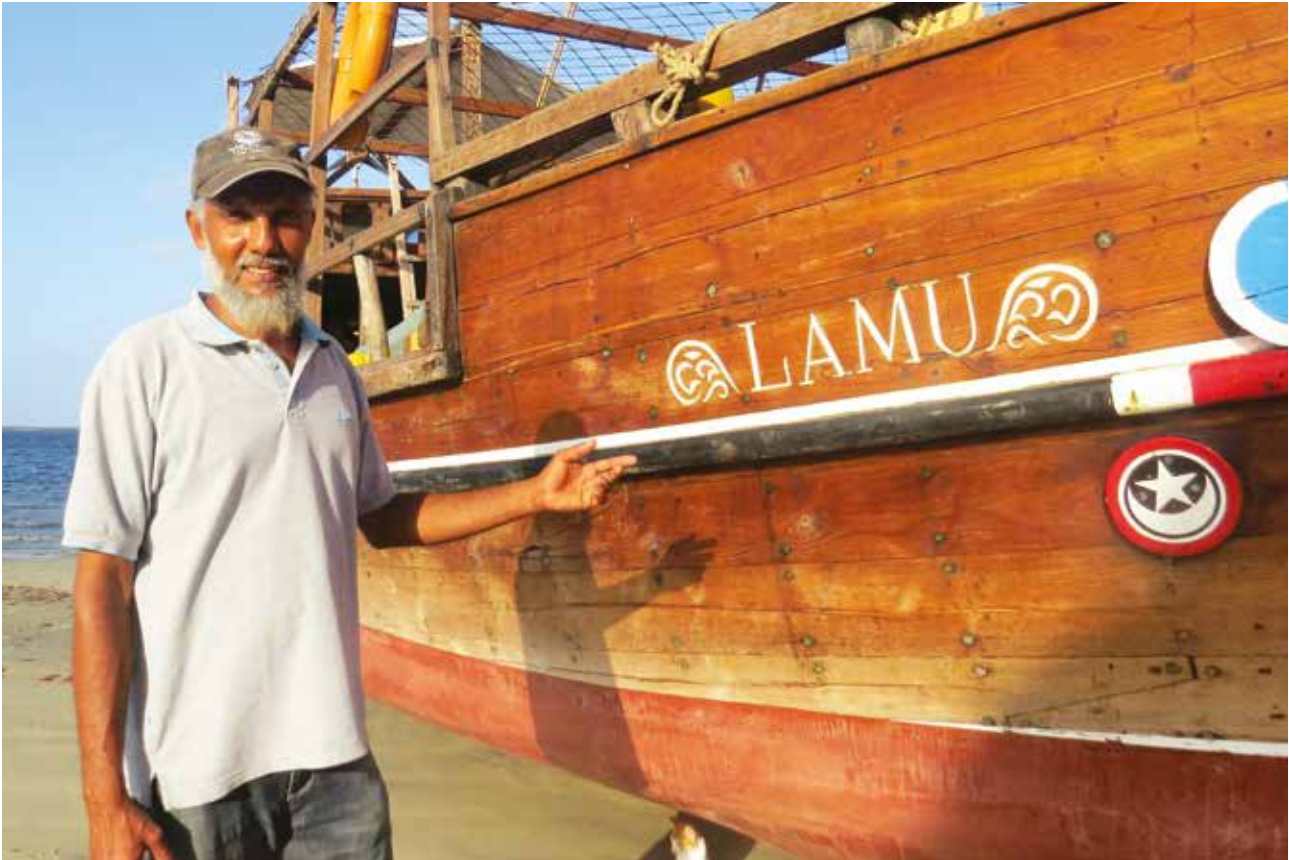
had to be done. His business was about selling holiday destinations and this was not helping. A dhow sailing by became his *eureka* moment. Why not build a dhow with the plastic trash and sail it around to spread the message about plastic waste to have people shun this ubiquitous material in our midst?

A sobering thought: Every single plastic thing we manufacture and use will be around for thousands of years.

Morrison shared his idea with an old school friend from Kenya, Dipesh Pabari, who hails from Kisumu. Pabari was already leading campaigns against plastic and involved with an outdoor adventure and education company. Pabari jumped at the opportunity to be part of the team and became a co-founder of the project.

Morrison's next step was to find a dhow





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fundi (craftsman) who could take on the challenge because traditional dhows that have sailed the oceans for thousands of years are made of hardwoods like teak and mahogany.

Morrison met Ali Skanda in Lamu, a dhow *fundi* who comes from a long lineage of master craftsmen. His grandfather is the man behind the wooden carved door gracing the parliament building in Nairobi. The wooden carved doors of the East African coast are steeped in history and from the many styles of carving, the origins of the carvers can be traced to the east. Those dated before 1946 are gazetted. Needless to say, they are much sought after collectors' items.

A youthful Skanda in his 30s had already built his own dhow, christened Lamu, meticulously following every detail including using copper nails made in his boatyard by another accomplished *'fundī'* specializing in his art of nails. Copper nails unlike the ordinarily used iron nails do not rust.

"Morrison asked me if it was possible to build a dhow from 100 per cent recycled

plastic waste. And I said yes," says Skanda now in his mid-40s, tall and lean showing us around his yard where he is working on restoring another dhow, a 20-metre-long, seven-metre-wide *jahazi* (boat) called *Utamaduni* (Kiswahili for culture) with a 4.5-metre height.

Built in the 1970s in Matandoni, the neighbouring village famed for its dhow-making skills, its launch was like a wedding feast, with song and dance and food for the whole village. That was normal for dhow launches back then. The *Utamaduni* even sailed as far north as Egypt.

Then came the crash in the tourist trade and the *jahazi* lay neglected for many years – until the new owners came. In the hands of Skanda and his team of *fundis*, the dhow's being lovingly restored including replacing every single iron nail with a copper one, again made on site by the nail *fundi*, one of a handful left on Lamu.

Many of these skills are being lost with few specialized craftsmen carrying out their family



trade. “This is probably the last *jahazi* that will be restored in Lamu,” continues Skanda standing by the huge dhow. “It’s just too expensive to build or even maintain them.”

It will be the end of an era for the wooden *jahazi* which is a uniquely Lamu design with a standing front and a flat back unlike the ‘booms’ or the larger dhows of the Arab and Indian ocean traders that were a common sight in Lamu until the 1970s when the port was moved to Mombasa. “The *jahazi* is easier to load and more comfortable,” adds Skanda.

Increasingly seen on the Lamu waters are the Mozambique dhows either built of hardwood or fibre-glass that are wider and easier to maintain.

Takataka Foundation

“I didn’t learn how to build dhows at school,” says Skanda. “I started carving in my father’s workshop when I was 12 years old.” It’s a skill passed on from generation to generation. “Just because a plastic dhow made from *takataka* (waste) had never been crafted, didn’t mean it could never be done.”

Heaps of plastic waste collected from the Lamu beachfront and town spearheaded by Skanda’s Takataka Foundation lie neatly on

the sand. “I’m also an environmentalist now,” he states matter-of-factly.

At some point, plastic trash ends up in the ocean. Over time, it disintegrates into microplastic that is easily digested by marine animals – anywhere from turtles, sharks to tiny fish. We eat the fish and the plastic trash ends up in our digestive tract.

Lying in Skanda’s workshop is a plastic shredder to turn the non-biodegradable plastic into usable material – anywhere from tiles to fashion accessories. Waste is the new urban mine – and Takataka’s force is to create a positive example of how single-use plastic can have a second life.

Flipflopi

Combining traditional dhow building techniques with pioneering new techniques, Skanda and his team crafted a world-first. The hull and deck of the dhow are covered with re-purposed flip-flops – to be exact 30,000 -- the footwear of three billion people and the most common item found during the team’s beach clean-ups. The flipflop lent its name to the dhow, aptly named “The Flipflopi”.

After its successful maiden voyage to Zanzibar from Skanda’s famous boatyard



on the historical isle of Lamu that boasts a continuous Swahili settlement from 700 years ago in Lamu Stone Town that is a World Heritage Site, the Flipflop team has now embarked on an even bigger project.

It's to sail to India and beyond along the trade routes of the monsoon winds used by the ancient mariners.

Again, it will be a world-first in a 100 per cent recycled plastic dhow made by Skanda and his team of *fundis*. The 20-metre long, 60-tonne dhow covered in 285,000 flip-flops

Construction is to start soon and it will take 14 months for the larger Flipflop to sail around the world, seen and heard by an estimated 4.8 billion people... more than half the Earth's human population. At the helm will be Skanda again who besides being a master carver, dhow builder and environmentalist is a born sailor.

The expedition as with every other expedition will stop at many ports to urge the world to stop the use of noxious materials that are harmful to all life on Earth – such as your ordinary plastic straw, cling wrap, ear-bud and countless more.

Sailing in tow will be the *Utamaduni*. “Dhow building is a dying art,” says Skanda looking at the *Utamaduni*. “My dream is to open an Institute for Dhow Builders so that the art is not lost.”



The material to be used – anyone's guess? Plastic trash.

In 2014, Skanda donated his dhow, Lamu's little sister to the Smithsonian Museum in Washington DC. His work is found in museums and collections around the world, including the National Museum in Washington DC.

Morrison's mission: ‘a world without single-use plastics’. He is convinced that plastic is far too valuable, versatile and often beautiful to be used just once and thrown away. It can be re-purposed – but not at the expense of creating more single-use plastic.

The *Takataka* Team: Ali, and his team of boatbuilders: Hassan, Ahmad, Abu, Rashidi and Hannah Evans. They are working at the



2015

Year researcher Biginagwa et al. analyzed the gut contents of Nile Perch and Nile Tilapia in Lake Victoria - resident fish populations in Lake Victoria. Microplastics were found in 20% of the fish they tested.

2019

Year a research team led by Egezza and his colleagues wanted to identify if there was plastic found along the shores and in the sediment. They took a total of 18 samples from six beaches of differing uses in northern Lake Victoria. Plastics were found to be present at all but one of the samples tested.

workspace in Lamu every day, exploring the properties of the recycled materials and using their boat building knowledge to work out how to turn all the plastic waste into a solid and strong sailing boat.

“We want to promote small-scale projects in the region to embed circular economy solutions that give plastic a second life and bring wealth to communities,” said Dipesh Pabari. “This includes our soon to be launched Kisumu Waste Innovation Hub, which will collect, recycle, and repurpose plastic waste around the city.”

By introducing and encouraging small (or large) scale circular economies around the lake, not only can plastic be recycled but it can also stimulate employment.

Throughout the dhow expeditions, the Flipflopis team will be highlighting local innovators and creating toolkits and training for small businesses interested in moving towards a circular economy model.

The team hopes that if we can illustrate the viability of a circular model we can drastically reduce the amount of plastic left to waste on the shores of Lake Victoria or the Indian Ocean or any other water body. ●

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