

# Transcript: Watercrafts and heritage in Iraq

## - A Conversation with Rashad Salim

Mehiyar 0:00 Welcome to the Nahrein Network podcast series in Nahrein network is a UK Arts and Humanities Research Council funded project working on the sustainable development of cultural heritage in Iraq and its neighbors. The first guest of the Nahrein Network podcast series is Rashad Salim of Safina projects. Thank you, Rashad for coming into the Nahrein Network office here at UCL. It's a pleasure seeing you again. Can you tell us a bit about Safina projects.

Rashad Salim 0:32 Safina projects is a community interest company that we set up to realize a dream project that I've had for a while and I've been working on called The Ark Re-imagined. The ark re-imagined basically is reimagining the Noah's Ark, but not for any sort of, we're not sort of proposing the form of it or the shape of it, but rather engaging with it as a concept towards understanding more of the cultural the cultural heritage of Iraq, and within the context of history and cultural heritage, globally. So I mean, the basic concept of it is how would this boat the Ark have been built at its time and place, and in its environment. So we're looking at the debate, rational way. And engaging with with a lot of literature, a lot of things that have to do with this because it's the favorite subject amongst a particular group of people in the world. So the situation in Iraq, as as you know, has been quite detrimental both environmentally as well as to cultural. So this is one way of engaging with it. At the moment, there's nobody really in the country that is concerned with maritime, maritime heritage. But unlike just also maritime heritage, maritime heritage is is one way of engaging with, with an aspect of the culture that is related to the environment.

Mehiyar 1:11 You've just come back from Iraq. What were you doing there,

Rashad Salim 2:25 I just built the first Mashoof, which is a type of canoe, Marsh Arab canoe, these canoes disappeared in the 80s. And since then, we've not had these other sort of crescent shaped canoes that are very famous, you find them in art depicted a lot in Iraqi art. They're sub iconic of Iraq, but they disappeared in the 80s. So you don't have these crescent shaped boats. And again, these crescent shaped boats go back all the way to ancient Mesopotamia as early as Sumerian, you'll find it in the British Museum. Both with the prowess raised by corns, so So identified boatbuilders, in Huwair, which was a traditional Basra, but it's sort of on the edge of the marshes. There used to be actually sort of Canal land. And that's another thing that I saw there that really struck me. And we everybody knows about the marshes. It's sort of quite sexy at the moment marshes, but there's a, there's an amazing culture of palm groves, with canals, amongst these canals. And these sort of would have been the kind of environment as much as if not more than the marshes, part of the environment that

you'd find in ancient Mesopotamia. And these are also being lost. So we've got major loss of these sort of seminal environments throughout the country, really, but specifically in this area. And with it, of course, the craft sculpture, and that sort of independency or that sort of self sustaining culture. We've lost that connection with the, with the environment, with ecology with the land itself. This is perhaps even more dangerous than losing heritage, as in, you know, that is the heritage. So how to engage with this issue, how to understand that is through this project for us. But it's a serious, serious problem. Not only losing the land Losing the water. And there is major major problems with pollution. Plastic Pollution from in the area that we're in, for example, building the boat, you've got the, the fumes from the burn off of the oil wells. A so it's, it's that's on that sort of physical level but on a social level in a cultural level, you've got also this sort of loss of continuity and connection between generations. And you've got the last generation

Mehiyar 5:37 because of war mostly

Rashad Salim 5:39 because of war, because of this degradation in culture, that cultural heritage, culture and cultural heritage is a means of connecting the generations, as well as connecting the these generations with the land and the future. So you have, you know, how, what is your communication without that culture? And you have, you can revive that through this, this is a means of engaging with that. So we're looking at the boats. And what happened was by invitation from local obviously , obviously Abu Sajjad was that interestingly, he's a local businessman in Huwair air with a business that goes back to ancient Sumaria, and it's directly related to the boats. So he has he, he transports and sells tar gear, different types of gifts from heat. And right through this period, even despite the problems in the wars, and etc, this sort of thing, Hit in Anbar. So he was doing that right through all this period. So he's quite, because it's not only for boats, but for roofing, for roofing, waterproofing, etc. It's a main industry, going back a Petro industry going back to the most ancient times we've got just seeps off the ground, it seeps from the ground in sort of like yeah, to seepage in, in Anbar area, and we have this connections with the boats, and what's why boats are interesting. boats have always been, until now the most sort of sophisticated construct of any culture until this day. You know, like, submarines and tankers are actually even more sophisticated than spaceships and spaceships are called ships for a reason. Yeah, there's that thing about, about an even more so than, than architecture, as in static architecture, it's something that that has a body that carries you. So it's, you know, you depend your life on it. Like you have to it, you give you put everything, you know, into creating something that is safe, it's always been the case, it is the peak of knowledge, the most sophisticated construct of any culture anywhere, has always been the case to now about. And you find, for example, like a lot of countries, they the sort of the icon of the country, it's a boat, like the Vasa in Sweden, and the in May rose, sorry, in England, and others, you know, the Navy, the US Navy, you know, the aircraft carriers, etc, that sort of the rocket ship. It's that personification of the most sophisticated cultural construct, as always. So, we don't know, we don't know how the Sumerians built their

boats. And there's a lot of work, serious work in trying to figure out what kind of boats because the thing about Mesopotamia is, it's a riverine culture. And, you know, people talk about agriculture as being really important, when in fact, both are equally important to agriculture, in trade in developing that civilization, and it's looked at so so if you look at the literature, you'll find always boats being picked up as really important, but we have no very, very few clues, but amongst the clues going back to the bitumen tar the gear. Amongst the clues are our clots of tar, bitumen that were found in in Oman, Kuwait, various places around And with with them print on one side of Cain, Matt, Cain, Matthew and on the other side of barnacles, which is sort of like the only empirical proof we have of the construction of the Sumerian boats, because these barnacles had to be from the sea. And you find them and they did studies on the on this and, you know, they identified the sources of this as being Hit

Mehiyar 10:35 on the quffa that you revived or

Rashad Salim 10:38 talking about jet No, these are seagoing ships. Okay. These are seagoing ships. Yeah, me the quffa we know, the quffas, we have got, we've got you know, impressions, drawings, and cylinder seals, etc. of boats that we can say are quffas going back to definitely Akkadian. And earlier, we can see that there's a there's a there's a distinction over here that has to be made between boats and ships. I'm working with boats towards understanding the shipbuilding. So boats are quite understood globally, there's a universal there's a universal typology of boats. So we find quffa, which are Coracles, not just in Mesopotamia, but they're known to be one of the oldest type of, of boats, just like a Kelek is a log raft.

Mehiyar 11:37 And they will use them for what purpose? Exactly?

Rashad Salim 11:41 Well, that's, that's, that's an interesting thing, because, you know, I've got three main types of, of boats that actually four or five but as main types that identify the northern part of the country. So you have the Kelek a log rafts. That used to be it used to be an floats so they used to float also on air bags, made out of leather. Like ships were which of these you know, I didn't have you know, which is a milk churn? I do. Yeah, leather, leather milk churn. So this as an airbag. And we know that this was used all the way back, you know, actually having an air bag of float, you know. So there's two float down logs, as well as stone, including milling stones. If you've got agriculture, you need milling stones and things like that, as well as sculptural things. And of course, southern Iraq, where Sumerians didn't have stone. This was coming from the north. So this is coming from the north. And they used to bring it down with these keleks until middle of the century or more, a little bit more but around middle of century this that is cut off. So they brought down the stones, and wood needed this wooden, Marathi, poles, etc. From from the north, selling everything, and then they sell it once they got down sells, and sort of pack up the leather bags and take it back up north and then repeat that sort of process. So it's one way using the river as a conduit. And this is the thing about about Mesopotamia, it's really is Mesopotamia, the two

ivers that are like highways, and from these you've got mazing sort of networks of canals, etc, that really covered the whole country. And people are studying that now. I mean, there was a highway highways and byways and sideways cul de sacs, etc. or water. Right through major. Yeah, it's, of course, the combustion engine. And roads have effect was one of the first things that that deteriorated or affected that relation to the river. For sure, but anyway, the kelek is the first one coming up further north. And then you have the quffa that you mentioned, which is a coracle, a basket, with indications that was used also made out of leather at some points as well. And the oldest ones that we have, actually, we have one of the oldest ones that we know of, is from the linear. What's it called linear. In Germany, they found 4000 BC or whatever,

Mehiyar 14:36 using the same gear in Hit.

Rashad Salim 14:39 Yeah, now that of course the leather ones we don't know what they put on it, but the ones that have reached us, and these are basic sort of thing because quffa or these Coracles it's a concept that's important for all of them. This is this is what I find. Also really fascinating, this sort of a seminal concepts that are defined or exemplified by these boats. So the kelek, you know, we put sticks together, tie them together, when they float, we don't go down really ancient they go back. That's it goes without saying the quffa basket if you make a basket big enough and waterproof it, you know whether you use leather or you use, like in Iraq, a coil basket, so it's one spiral coil of of fibers alfalfa in just moved that bound with something and that when it comes to quffa where it's bound with leaves, and then it's braced. So it has to be somehow, you know, mustn't collapse, obviously the basket. So they bought, they brace it in Iraq with pomegranate. That's the people that I've found, who still remember making them in, said that Hindya and Babylon and Hilla. They used to mix the smaller fisherman's one. Because that was sort of like a meter 50 That sort of size and we now have 11 them, 10 of them, and one that we've managed to get them to make beyond the size that they normally do, which is two meters we have now cargo cargo quffa, because we know that these to build and this is empirically I mean photographs, etc. We know that they used to build them up to sort of five and six meters. And her auditors mentioned them as one of the wonders of Babylon. These huge quffa, even though he was a little bit confused between the quffa and that kelek, you know, the issues about that sort of description anyway. So the quffa was is basically a huge basket. And these quffa Coracles you find them in England, you find them and there's one they found in Norway that 3000 You find them Vietnam and India all over the world, as well as those keles, but there's also canoes. like canoes is the type that I'm particularly interested in because it was the my entrance into the subject, which is a Shasha. That's a reed boat. So it's basically a bundle of reads that have been put together to create a platform. So that's buoyancy in itself. So the material itself is buoyant. The quffa is a displacement boat that displaces and kelek floats. So they're all distinct types of boats, the the Shasha, our bundles of reeds, or cane or whatever it is any material that that will float held together. And that's the technology that we find in and that is documented in the Sumerian iconography, as one of the

main building techniques, whether you have the mudhifs, the reed huts, reed houses, etc. You know, it's a main technique. And for me, that's very important, very interesting, because, obviously, we look at the story of Noah, we're looking at a period that predates and there's something that we know, empirically from studies of the topography of the, of the Gulf and region that there was a flood. And that flooding that actually number of floods, and the passage between the Pleistocene and Holocene, now we're into the Anthropocene and also on front of new floodings and new changes. So there's there's a bit of mirroring what when that sort of critical, climatic change in this one we're in, but anyway, we know that that there was a flood. But interestingly enough, the floods that the main floods which are sort of between 24,000 8000 BC, and then there was one from 5000 BC that was a smaller flood, but the only quite the earlier ones is like, you know, 120 meters.

Mehiyar 19:43 This is a flood in north in the north part of Iraq

Rashad Salim 19:46 The world over Okay, that's interesting thing another because we don't own the flood story, except in fact that it's in the Abrahamic tradition, which is the most known tradition but the flood still or is there 360? There's always this 360. But anyway, there's over 300 flood stories. globally. Yeah, everywhere, China, North America, South America, even. well even the aborigines of Australia have an oral flood story, and aborigines of Australia Interesting enough, either either oldest, or the furthest, we have absolute proof of human beings using boats, because we know that they reached Australia around 66,000 years ago. So there's no there's no way they could have reached it without boats. So we know that these boats that could actually crust, big bodies of water and not just sort of cross the river. So I mean, that's, that's, that's, that's interesting thing. So the flood would have proceeded. And we're going back now to our area or region, Mesopotamia, the Gulf of Arabia. I don't know if you call it the Middle East or what. But this area would have preceded the great sort of transitions into the ages of metal. And the transition into the ages of state building, it was preceded that it's and that gate, that transition from the sort of a more egalitarian into more patriarchal. So it's a transitional time, just like we have now. But what's interesting for me is that it predates the Bronze Age. So that arc would have been an arc built without metal. And the boats that I'm looking at, as that sort of basic thing without metal, and one of the reasons why I'm looking at it, because I think there's a sort of a, like I said earlier, there's a there's a loss of linking with that sort of seminal knowledge, that seminal relationship between culture and environment, and, you know, and ourselves as well. Oh, humanity. So, I believe that there is a sort of a universal language of making an alphabet of making, if you wish, when we said that boat would have been made. Now, my experience with ancient boats, and the people that have studied ancient boats has been that so far, the modus operandi, the way of viewing it has been towards something primitive. That which was old before is primitive. And we find this in the contemporary and the contemporary in the sense that, you know, when I say boats, this, you know, in the marshes, they say, No, that's old stuff finished, gone. This is in Europe, Yeah. But also we only whether who built the Tigris that I took part in,

in 77-78, or, or any of the ones so far that have been building boats, two things happen. Two things happen. And these, we find in the Noah story, as it has been translated from epoch to epoch. Two things happen. And, and one is that the past gets both primitive, primitive, made primitive, is there a verb for that primitive? And the second is that the present of the culture of the present gets implanted on it. So we have this issue of of boats being like Tigris itself that I was on with Tarada, which is a seminal experiential boat building. It's mentioned in all of them used on the one technique that of the reed boats. Like I said earlier, boats have always been the most sophisticated. You wouldn't have used only one technique to be you'd have you used all your techniques. And I've got various critique of that. Go into details a lot of detail on this, but I mean, that's what's suggested as a trading boat? I don't think it was a trading boat. Because of its primitive nature, because it had deadweight, you know, I think that, that primitive ness is sort of the idea that people would have first made boats that were like a reed bundle of, or a log, hollowed out log, and that there was a sort of an evolutionary transition from a floating object to a displacement. You know, there's some sort of there's an evolutionary view that you know, people would not have figured out that you displace before. Yeah, but that is that is that is an imposition of, I think the, you know, the hollowed it's self evident that something hollowed was there, and you've got it in nature, in cannabis plants have all sorts of things. And you know, you can understand that, you know, the structure of boats, you can understand it as you know

Mehiyar 26:13 Going back to your actual work in coming, what do you see are the main challenges to your to your work?

Rashad Salim 26:24 My main challenge is the lack of capacity within the country to to do the obvious to what, what should be done? It's been undermined the so we have we have lost a great deal of our there's been a brain drain, we've lost archives, we've lost many things, because the crafts, which is one of the main things that I'm looking at, was in focus. Previously, we had a, we had a anthropological journal, there were people interested, we had many, quite a few surveys that were done, music, crafts, etc, textiles, etc, were studied. From from maybe a twisted view, when it was politicized. But this a lot of this was outside of politics, you know, general knowledge and people interested in it and support it. So that that's the main problem is that we're in a situation where we're speaking about the 70s here, or 80s, yeah, up until the 70s 80s. Yeah, you had you had you had the capacity in the country to engage with all these things. There wasn't knowledge of it. And also, you had, you know, the environment hadn't been so degraded. So, I mean, one thing is lack of capacity in the country. But not a lack of will or understanding specifically from the people that are on the ground. Even even in upper levels, you have an understanding of the both the importance of it,

Mehiyar 28:28 the state level minister,

Rashad Salim 28:29 yeah, yeah, you have, but there's always some kind of hampering, yeah, I'm interested, but we don't have money. I'm just that all sorts of different things that we need to, there's a lot of work to do. And this is why we set up Safina projects. And why I have here because initially this project is it was an artist project. And I'm working it as an artist, researcher, cultural researcher, I'm working at this thing. And But now, we're increasingly as soon as you know, I got engaged with the thing. It was clear that you know, I can we can't afford for me to do it, even though it might be a way of doing it is just doing it as an artist and forget about the whole thing. And then people will pick up from from the product. Yeah, but the other way of doing it, which we're trying to do, and hopefully Nahrein would be helpful with us is to see how to use this as a means of capacity building actually engaging in so we're working with universities, working with government institutions, museums, etc. To do it in a capacity at very local level. yeah, exactly. So for example, the this Chilaika that the Meshoof canoe that we've just built. You know, it's it was so clear by building this boat there, that people not only enjoyed it, but created a, a bridge between the generations. Yeah. And it's sort of, it's a beautiful object as well as there's a beauty of this pride because that's another problem that we, we face is a lack of, of, of active pride or call it, you know, there's sort of maybe passive pride. But there's a lot that is undermining that pride, Mehiyar 30:40 pride of national heritage

Rashad Salim 30:42 pride and national pride in place. Yeah. So there's pride because of

Mehiyar 30:47 the disconnect, because of Rashad Salim 30:49 the, because of the disconnect because of the humiliation because of the corruption. Yeah. Because of, you know, there's a sense there's an apathy. Now, there's an apathy. That is, I think, why it's totally unIraqi. I don't think it's ever been that apathy. In that sense of Have you read a lot of books about Mesopotamia, and the first thing they say is, you know, Mesopotamia was also the birth of pessimism. Yeah. Yeah. And it's ingrained in us pessimism. But this is this what we're facing is beyond pessimism, it's sort of its, its case study. Case study is negative, so what that it's a problem that, you know, people will will see what you're doing, but cannot believe that, you know, anything will go right, will go that way.

Mehiyar 31:58 Because of the absence of active successful models in the ground,

Rashad Salim 32:02 on the one hand, and also the predominance of broken promises. So we've had an everybody write through when you go, there's always been so much promise, and so many promises, and it's all been broken up practically all been broken, you know,

Mehiyar 32:22 a lack of trust that you're trying to see your active work on the ground, and you're

Rashad Salim 32:27 not I have not, I have not felt that distrust to myself,

Mehiyar 32:32 because you already have successful outputs. And I think,

Rashad Salim 32:35 and then I'm working also from people can see that I'm working, I get down and dirty, and I'm working there and I'm with them, but But what happens is that, you know, with a lot of luck with some of the people that are working there, sadly, is more exploitative and more up, down, I'm working down up, and I insist on working down up, I'm not working, I don't come and tell them what to do. And that's another thing is there's a there's a tendency when it comes to even in the universities to see themselves as a position of, of actually authority of telling them what to do. So you've got anthropological department isn't that sort of their their motivation is not to understand the grass, but rather, who am I to tell them how to go to instruct them to instruct them. That's baloney. That's, that doesn't work, because my whole thing is actually to be a student. So I'm a student on the ground, you know, I'm always a student that cannot be more than a student, but from what I'm studying, and this is where myself as an artist comes in. And I'm looking, you know, my thing with the arc, all of that is actually to use this material that is being that I'm studying, which is the the nature the elements in the ecology, plants, etc, the culture, the crafts, etc. From that make that the palette, or the material of an artwork that is creative, rather than it is a monumental project for me, I see the arc as a monument. You know, I'm from the Salim family you know, made the monument famous monument in the book. I'm not interested in making a bronze monument you know, as a person, you know, and I'd like to end up my life by doing something that is well worth and monumental. Yeah, I'd like to do that. But I don't want to make this as monumental as it is just as much if not more,

Mehiyar 34:59 because you work on the sustainable development of cultural heritage, at a very local levels, I'm

Rashad Salim 35:03 making the monument from the material and the heritage of the country rather than portraying that now the person, the people, there's, you know, they've offered a piece of land from themselves, because we could make, and we can make a local, a local cultural center for them to engage with their culture and transmit my job, then, yeah, or our job is to see how to make that sustainable.

Mehiyar 35:31 The center itself

Rashad Salim 35:34 know, the building of boats and systems, and the center itself,

Mehiyar 35:38 this is an idea for you to have the center anywhere.



Rashad Salim 35:42 Yeah, that's one center, I think I believe that all of these areas should have local centers that are managed by the locals, by the locals, by the local culture. Not it's no good, you know, setting up a center, you know, and inviting them in, they have to invite you and manage the same center. But the thing is, you know, obviously, you're making a boat, I mean, I'm in a lot of countries, a lot of cultures, you can make a boat just as a, as a ritual exercise that defines your culture that happens in Hawaii, in places like Polynesia, they don't have to make these boats, but they do it as as a as a form of remembrance and continuity. So there's that. But then there's also the fact that Iraq is a flat, and quite featureless land, you've got the palm trees, you've got not many features. So if you're visiting the marshes, what you see something now, what you see is something that you can see anywhere, anywhere, even the boat types, they use the shaft or it's something you'll find globally, exactly the same boat. So basically, people go now to tourism and marshes. You don't even hear the place. Now with an engine, it's not even Yeah, it's a boat. with an engine. It has no cultural presence significance. So what you're doing is you I want to see the rhythm of those canoes there. So the tourism industry in Iraq needs and the aesthetic presence of these as well as the cultural presence of these. But then again, you no one can take these. Everyone studies them and develop a national form of sport, the racing, racing, you know, we've got the rivers now. I mean, these rivers used to be used, you had boats in them and, you know, all sails, etc, all sorts of things there. Now, the rivers, you know, are dead

Mehiyar 38:11 we have a water crisis now also

Rashad Salim 38:15 we have a water crisis. And this comes into another level, another level, when it comes to what is you know, we have, we have these rivers, we have water crisis, we have dependency of oil we have we are not even producing our own food anymore, etc, that if we don't respect and don't have a culture worth keeping, that is alive. Nobody's gonna respect us up river. Yeah. Yeah, we have to actually show and be something worth keeping, you know, worth maintaining. So yeah, respecting and respecting and be interesting, you know,

Mehiyar 39:00 you know, this goes back to the pride that you've been speaking about,

Rashad Salim 39:03 exactly. So at the moment, the water is basically, you know, the river is and this is right through the country. You know, I know rivers that I've never seen rivers and experience rivers, for example. And the same idea here in the 70s. There was a river over there. Beautiful river. Now it's you know, it's what have sewage, a sewer. The whole country, the rivers are turning into sewers.

Mehiyar 39:31 So it starts locally for others to respect.

Rashad Salim 39:33 It starts locally, it starts centrally, we've always been a central, centralized. We are in irrigation canals, all of these things need central there is no we have to go back to the time of the flood to be decentralized, but since the since after the flood, it's always been centralized and we are the first state bye bye In the history in history, you know, we've always been within that, mainly because of these rivers. Without that rivers, you wouldn't have had this sort of construct the geography that has, he defines it, and we've got a, we've got a well defined borders of mountains, you know, the Torres and the Zagros Mountains, and the desert. And between those, it's the land of the two rivers that it interconnects it, you know, with highways, you know, long before highways were developed here or anywhere else on the Roman Empire, whatever, your natural highways in different directions, not just like the Nile, you know, the string going down, we've got a network of highways, that has always brought us together. So I mean, the thing is, so hopefully with this project, inshallah, it's it's, you know, we both sort of get a new understanding or a deeper understanding of this culture, but also your or maybe have some kind of agency in return that agency with these boats, if nothing else, but to to describe ourselves understand ourselves or express ourselves In

Mehiyar 41:16 in terms of engagement, activity, presence.

Rashad Salim 41:26 Yeah. Presence. Yeah. But the thing that we, you know, we've we've been, sadly, what not sadly, but we've been sadly seen as literally as the has been, in the sense that all of you towards Iraq has been archeological. Yeah, it's been archaeological. Well, that archaeology and archaeologists, it's the reliquary of history, it's the bone box of history. But the fact is that, you know, a lot of the environmental is the same, the material that's been used, the crafts have the same, the architecture and vernacular architecture is the same. All of these things have, there's been a continuity, because we reached, you know, the best design with the material for the use in Iraq, since early on, in that environment, in that environment. So the boat types have remained until a material technological change major has come in. And then it has been threatened at the end. So we have we have a living heritage, we had a living heritage that was alive, remained alive, despite the rise and fall of, of empire, etc. Until now, the first time in our history, the very first time in our history where we have lost that connection, where we have become an archaeological site where what was alive now is an archeological stratum within the archives of the world. Now we have the images of it. But loss the reality which is why I'm doing this because you know, I can't see you with the sense of painting Mashoof boats as defining us and not having them in reality, it's senseless.

Mehiyar 43:29 On that note, Rashad Salim, thank you very much. I'm sure we'll be doing more podcast recordings with you I would like to thank you thank the AHRC the Arts Humanities Research Council for facilitating this. Thank you. If you'd like to learn more about Rashad's work you can look at his website at [www.SafinaSafinaprojects.org](http://www.SafinaSafinaprojects.org). Thank you very much.

Rashad Salim 44:02 Thank you