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Alifushee boat yard
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BOAT BUILDING IN THE MALDIVES - AN OVER VIEW

1. ALTHOUGH THE WELL KNOWN MALDIVE COWRIES (THE MONEY SHELLS) HAD BEEN FOUND HOARDED WITH BURIALS FROM 1500 BC. IT IS SAFE TO ASSUME FROM WRITTEN EVIDENCE THAT THE MALDIVE ISLANDS HAVE BEEN INHABITED AT LEAST SINCE THE EARLY TENTH CENTURY - AD IT IS ALSO CLEAR FROM SUCH EVIDENCE THAT THE PEOPLE OF THE MALDIVES WERE AMONG THE MOST INDUSTRIOUS AND WELL-TO-DO PEOPLE OF THE TIME. THE NUMEROUS SMALL ISLANDS HAD BEEN SHOWN TO BE THE INTERNATIONAL MINT AS EARLY AS THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY, CULTIVATING THE VALUABLE COWRY SHELLS WHICH WERE USED AS MONEY IN THE EARLIEST CIVILIZATIONS SUCH AS THE INDUS VALLEY CIVILIZATION.

THE PEOPLE OF THE MALDIVES ALSO EXCELLED THEMSELVES IN BOAT BUILDING, FISHING AND SEAFARING. THE FACT IS MOST EVIDENT IN THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE OF THE HISTORY OF THE EARLY CIVILIZATIONS OF THE WORLD.

SINCE THE STANDARD SHAPE OF THE MALDIVE DHONI HAS A MARKED RESEMBLANCE TO THE TYPICAL SHAPE OF THE ELEGANT REED BUNDLE SHIPS SHARED BY THE WORLD'S EARLIEST KNOWN CIVILIZATIONS -- EGYPT, MESOPOTAMIA AND THE INDUS VALLEY, IT CAN WELL BE DEDUCED THAT THIS WAS THE ORIGIN OF THE INDIGENOUS DESIGN OF THE DHONI. THE MALDIVE DHONI HAD EVEN MORE IN COMMON WITH THE PHOENICIAN SAILING SHIPS WHICH WERE BUILT FROM WOODEN PLANKS, BUT RETAINED THE PAPYRUS FORM OF THE OLDER MOTHER CIVILIZATIONS.

ALTHOUGH THE MALDIVIANS MIGHT HAVE USED THE REED BUNDLE SHIPS OF THE OLDER CIVILIZATIONS, THE EARLIEST FORM OF CONSTRUCTION KNOWN IS, THE "TYING OF DHONI" - IN WHICH FORM, PRE-SHAPED TREE-TIMBER PLANKS ARE TIED TOGETHER, EDGE-TO-EDGE, WITH TWINE MADE FROM THE BARK OF TREES IN A DIAGONAL LASHING THROUGH HOLES BORED AROUND THE PERIPHERY OF THE PLANK. THE HOLES SO USED ARE LATER PLUGGED WITH WOODEN PEGS TO MAKE THE HULL WATER PROOF.

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NO EVIDENCE IS SEEN OF A CHANGE OF THE METHOD OF CONSTRUCTION OF THE MALDIVIAN DHONI, UNTIL THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY WHEN THE PORTUGUESE ARRIVED IN THEIR SEAFARING AND WARRING VESSELS. THESE VESSELS CALLED 'GURAABU' HAVE BEEN FOUND TO BE CONSTRUCTED IN THE SAME WAY AS THE SO CALLED TRADITIONAL METHOD OF MALDIVIAN BOAT BUILDING. IN THIS THE WOOD PLANKS ARE FASTENED TOGETHER BY MEANS OF TRUNNELS (OR TREE NAILS) WHICH RUN TRANSVERSELY THROUGH THE PLANKS. IN THIS METHOD, THE HULL OF THE VESSEL IS BUILT FIRST, AND THE RIBS OR THE FRAMES ARE BUILT-IN LATER. IT IS FROM HERE THAT THE MALDIVE DHONI PROPER HAVE EMERGED. THE 'GURAABU' MAY WELL HAVE BEEN CONSTRUCTED OF TREE TIMBER. HOWEVER, SINCE THE MALDIVE ISLANDS HAVE NO LOCAL TREES OF A HEIGHT SUITABLE FOR BOAT BUILDING, THE PEOPLE MOST LIKELY ADOPTED THE FREELY AND ABUNDANTLY AVAILABLE COCONUT TIMBER TO BUILD THEIR LARGER BOATS. THIS ASSUMPTION IS FURTHER SUPPORTED BY THE FACT THAT SMALLER LOCAL CRAFT CALLED 'BOKKURAA' ARE BUILT OF TREE TIMBERS AND FURTHERMORE, IN THE SOUTH OF THE MALDIVE ARCHIPELAGO, WHERE FEW LARGER AND TALLER TREES ARE AVAILABLE IN THE EARLY DAYS, LARGER VESSELS OF UP TO A LENGTH OF 70 (SEVENTY) FEET HAVE BEEN FOUND BUILT SOLELY OF TREE TIMBERS.

WE COULD THEN CONCLUDE THAT THE PEOPLE OF THE MALDIVE ARCHIPELAGO HAVE KNOWLEDGE AND TECHNOLOGY OF BOAT BUILDING AS EARLY AS THE TENTH CENTURY AD, AND THAT THE PEOPLE HAVE BEEN USING THE BOATS EXTENSIVELY SINCE THEN. IT IS ALSO EVIDENT THAT THE KNOW-HOW AND THE TECHNOLOGY OF BOAT BUILDING HERE HAD GONE THROUGH A MAJOR CHANGE DURING THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY AD AND THAT THE INDIGENOUS BOAT CALLED THE 'DHONI' HAVE EMERGED WITH THE TECHNIQUES AND THE KNOW-HOW THEY HAVE GATHERED OVER THE YEARS AND THE COMMON SENSE SO COMMON TO THE SMALLISH RACE OF PEOPLE, TO USE THE LITTLE RESOURCES THEY HAVE, IN A PURPOSEFUL, MEANINGFUL AND FUNCTIONAL WAY. HENCE THE COCONUT TIMBER DHONIS OF THE MALDIVES HAS BECOME BOTH TRADITIONAL AND INDIGENOUS THAT THESE BOATS NOW SYMBOLIZE THE ENTIRE ARCHIPELAGO TODAY.

IT SEEMS NOT MUCH ATTENTION HAD BEEN GIVEN FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE BOAT BUILDING TRADE OR THE BOATS THEMSELVES, EXCEPT FOR THE USE OF NEWER MATERIALS AS FASTENINGS AND TOOLS IN THE CONSTRUCTION. IT WAS NOT SEEN NECESSARY UNTIL THE LATE 1960'S, WHEN THE GOVERNMENT INITIATED A MOTORIZATION PROJECT FOR THE FISHING VESSELS. AT FIRST THE PEOPLE WERE VERY HESITANT AS ALL

early 70's

MALDIVIANS ARE KNOWN TO BE A CAUTIOUS PEOPLE. THE AUTHORITIES HAD TO DO MUCH COERCING FOR THE PEOPLE TO AGREE TO MOTORIZE THEIR VESSELS. HOWEVER, WITHIN ABOUT A YEAR OF THE INTRODUCTION OF THE MOTOR AS A MEANS OF PROPULSION, ALMOST EVERY MALDIVIAN BELIEVED THAT IT WAS A MILE-STONE IN THEIR HISTORY. EVERYBODY WANTED TO MOTORIZE THEIR FISHING BOAT - THE MAS DHONI - TO GO FASTER TO THE FISHING GROUNDS, TO BE ABLE TO GIVE A CHASE TO THE SCHOOL OF FISH, TO CATCH MORE FISH, AND FINALLY TO COME BACK HOME MUCH SOONER THAN THEIR BROTHERS WHO ARE STILL USING THE SAIL. -- THE ENGINE (INJEENU) DHONI WAS BORN HERE.

SINCE FISHING IS THE SOLE ECONOMY OF THE TINY ISLAND NATION AFTER THE COWRIES WENT OUT OF CIRCULATION AS THE CURRENCY OF THE TRADING CENTRES AROUND, MOTORIZATION OF THE FISHING FLEET OF THE NATION WAS A MAJOR STEP FORWARD IN STRENGTHENING THE ECONOMY OF THE COUNTRY.

DOCUMENTARY EVIDENCE IS AVAILABLE TO SHOW THAT AT THIS VERY TIME THE MALDIVES GOVERNMENT HAD BEEN TRYING TO FIND WAYS TO IMPROVE THE DESIGN OF THE INDIGENOUS CRAFT, TO SUIT THE NEW PROPULSION SYSTEM AS WELL AS TO RENDER THE BOAT MORE COMFORTABLE AND FUNCTIONAL. IN THIS REGARD, A GOVERNMENT OWNED BOAT BUILDING YARD WAS ESTABLISHED IN THE NOW AIRPORT ISLAND IN THE EARLY 1960'S. IT IS KNOWN THAT ABOUT HALF A DOZEN OR SO OF VARIOUS IMPORTED DESIGNS OF BOATS WERE CONSTRUCTED OF TIMBER AT THIS YARD BEFORE IT WAS SOME HOW ABANDONED.

the early 70s

~~ALSO~~ DURING ~~THIS VERY TIME~~ THE MALDIVES SAW ANOTHER INDUSTRY WHICH PAID NEARLY AS MUCH - TOURISM. THE BUDDING INDUSTRY SAW IT NECESSARY TO DEVELOP THE GENERAL DECK ARRANGEMENT OF THE EXISTING DHONIS TO SUIT THE NEEDS OF THE DOLLAR PAYING GUESTS. THE SAME 'MAS DHONI' WAS AGAIN MODIFIED, MOTORIZED AND NAMED AS A 'SATHARI DHONI' FOR THE TRANSPORTATION OF THE GUESTS FROM THE AIRPORT TO THEIR TINY, SERENE AND SECLUDED ISLETS.

TOURISM WAS NOT SATISFIED WITH THE 'SATHARI DHONI' ALONE. THIS INDUSTRY COMPELLED THE MALDIVIAN BOAT BUILDER TO CONVERT THEIR TRADITIONAL 'MAS DHONI' TO WHAT IS TERMED AS A 'YACHT DHONI', ACCORDING TO THE PURPOSE SHE FULFILLS. THE TOURISM INDUSTRY WENT ON DEMANDING MORE FROM THE LOCAL TRANSPORTATION FACILITIES, AND SO TODAY IN 1997 THERE CAN BE FOUND

WOODEN YACHTS OF UP TO A HUNDRED FEET IN LENGTH. HOWEVER, MOST OF THESE YACHTS ARE A MERE CONVERSION OF THE TRADITIONAL MAS DHONIS OR THE MORE BULKIER TRANSPORT VESSELS CALLED THE 'BATHTHELI'.

early
SINCE THE ~~LOCAL~~ GOVERNMENT PURSUED THE ENDEAVOUR TO DEVELOP A MORE SEAWORTHY AND STREAMLINED HULL TO SUIT THE NEW PROPULSION SYSTEM AND THE FUNCTIONALITY OF THE VESSEL AND COMFORT OF THE CREW AND THE PASSENGERS, IN THE 1980'S A 'SECOND GENERATION MAS DHONI' WAS DESIGNED AND FOUR PROTOTYPES WERE BUILT FOR EXPERIMENTATION.

WITH PROPER FEED BACK ON THESE PROTOTYPES ORIGINATING FROM THE LOCAL FISHERMEN THEMSELVES, A NEWER VERSION OF THE SECOND GENERATION MAS DHONI WAS DESIGNED AND BUILT IN 1983. THESE VESSELS WERE CALLED THE SECOND GENERATION MK. I DHONIS - PURELY A FISHING VESSEL - AND WERE BUILT IN A GOVERNMENT OWNED BOAT YARD SPECIALLY SET UP FOR THE PURPOSE, IN THE TRADITIONALLY MOST FAMOUS BOAT BUILDING ISLAND OF THE MALDIVES KNOWN AS ALIFUSHI IN THE NORTH OF THE ARCHIPELAGO.

SINCE THIS GOVERNMENT OWNED BOAT YARD WAS ESTABLISHED IN 1983, THERE HAD BEEN THREE VERSIONS OF THE SECOND GENERATION MAS DHONI. ALL OF WHICH ARE ADVANCED HULL DESIGN AND CONSTRUCTION, SEEN NECESSARY OR BETTER THROUGH EXPERIENCE OF THE OLDER VERSION. THE YARD IS NOW BUILDING THE MK. III TYPE OF THE SECOND GENERATION MAS DHONI, AND HAVE COMPLETED A TOTAL OF MORE THAN 260 VESSELS OF VARIOUS TYPES.

AT THE SAME TIME OF THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THIS SECOND GOVERNMENT BOAT YARD, THE ~~LOCAL~~ GOVERNMENT ALSO STARTED A BOAT BUILDING TRAINING CENTRE, IN A FURTHER EFFORT TO DEVELOP THE TRADITIONAL INDUSTRY.

IT HAS BEEN NOW DECIDED TO UPGRADE THIS BOAT BUILDING FACILITY, SO AS TO CONTINUE TO SERVE THE FISHING INDUSTRY AND ALSO TO START BUILDING THE CUSTOM VESSELS NEEDED BY THE ~~OTHER MAJOR~~ INDUSTRY OF THE COUNTRY.

emerging transport
IT IS THEREFORE CLEAR THAT THE BOAT BUILDING INDUSTRY IN THE MALDIVES CAN NOT BE SAID TO BE AN EMERGING INDUSTRY. AS IS NOW EVIDENT, THIS INDUSTRY IS TRADITIONAL

AND INDIGENOUS TO THE PEOPLE OF THE MALDIVES, AND WHAT IS HAPPENING NOW IS THE REVIVAL AND MODERNIZATION OF THIS MAJOR INDUSTRY.

2. THE FOCUS ON THE BOAT BUILDING INDUSTRY CAN NOT BE LINKED TO THE GROWTH OF EITHER FISHING OR THE TOURISM INDUSTRIES. AS WE HAVE CLEARLY SEEN SO FAR, FIRSTLY, TOURISM HAS STARTED AFTER THE MALDIVES GOVERNMENT HAD INITIATED TO DEVELOP THE BOAT BUILDING INDUSTRY OF THE ISLANDS. SECONDLY, THE LOCAL FISHING INDUSTRY HAD GROWN TREMENDOUSLY AFTER THE MOTORIZATION OF THE DHONIS, AND ALSO FISH LANDINGS HAS TAKEN A MAJOR JUMP IN 1984 - 1985, WHEN THE SECOND GENERATION MAS DHONIS WERE INTRODUCED IN TO THE FISHING FLEET. HENCE, IT IS MORE APT TO SAY THAT THE GROWTH IN THE FISHING AND THE TOURISM INDUSTRIES CAN BE LINKED TO THE DEVELOPMENTS IN THE BOAT BUILDING INDUSTRY.

3. WE ARE STILL BUILDING THE MAJORITY OF OUR BOATS IN WOOD. BUT THERE ARE PRIVATE EFFORTS TO BUILD BOATS OF OTHER MATERIALS LIKE FIBRE-GLASS. IT IS WITH NO DOUBT THAT WE SHOULD BELIEVE TIMBER CAN NOT BE THE BUILDING MATERIAL IN THE FUTURE, AND HENCE WE SHOULD SERIOUSLY THINK OF OTHER MATERIALS TOO.
IN TIMBER BOAT BUILDING, THE INDIGENOUS AND TRADITIONAL BOATS WERE BUILT IN A SHELL FIRST AND FRAMES LATER METHOD, BUT NOW THIS METHOD HAS BEEN CHANGED TO THE MORE ACCEPTED METHOD OF FRAMES FIRST AND SHELL LATER METHOD - LIKE PAPERING A KITE. THIS LATER METHOD IS MUCH EASIER FOR CONSTRUCTION, YIELDS A STRONGER BOAT, AND LEAVES TO THE BUILDERS THE POSSIBILITY OF COMPLETING THE BOAT AS THEY WANT - IN OTHER WORDS BUILDING TO THE DESIGN IS EASIER WITH THE FRAME FIRST METHOD.

WHEN ONE TALKS OF IMPORTING, EXPORTING OR DEVELOPING MAN POWER AND TECHNOLOGY, ONE SHOULD REALIZE THAT THE MALDIVES HAD STARTED ON MAN-POWER DEVELOPMENT AND TECHNICAL EDUCATION AS LATE AS THE LATE 1970'S, AND SO WE STILL LEAN HEAVILY TO THE IMPORT SIDE. LIKE ALMOST EVERYTHING ELSE, EXCEPT OUR FISH, WE HAVE TO IMPORT TECHNOLOGY, AND EVEN MAN-POWER.

4. MALDIVES CERTAINLY HAVE A POLICY ON BOAT BUILDING, LIKE EVERYTHING ELSE. ESPECIALLY AFTER THE LATE 1970'S, THE GOVERNMENT IS VERY KEEN TO DRAW-UP NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT POLICIES FOR EACH AND EVERY FIELD WHICH CAN POSSIBLY CONTRIBUTE TO THE BETTERMENT OF THE PEOPLE. IT SEEMS FIT TO STATE THAT THESE POLICIES WILL BE BASED ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE VARIOUS ASPECTS

NECESSARY FOR THE PEOPLE. HENCE THE GUIDE LINES FOR THE POLICY ON BOAT BUILDING CAN BE LISTED BROADLY AS :-

1. THE DEVELOPMENT OF A TRADITIONAL INDUSTRY.
 2. ACQUIRE THE MAXIMUM THAT BOAT BUILDING CAN CONTRIBUTE FOR THE FISHING AND TOURISM INDUSTRIES.
 3. ESTABLISH AN INCOME GENERATING SOURCE FOR THE PEOPLE IN THE REMOTE AREAS OF THE COUNTRY - WHICH CAN CONTRIBUTE TO THE DECENTRALIZATION POLICY.
 4. MAKE THE NECESSARY EFFORTS TO COME-UP WITH A MORE ENVIRONMENT FRIENDLY BUILDING MATERIAL FOR THE INDISPENSABLE BOATS.
 5. LAY DOWN CERTAIN MINIMUM STANDARDS FOR BUILDING THE TRADITIONAL WOODEN VESSELS.
5. COMMERCIAL BOAT BUILDING HAS BEEN GOING ON IN THE REPUBLIC SINCE THE EARLY 1980'S, BUT ON A VERY NON-CONFORMING WAY TO THE REQUIREMENTS OF SAFETY. THE AUTHORITIES ARE QUITE CONCERNED ABOUT THIS FACT AND HAVE BEEN TRYING TO LAY DOWN SOME BASIC STANDARDS OF CONSTRUCTION, ESPECIALLY FOR THE LARGER VESSELS WHICH ARE BEING BUILT. THE GOVERNMENTS EFFORT TO STANDARDIZE THE RULES FOR VESSEL CONSTRUCTION OF LARGER SIZES EFFECTED THROUGH THE GOVERNMENT BOAT BUILDING YARD, WHO WILL CONTINUE BUILDING SEAWORTHY VESSELS OF THE SIZES REQUIRED BY THE PRIVATE OWNERS, FOR USE MAINLY IN THE TOURISM SECTOR. THE FISHING SECTOR ALSO NOW CALLS FOR LARGER VESSELS WITH PROPER ACCOMMODATION AND FISH HANDLING FACILITIES ON BOARD. HENCE THERE IS DEMAND AND THE NECESSITY FOR A CENTRAL MOVE TO DEVELOP COMMERCIAL BOAT BUILDING IN THE COUNTRY.

THE BUYERS OF THESE VESSELS WILL BE THE TOURISM PEOPLE AND ALSO SOME OF THE WELL ESTABLISHED FISHERY PEOPLE. EXPERIENCE HAS SHOWN THAT THERE IS THE DEMAND AND THE MONEY IN THE TOURISM SECTOR, BUT THE FISHERY PEOPLE WILL NEED ASSISTANCE, GOVERNMENT OR OTHERWISE, TO SUPPORT THEM TO STAND ON THEIR FEET.

THE COST OF A BOAT WILL DEPEND, IT WILL DEPEND ON A LOT OF THINGS LIKE, THE SIZE OF BOAT, THE QUALITY OF THE MATERIAL OF CONSTRUCTION - EVEN TIMBER IS AVAILABLE IN VARIETY OF DIFFERENT GRADES AND SPECIES. FACILITIES REQUIRED ON BOARD, THE EQUIPMENT THAT SHOULD BE AVAILABLE FOR THE USE OF THE CREW, AND MAINLY THE MAIN

ENGINE - TYPE, MAKE, AND SIZES. IN SHORT, THE COST OF THE BOAT DEPENDS ON THE OWNERS REQUIREMENTS.

THE APPROXIMATE COST OF A STANDARD, OPEN DECKED, FISHING BOAT OF THE SECOND GENERATION TYPE HAVING A LENGTH OF ABOUT 42 FEET, AND INSTALLED WITH A YANMAR ENGINE OF 3TMG SERIES IS PRESENTLY AT 480,000.00 RUFYAA.

6. THE MALDIVIAN GOVERNMENT LAID SPECIAL EMPHASIS ON TRAINING AND EDUCATION OF TECHNICAL PEOPLE DURING THE LATE 1970'S. HENCE THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE VOCATIONAL TRAINING CENTRE WHICH NOW HAS BEEN UP GRADED AND RE-NAMED THE MALDIVES INSTITUTE FOR TECHNICAL EDUCATION (MITE). THIS INSTITUTE TRAINS AND EDUCATES PEOPLE IN VARIOUS TECHNICAL FIELDS WHICH ARE VERY MUCH NEEDED FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE COUNTRY AS A WHOLE. THE INSTITUTE HAS BRANCHES IN THE FIELDS OF ENGINE MAINTENANCE AND REPAIR, REFRIGERATION AND AIR CONDITIONING, ELECTRICAL ENGINEERING, HANDICRAFTS, CARPENTRY, AND BOAT BUILDING, CENTERED ALL AROUND THE REPUBLIC.

THE BOAT BUILDING TRAINING CENTRE WHICH IS BASED AT THE GOVERNMENT BOAT YARD ISLAND, TRAINS PEOPLE IN THE TRADE IN TWO YEARS. THE TRAINEES GET THEIR PRACTICAL TRAINING IN THE AFTERNOONS IN THE YARD, AND DO THEIR THEORETICAL WORK IN THE MORNINGS WITH THEIR TRAINERS OR INSTRUCTORS. WHEN THEY COME OUT OF THIS INSTITUTE AFTER TWO YEARS, THEY ARE GREEN BOAT BUILDERS WITH THE REQUIRED THEORY BEHIND THEM. THE GRADUATES FROM THIS INSTITUTE REQUIRE ABOUT TWO MORE YEARS OF WORK IN THE BOAT BUILDING INDUSTRY TO BECOME BOAT BUILDING CARPENTERS, AND AFTER FIVE YEARS IN THE INDUSTRY, WITH THE RIGHT ATTITUDE, SOME OF THE TRAINEES HAVE BECOME MASTER BOAT BUILDERS OF A NEW GENERATION - THAT IS WITH THE REQUIRED THEORY BEHIND THEM.

7. THE TRADITIONAL BOAT BUILDER IS SURELY AFFECTED BY THE NEW TECHNOLOGIES. THAT IS, THEY THEMSELVES IMPROVE THEIR KNOW-HOW AND TECHNIQUES. THEY ACQUIRE NEW EXPERIENCES. IT IS A KNOWN FACT THAT THE AVERAGE MALDIVIAN IS A VERY FAST LEARNER. THEY TAKE-IN FULLY ALL WHAT THEY SEE AND HEAR. IN THIS RESPECT, THE TRADITIONAL BOAT BUILDER HAS TREMENDOUSLY BENEFITED AND IMPROVED HIMSELF FROM THE NEW TECHNIQUES INTRODUCED INTO THE INDUSTRY.

THEN SURELY THERE IS NO CHANCE FOR THE TRADITIONAL BOAT BUILDER TO BE DISPLACED. ON THE CONTRARY, HE IS EVERY MUCH IN THE BUSINESS EVEN TODAY. IN-FACT, HE'S BECOME EVEN TRENDIER.

- 8. THERE ARE FEW PRINTED MATERIAL AVAILABLE ON THE SUBJECT, AND MOST OF THESE ARE OF HISTORICAL PURPOSE. FEWER MATERIAL IS KNOWN ON MALDIVIAN BOAT BUILDING, TECHNIQUES.

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