

Smelly skins make for fishy fashion in Kenya

July 15 2018, by Fred Ooko

Women sharpen their knives before setting about stinking piles of fish skins, flesh and bones that cover the floor at an unusual artisanal tannery in western Kenya.

Set up by a 39-year-old industrial chemist named Newton Owino, Alisom Products separates [fish](#) skins from the rest of the waste, then tans them to make a kind of [leather](#) used to manufacture handbags, wallets, shoes, hats and jackets.

Kisumu, on Lake Victoria, is a piscatorial place, a city where grilled tilapia and Nile perch are a ubiquitous delicacy, and from where cleaned fillets are exported around the region and the world.

But Owino saw opportunity in the leftovers.

An estimated 150,000 tonnes of fish waste is produced every year and 80 percent of it is dumped. Owino and his dozen employees offer an alternative.

"My major business here is (to) turn fish skin into leather," he says, pacing the yard in gumboots and a polo shirt. "(There are) plenty of raw materials that we have around here."

Fleets of bicycle transporters bring sacks of skins from fishermen, restaurants and factories to his little facility every day.

There, workers strip the last pieces of rancid flesh from fly-covered

skins and hang them to dry on wooden beams, like clothes on a washing line. Hungry birds peck at his product.

The dried skins are stuffed inside a rusty hand-cranked drum and drenched in an acidic herbal solution, based on local fruits such as papaya or avocado, that tans them into fish leather.

"We now do what is called the drum turn," says Owino, putting his shoulder into spinning the contraption.

Stylish, affordable, unusual

What comes out is softer, darker and less smelly. The skins are then descaled, stretched and dried again, becoming workable leather.

Fella Atieno is a fish leather shoe designer, making sandals, boots and other footwear.

Everything is done by hand with only a pen, a pair of scissors, some glue and dye.

The result is distinctive products, with scale patterns reminiscent of crocodile or snake [skin](#), but at a fraction of the price.

Shoes sell for 1,500 shillings (\$15, 13 euros) and jackets for 2,000.

Allan Ochieng, a student working with Owino, looks forward to earning "thousands of shillings" once his training is complete.

"In addition to creating jobs for slum dwellers, we also offer leather products that they can afford," said Owino.

His customers agree.

"If we have fish, why can't we be proud of our fish and use it more economically?" says Lawrence Odero, who is visiting the workshop.

"So, when I put on the shoes made from fish leather, I put on the cap as well as the jacket I feel happy! I feel very proud," he adds.

While there are other tanneries in town, Owino's is the only one specialising in fish leather.

He says he uses a chemical-free tanning process for his unique products.

And he hopes to expand his business with a manufacturing school and training facility for prospective fish tanners.

"We actually (have) the vision of establishing a leather school so that we could pass on this knowledge on technology to other people. Not just doing it for ourselves," Owino says.

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