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## **Bringing people and stories together: towards decolonising archaeology in Sudanese Nubia**

### **Abstract**

Objects have the ability to evoke memories, generate a sense of connection with ancestors, and contain the knowledge associate with them. While restitution of objects to the community of origin is certainly important, it would not complete 'decolonisation'. As some recent heritage studies from Africa advocate, objects occupy only a segment of heritage. In other words, the value of the object is not a matter of the material preservation alone, but, rather, their associations to belief, knowledge, customs, ethics, wellbeing, and socioeconomic activities within the landscape(s) the community lives in. The decolonising of heritage requires a recognition of and research practices that foreground epistemic diversity, and allows the creation of narratives – around objects, places or landscapes – using different knowledge sets.

Archaeology was brought to Africa within the context of western colonisation. Material remains and objects from the past came to be under control of the colonial administrations and western archaeologists, which effectively separated them from the people who have historical, cultural, and ancestral relations to the landscapes, places and objects. The separation is not only the physical separation, taken away to western or national museums and denial of use and access; but also the separation from their knowledge and worldview when they were interpreted and narrated.

In Sudan, archaeology has long been focused on Nubia in northern Sudan. Many objects and monuments have been transported out of Nubia – to the capital Khartoum and western museums. Yet, Nubia has become centrally placed within a national historical discourse created in the lead-up to the independence in 1956. Perspectives from Nubian communities were largely absent in the discourse, and the management of the archaeological heritage placed under the remit of a Western-style antiquities organisation, within a national government framework.

This paper reflects upon the importance of collaboration between archaeologists and local people, as a way to decolonising archaeological practices, particularly the narrative of the past, based on the research and community programmes undertaken around an archaeological site (Amara West) in Sudanese Nubia. Storytelling and other programming around the past brought archaeologists and local people together, to learn from each other's knowledge and perspectives. Does this offer one model towards decolonisation, foregrounding the local people rather than nation states or academic specialists?

### **Keywords**

Multiple knowledges, De-colonial shift, Collaboration, Sudan, Nubia, Archaeology, Heritage

### **Biography**

Tomomi Fushiya is a Japanese archaeologist, specialised in collaborative archaeology and heritage management planning. She conducted ethnographic and practice-based research

around Amara West, northern Sudan on the relationship between Nubian people, archaeologists and an archaeological site for her PhD at Leiden University. She currently works at sites in other parts of Sudanese Nubia, including at a Medieval-Islamic site, Old Dongola, as a research associate of University of Warsaw.  
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### Core text

Objects have the ability to evoke memories, generate a sense of connection with ancestors, and contain the knowledge associate with them. While restitution of objects to the community of origin is certainly important, it would not complete 'decolonisation'. As some recent heritage studies from Africa advocate, objects occupy only a segment of heritage. In other words, the value of the object is not a matter of the material preservation alone, but, rather, their associations to belief, knowledge, customs, ethics, wellbeing, and socioeconomic activities within the landscape(s) the community lives in. The decolonising of heritage requires a recognition of and research practices that foreground epistemic diversity, and allows the creation of narratives – around objects, places or landscapes – using different knowledge sets.

'You know about *athar* (archaeology) and that is what you do. But *turath* (heritage) is about us. We can talk about it. We don't know what is under the ground but you know it'.

This is a remark made by one of the persons I interviewed in Sudanese Nubia. It is an explicit statement about the ownership and the location of the knowledge about heritage – it exists within the communities. Simultaneously, it is indicative of the presence of another set of knowledge, the knowledge of archaeology. In the country where archaeology is regarded as a foreigner's practice (Humphris and Bradshaw 2017) as it introduced during the colonial period, practiced almost exclusively by western scholars, archaeological knowledge is the knowledge of outsiders. My ethnographic research in a case study area in northern Sudan revealed that an ancient town site comprises a part of heritage in the communities and the local people value archaeological information. Growing understanding of what constitutes heritage for local communities was an important turning point for me to consider how this co-existence of the knowledges could be translated into a collaborative heritage programme and how the knowledges could be equally contribute to narrating a local heritage place.

This paper considers a process of mutual learning, negotiations and contestation that emerge through community engagement regarding archaeology and heritage with a case study from Sudanese Nubia. The process suggests how a decolonial-shift could take in practice within the field of archaeology. The transformation of archaeology in Sudan requires a collaborative turn that would affect the mind-sets of both archaeologists and local people concerning archaeological practice and would lead to respect of different knowledges both of which have the ability to narrate about the past. The different knowledges could complement each other. Although the collaboration across a range of stakeholders and interest groups, including national and regional governments and other ethnic groups, is essential to embed the process to decolonising archaeological practice and heritage cares, this paper gives a focus on the relationship between Sikoot Nubian people and non-Sudanese archaeologists as a starting point of the transformative action.

### **Co-existence of knowldeges**

Heritage and its associated knowledge and worldview are one aspect that has been colonised during the European colonialism in Sudan and that should be empowered and liberated. The idea of border thinking may provide the image of how the de-colonial shift could take or what would be a de-colonial shift. 'Border thinking is the epistemology of the exteriority; that is, of the outside created from the inside' (Mignolo and Tlostanova 2007, 206). It emerges 'from and as a response to the violence (frontiers) of imperial/territorial epistemology and the rhetoric of modernity' (*ibid.*). The discussion calls for destabilisation of the euro-centric or 'universal' epistemic foundation, and create (or embed) the idea of plurality of knowledges that co-exist; that is '[a] world in which many worlds will co-exist' (*ibid.*, 219).

How could this co-existence be imagined and created? In the issue of heritage and archaeology, collaboration is a way forward. Collaboration that is forming an equal partnership, seeking mutual benefits, respecting different knowledge sets, and co-decision-making in process (Atalay 2012, 55-56). Collaboration brings about a dialogic process and form a relationship among participants. What is lacking in the colonial and post-colonial context, is an equitable dialogue and relationship-forming that provides a learning opportunity about different interests, perceptions, knowledge and worldviews. Museums in North America, New Zealand, Australia and the Pacific islands have made a collaborative turn through repatriation of objects to indigenous peoples and accumulated the experiences of collaboration. As their experiences inform, the collaboration is not a smooth cooperation but is a process with twists and turns, contestations and negotiations (Karp and Kratz 2014). '[T]he collaborative venture itself contains the possibility of pluralising answers and raising different questions' (*ibid.*, 281). I

argue, further, when collaboration takes place between archaeologists and local communities, the process leads to realisation of what aspects of heritage and archaeological practice have been normalised and clarify the biased views toward one another. In other words, it filters out the issues that has prevented a de-colonial shift in the heritage-archaeology sphere. These should be challenged.

### **Colonialism and archaeology in Sudan**

The colonialism in Sudan made several important enduring impacts on the relations between the Sudanese people and their heritage. Firstly, archaeology was introduced in parallel to the process of the colonialism. The study of the past became the realm of western experts. As it was similar with archaeology in other African countries (Shepherd 2003; Posnansky 2017), the involvement of the Sudanese people in archaeology was limited as labours in excavations at best. Excavated objects were taken away from original places to the national museums and western museums. The information about excavated material remains was exported to be studied and stored in western institutions. Local perceptions and connection with the past, methods of knowledge production and passing on were considered absent or not valid in writing of the history. Such practice of archaeology came to be associative with exploitation and foreigners among the Sudanese population. Further, the people were considered necessary to be educated about the history of their country and the colonial administration conceived public engagement programmes for the Sudanese at museums (Arkell 1944). The Sudanese people was framed as a passive audience of archaeological knowledge that made up the national history.

Secondly, the legislation for the protection of past remains formalised the separation between the people and spaces and objects from the past. The Antiquities Ordinances was promulgated in 1905, in the first decade of the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium period (1898-1955). It defined what is worthy of preservation as the national heritage and who is the rightful expert to investigate, narrate and decide about handling and preservation of these remains and research outcomes. Archaeological sites and objects effectively came under the ownership of the colonial administration, while western archaeologists were the expert, given permission to excavate, 'partage' the excavated objects with the administration, store data and decide how to disseminate the research results. In places that were recognised archaeological, some local activities such as re-using of stone blocks were banned without consideration of the local significance of the activities, and needs, interests, connections, values in continuity of heritage activities (cf. Larson 2006, 67). Instead, local residents were often spoken about as the ones who damage archaeological remains and guards were placed to prevent destructive activities. Archaeological sites became the space that belonged to the administration and archaeologists

whose expertise were recognised. In turn, they were separated from those who have cultural, ancestral, social or geographical associations with these places for generations.

This structure of separation between the archaeological sites, practice, production of knowledge and local people has been largely inherited to this date, 64 years after the independence. What is the major force that allowed the situation? Although an increasing number of experienced Sudanese archaeologists lead their own projects and teach in universities, different issues that tied to socio-political environment of the country are relevant. For instance, a long-term, multiple political instabilities, a severe lack of the budget allocation to archaeological research in the government and universities, challenges in access to intellectual resources, scientific facilities and training, and a critical review of the antiquities law that has not materialised. On the other hand, and, more importantly, a lack of critical self-reflection of the disciplinary practice in archaeology and normalisation of the colonial practice among western archaeologists and local people is the factor. The coloniality that continues on can be found in the normalised absence of the locals in the knowledge production. A lack of awareness among archaeologists about local perceptions, knowledge of the past and the location of archaeology within communities' heritage.

### **Recent development**

In contrast to North America, Australia and some southern African countries, western archaeologists in Sudan had not been challenged by local communities or the government to explore an alternative, more inclusive and participatory approach to practice archaeology until recently. A wake-up call for archaeologists was perhaps the protest of the Manasir people against archaeological salvage projects resulted from the construction of a hydraulic dam (Merowe dam) and a gradual expulsion of all archaeologists in the area between 2006 and 2008 (Kleinitz and Näser 2011). The motivation of the Manasir people was mostly political, to make their voice heard by the government for the insufficient compensation for the loss of their land. However, a lack of communications between archaeologists and local communities contributed to growing distrust (*ibid*). It signalled international archaeologists active in Sudan that archaeology cannot and should not be practiced without forming a relationship with residents living around the sites. It does not mean that any sort of relationships was not formed in the past. Rather, it was work-driven, archaeology-related relationships (e.g. limited with excavation workers), so that archaeologists remained strangers for the large part of local communities. More importantly, the need, interests, and values of archaeology among the communities were not sought, and the research outcomes were rarely shared.

A further shift toward more inclusive archaeology was brought by several projects that employed community archaeological approach. Funded by a bi-lateral cooperation project, Qatar-Sudan Archaeological Project (QSAP)<sup>1</sup>, five archaeological projects at Meroe Royal City, el Kurru, Mograt island, Musawaraat es Sufra and Amara West embarked on community archaeology, exploring local perceptions, interests, technology and knowledge about archaeological sites that the individual projects were working on, with differing aims and application of varied methods with different communities (Humphirs and Bradshaw 2017; Näser and Tully 2019; Kleiniz 2019). Amara West is where I conducted the ethnographic research and community engagement programmes as a part of the British Museum Amara West Research project. Seven different engagement programmes were carried out between 2014-2018.

### **Community engagement programmes around Amara West/Abkanisa**

Amara West has been known as an ancient administrative centre, established during the reign of Seti I, around 1300 BCE when Egyptian pharaohs colonised Kush or Upper Nubia. The settlement and two associated cemeteries have been investigated by two British teams; in 1938-50 by London-based Egypt Exploration Society and in 2008-2019 by the British Museum. The site is known as Abkanisa among local communities, the place name pre-date the first excavation, and is the local identifier. There are local stories and memories associated with the place, while residents living in the vicinity, across the river (Abri town and Amara village) and on the island (Ernetta), consider it as the place their ancestors inhabited before moving to where they currently live. In the communities where the majority of the populations in the local communities self-identify themselves as Sikoot Nubians, Amara West/Abkanisa is a part of Nubian heritage.

The methodology of the community engagement programmes at Amara West has evolved along the way, can be divided into two phases. The first phase is characterised by outreach approach in which the programmes were designed to share the archaeological knowledge, initiated by the archaeological project. It means that what method, media, language to use and what information to share in the programmes were determined by the archaeologists. The local people are passive audience and their perceptions, needs and interests are not integrated. The programmes included public talks, site visits and distribution of the book written by the archaeological project. The outreach approach is the most common form of archaeological community engagement that has little changed since the colonial period. Although it is a top-

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<sup>1</sup> QSAP funded over 40 Sudanese and international archaeological projects between 2013-2019.

down, one-way communication of the archaeological knowledge, it later revealed at Amara West that the local people select segments of the archaeological information and added to their existing knowledge. In other words, the archaeological knowledge was integrated into the local knowledge.

The second phase was collaborative work in which the local people and archaeologists came together to create heritage resources. The local knowledge, perceptions, needs and the archaeological knowledge are integrated into two heritage resources: Nubian podcast and a local heritage book for children. These resources were not only integrated the two different knowledges but also attended the local concerns regarding their heritage, particularly the language survival (Nubiin) and a lack of knowledge and interests about heritage among the young generations.

The programmes shifted toward collaboration because the experiences of the outreach programmes helped to start changing the mind-sets of both archaeologists and local people and created an avenue of collaboration. Prior to the engagement programmes, the local residents thought that the archaeologists would not want to talk to them, while the archaeologists assumed, they had a good relationship with the communities as they hire local men and women during their fieldwork and worked together. However, the relationship did not go beyond the work-driven circle and the results of the research had not been shared from the project, except a Sudanese Nubian archaeologist from the local area explained about archaeology and answered questions from the communities regarding the project. On the other hand, local communities were silent, as if to say 'this is how archaeology is conducted. The foreigners do not understand about us'. A lack of interactions between local communities and archaeologists had been a norm for both sides.

The engagement programmes started with my and the project's assumption that the communities may not be interested in our work because the site is an ancient Egyptian town. Amara West for archaeologists is an ancient space, the space that was lived over 3000 years ago, and now quiet and dead. It is generally associated with other contemporaneous sites and the pharaonic invasion to Nubia which resulted in cultural entablement of ancient Egypt and Nubia, evident in lifeways and funeral practice (Spencer 2010; Binder 2017). Nubian culture was clearly identified at Amara West. Yet, it is predominately considered as an ancient Egyptian site with which the archaeologists did not find a direct relevance to the present-day communities. Further, as specified in excavation permission, Amara West is the study site for this archaeological project, so that the research focus was extensively on this limited space. These

archaeological understanding of the place was shared with local people through the outreach programmes. Their questions and reactions to them led me to understand Amara West was seen as a heritage place.

The beginning of the programmes was a learning opportunity for the archaeologists about local perceptions. The most appreciated benefit of the programmes among the communities was that the communities received the information from the archaeological project, according to the evaluation survey I conducted in 2018. As the quote above articulates, it is perceived that archaeologists have a different set of knowledge about their heritage. The programmes also played a role of a conversation starter with broader groups of people in communities – teachers, women, students, and elders in different villages, beyond the one that the project was based. It triggered more frequent interactions. Some of them became more proactive and had honest conversations with me about how they witnessed a lack of communication with the project, how they felt excavated objects were taken away from the communities and wondered if they were exported to London. They also understood that I was interested in their heritage, they showed me different heritage objects preserved in their houses, introduced me to the elders who shared oral histories of the communities with me.

### **Situating Amara West in the sphere of Nubian heritage through collaboration**

What is Nubian heritage? Heritage is not a specific thing or action in Nubia but made up of different aspects and things in everyday life. It is a living concept that accommodates changes and needs to be narrated in a holistic perception within a lived-experience. The people in the communities gave me various answers to this question during the interviews. It ranges from the language (Nubiin), traditional house, household objects, cemetery, irrigation systems, food and cooking, songs and music, to a certain personal quality (e.g. honesty and peacefulness). It also includes archaeological sites such as Amara West. However, none of these aspects that were mentioned by interviewee local residents are isolated to one another. Rather, associations between them, and stories and collective memories make them heritage. More importantly, the concept is embedded in a sense of connection with the present-day communities, family and/or personal. The need of link with the current living communities is evident in the gap of the narratives about Amara West/Abkanisa.

The outreach programmes led me to understand Amara West as heritage, though it turned out to be a partial understanding about how they situate the place within their local heritage during



the collaborative work. When I co-created a children's book about local heritage<sup>2</sup>, the archaeological and local perceptions of archaeological sites intersected but also clashed over conceptions of time and space concerning 'heritage'. With the understanding of Amara West as a heritage place, I suggested to include Amara West in the local heritage book during the discussion with three local collaborators about the content topics. No one disagreed the place as a heritage place. However, how to present it was a matter of discussion. The place, Abkanisa, for the communities does not have a clear boundary but is a boundless and integral part of the landscape. This not only means Abkanisa is a part of heritage but also other archaeological sites are also within the landscape. The significance of these sites as an ancestral place is shared, but residents of different villages and town expressed a stronger attachment to a specific site. It depends on which site is most associated with personal and collective memories and folktales shared in each of these villages and town. Thus, Abakanisa cannot be presented alone in the local heritage book.

The other issue was a sense of time. It is unquestionable for the community collaborators that these archaeological sites are 'ancestral' places. This connection is also expressed in a community-authored narrative about Amara West, Nubian podcast. The narrator remarks the archaeological project is investigating 'our (community's)' history and it presents how the Nubian people contribute to the history of the humankind<sup>3</sup>. However, tracing back the time to 1300 BCE, there was an issue. One of them mentioned the story of the archaeological sites cannot directly connect to the present community's life without having another story in between – a story of Moses. There are several fragmentary stories associated to Moses in Sudanese Nubia, including in these communities around Amara West. However, regrettably, we were not able to find any persons in the communities who could inform us about it within the timeframe of the funding, so that it was not reflected in the book. After all, it was agreed among the collaborators (co-authors) to add three archaeological sites that the communities are most attached with.

### **Bringing people together**

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<sup>2</sup> The bilingual (English and Arabic) local heritage book, *Life in the Heart of Nubia*, was co-authored by Shereen Ahmed, Hassan Sorta, Fekri Hassan Taha and Tomomi Fushiya. Available: [https://britishmuseumamarawestblog.files.wordpress.com/2017/04/life-in-the-heart-of-nubia\\_childrens-book-2017\\_english-compressed.pdf](https://britishmuseumamarawestblog.files.wordpress.com/2017/04/life-in-the-heart-of-nubia_childrens-book-2017_english-compressed.pdf) (Accessed on 07/11/2020)

<sup>3</sup> The story of the Nubian Podcast was created by the narrator, Fekri Hassan Taha, in the local language, Nubiin with English subtitles. Available: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rcjYzEbJnNc&t=101s> (Accessed on 07/11/2020)

De-colonial shift should be seen as a mutual process that affect both the colonisers and colonised, not a one-side process that denies one over the other. Particularly in Sudanese archaeology, the accumulated information stored in western institutions should be shared with Sudanese archaeologists and the people living around the original places from which it was taken. The process toward de-colonial could begin from recognition of the presence of the internal (local) and external (archaeological) knowledges, and learn from the other's knowledge. This process can be or should be initiated in a people-centred way. It is not the knowledges or heritage objects themselves that could communicate and move toward de-colonial world, but it is through people. My experiences at Amara West/Abkanisa did not end in outreach approach was because interactions between local people and the archaeologists, including myself, increased. Through these interactions, we both came to be aware the knowledges and bias of each other, eventually paved the way to collaboration. Collaboration brings people together who have been separated and placed in hierarchy to the same level where dialogues could take place.

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