Exploring attitudes towards the archaeological past: Two case studies from majority Muslim communities in the Nile valley

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> "You should know that I am a Muslim brother, but that I am still interested in the past."[1]

> "I, Mua'awia Osman Al-Awad Al-Bashir, am part of the history of archaeology in Sudan."[2]

Abstract:

There is a dearth of studies on intercultural dynamics in Southwest Asian and North African archaeology, not least since conventional narratives assert that present-day majority Muslim communities in these regions are not interested in the pre-Islamic past. In this paper I argue that, despite seemingly overcoming such positions, collaborative projects may actually exacerbate them through perceiving local communities as deficient, in need of being taught and re-united with "their" heritage. Using data from two current projects in Sudan, I explore actual motivations of local publics to engage with the archaeologically approachable past and the interests they voice vis-à-vis archaeological heritage. I suggest that emphasizing these dimensions effects a shift in how non-archaeological partners in collaborative projects are conceptualized. This opens new ground for engagement, as changing perceptions impact on interactions and, in consequence, power relations between protagonists.

Keywords: Community engagement, collaborative archaeology, visitor survey, majority Muslim societies, pre-Islamic past, Sudan, Egypt, Nile valley

Introduction

Community or collaborative archaeology has become an established field in global archaeology in the last fifty years (Tully, 2007: 157–158; 2019; Thomas, 2017: 18–19). While many of its concepts and procedures have been developed in social and political contexts in which descendant communities were in a directly disenfranchised position due to colonial expansions, archaeologists have recognized it as a relevant engagement also in other parts of the world. The multitude of contexts and approaches has shown that no overarching definition of what community archaeology is, and indeed of what communities are, can be found, or should even be sought (Byrne, 2012: 26–27; Moshenska and Dhanjal, 2012: 1). But despite this variability, some recurrent constellations can be identified and traced to similar social and historical contexts. One such context is societies with a colonial past and a present in which a link with aspects of the past forming the focus of archaeological interest is not a prominent part of identity building on a national or community level, as has been suggested for a number of majority Muslim societies in the Middle East and North Africa (Tully, 2009: 69; Damick and Lash, 2013: 148–149; Lorenzon and Zermani, 2016: 185–186; Bradshaw, 2017; cf. Gillot 2010: 11). In this specific context, community archaeology has been much slower in taking root, navigating

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[1] Statement by a Sudanese visitor to the pyramid cemetery at Begrawiya, July 2018.
[2] Statement by a guard at the Royal City of Meroe, the third generation in his family to hold this position, December 2017.

uncomfortably between the state-sanctioned accommodation of archaeology and a persisting alienation of many individuals and communities.

Present-day publics and the archaeologically approachable past in the Nile valley

Egypt and riverine Sudan share substantial parts of the history of their archaeological investigation. The exploration and exploitation of their historical monuments and archaeological sites developed in parallel to the establishment of colonial control from the early 19th century onwards (Trigger, 1984, 1994; Edwards, 2004: 33–34; Doyon, 2018; Näser, forthcoming). Western protagonists laid claim to these resources, seeing themselves as the heirs of the 'civilizing achievements' connected to them (for Egypt see Reid, 2002; Scham, 2003; Colla, 2007). Through these configurations, the archaeology of the Nile valley and the archaeologically accessible pasts of Egypt and Sudan became a field of imperialist aspiration and colonial domination, and the colonizing societies have "controlled cultural production about it ever since" (Scham, 2003: 173).

Local communities were largely excluded from this arena. Two hundred years of disciplinary practice steeped in orientalist and colonial perspectives were pervasive and widely successful in naturalizing both the Western presence and the alienation of large parts of the local populations (for some early manifestations of this discourse see Georg 2018: 53–55). In consequence, while hardly ever put in writing, many archaeologists – both Western and indigenous – today entertain the tacit assumption that Egyptian and Sudanese publics are not interested in the pre-Islamic past (see discussions in Meskell, 2000: 149; McDonald and Shaw, 2004: 123; El-Daly, 2005: VIII; Fushiya, 2010: 328; Doyon, 2015: 141–145; Tully, 2016: 184–185). Religion, in its historical trajectory since the coming of Islam and its manifestation in the majority Muslim faith of present-day communities, served as a convenient explanation for this, and archaeologists have done little to upset this notion and explore the actual relationships of present-day publics with the pre-Islamic past and its material remains (but see Tully and Hanna, 2013; Tully, 2016; Bradshaw, 2017; Doyon, 2018). The scarcity of research on this topic indicates that it rubs uncomfortably against disciplinary ethics and political correctness. I argue that there are complex dynamics at work which call for fresh conceptualisation and investigation.

A first aspect to consider is that the concept of 'archaeological heritage' itself is firmly rooted in the Western mindset and is a fairly recent addition to human ways of making sense of and appreciating the past. As part of what Smith (2006, 2012) calls the Authorized Heritage Discourse, it only gained global prominence in the wake of imperialist expansion in the last one hundred years (Silberman, 1995: 256–258). Non-Western societies were confronted with it as part of the colonial project and integrated it in their political, economic and social practices in different ways. In Egypt, political discourses made use of the Pharaonic past particularly in the first, pre-independence, decades of the 20th century (Hassan, 1998: 204–211; Wood, 1998; Reid, 2002: 6, 205–210, 2015: 109–136, 295–328). The UNESCO Campaign to Save the Monuments of Lower Nubia added another layer to the complex dynamics surrounding archaeological resources in the Nile valley (Carruthers, 2016; Meskell, 2018: 28–58). The campaign purported to rescue archaeological heritage for the global community, again largely bypassing local stakeholders. The essential message it reiterated was that the archaeological monuments of the Nile valley belong to the world, not to the Egyptians and the Sudanese. This multilateral rhetoric (Carruthers, 2016) reinforced the hold of international protagonists over the ancient past of the Nile valley, enhancing the Western grasp and the alienation of local populations in the post-colonial era (Meskell, 2018: 30, 43). In consequence, "other identifications, whether they be with other Arabs or with other Muslims, seem to have a greater hold over Egyptians today than does a feeling of kinship with the Egypt of the Pharaohs" (Wood, 1998: 186, commenting on the Mubarak era).

At the same time, Egypt and Sudan developed full-fledged professional bodies administering the archaeological affairs of both countries. By taking over former colonial administrative institutions after independence, they stepped into positions and practices which had been developed by their former

colonisers.[3] While the trajectory of these institutions up to the end of the UNESCO campaign has undergone some research (Reid, 2002, 2015; Carruthers, 2016), their younger history and present remain completely unstudied. I suggest that the adoption and reproduction of colonial ways of managing archaeological resources prevented these administrative bodies from developing successful ways to bridge the gaps into their own societies. Political and economic problems, including ineffective educational systems and bureaucratisation, further hamper the impact of these institutions. Despite all the motivation and hard work of individual employees, their activities have little effect on wider society. With regard to Egypt, Wood (1998: 195–196) has argued that it is political will to maintain the image of "Victorian archaeology", which serves Western publics, in order to support incoming-generating tourism.

While Egyptian and Sudanese archaeologists struggle with these conditions and starkly inadequate resources, foreign academics still dominate the field, relying on the effective structures put in place over the last two hundred years (Näser, forthcoming). Consequently, the interpretations of the past produced from archaeological evidence still largely follow Western objectives and narrative forms. This is certainly why they "continue to appear so foreign" in many social contexts in present-day Egypt and Sudan (paraphrasing a statement on India by Trigger 1984: 368).

Some researchers have challenged the idea of the uninterested Egyptians and Sudanese. As evidence they enlisted the politically motivated discourses of Egyptian nation building in the first decades of the 20th century (Gershoni and Jankowski, 1986; Wood, 1998; Meskell, 2000; Mitchell, 2002: 181–183; El Shakry, 2007), alongside the ambivalent attitudes towards the Pharaonic past and its monuments expressed in Muslim religious and philosophical thought (Haarmann, 1996; Wood, 1998; El-Daly, 2005; Cooperson, 2010; Feener, 2017; Stephan, 2017). However, these aspects add relatively little to the question of how *present-day* Egyptians and Sudanese construct their individual and collective pasts, and which role archaeological narratives and archaeological remains play in these contexts. Regarding this, it is important to note that heritage values are not static and uniform through time and across different social groups. For example, civilian activists in post-Arab spring Egypt and 2019 Sudan asserted their interest in and appreciation of archaeological heritage and pre-Islamic pasts (Tully, 2016: 199–201; Kuol, 2019). Likewise, members of present-day Nubian communities in Egypt, Sudan and the diaspora identify as descendants of the ancient inhabitants of their homelands in the Middle Nile valley (e.g. Bradshaw, 2017: 145–153), though exactly to which facets and manifestations of the past they relate and how they integrate them into their identity constructions lacks detailed study (cf. Edwards, 2004: 51–56). I suggest that their main point of reference is the image of ancient Nubia created in the archaeological narratives and popularized in the wake of the UNESCO campaign, rather than indigenously transmitted traditions and representations (cf. Bradshaw, 2017: 152–153, 249–252 and an example in the second case study below), but this scenario needs analytical substantiation. An appropriation of aspects of the Authorized Heritage Discourse, which in part mirrors this scenario, has been observed in connection with resistance by members of the local communities against the terms of their resettlement during the construction of the Merowe Dam above the Fourth Nile Cataract in the mid-2000s (Näser and Kleinitz, 2012).

At the same time, recent research with diverse Sudanese communities indicates that their historical knowledge primarily evolves around family and tribal affiliations (Bradshaw, 2017: passim, esp. 93–100, 2018: 189–190; Näser and Tully, 2019). These dimensions are generally not acknowledged by Western archaeologists because they are almost exclusively shared and passed on through oral

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[3] The Egyptian Service d'Antiquités was founded in 1858 with Auguste Mariette as its first director. Its upper echelons stayed in French hands until 1953, when Mostafa Amer became the first Egyptian director of the then re-named Department of Antiquities (Colla, 2007; Carruthers, 2016: 39). The first Antiquities and Museums Ordinance for Sudan was drafted in 1905, providing for an Acting Conservator of Antiquities. The Sudan Antiquities Service was established in 1939. Its first director, Anthony J. Arkell, had been a member of the Sudan Political Service since 1920 (Ille, 2018). Thabit Hassan Thabit became the first Sudanese Commissioner for Archaeology in 1960, four years after Sudan's political independence (Näser, forthcoming).

traditions, and most Western archaeologists lack the interest and sufficient command of Arabic to engage with them (compare Abu-Khafajah and Rababeh, 2012 for a similar context). But also tangible interactions of present-day communities with archaeological resources have received almost no attention from archaeologists, presumably because they have not been considered engagements drawing on and generating legitimate knowledge (Haig-Brown and Archibald, 1996: 250; compare Bashir 2017, 15–16). For example, Sufi traditions have consistently incorporated archaeological monuments, giving them meaning as *baniyat*, holy places, which carry *baraka*, blessing (Humoudi, 1977; Wood, 1998: 187–189; Näser, 2007: 127–128; Stauth, 2008; Bradshaw, 2017: 177–182; Weschenfelder and Becker, 2018: 80–81). These appropriations go either unnoticed or receive a merely anecdotal mention in archaeological literature (e.g. Dreyer and Swelim, 1982: 85). With the notable exception of three contributions by Osman (1992), Glazier (2005) and Bradshaw (2017: 173–177), the same is true for so-called folk tales which integrate archaeological sites and monuments in present landscapes of meaning (compare again Abu-Khafajah and Rababeh 2014: 77–81).

In sum, the archaeology in the Nile valley unfolds in an arena which is characterized by repercussions of the colonial past. They do not only surface in the blind spots of archaeological perception and the discourse about the supposed lack of interest of present-day Egyptians and Sudanese in the archaeologically accessible past. The naturalization of exploitive configurations has also led to a specific view of present-day communities. They are perceived as 'deficient', lacking knowledge and the faculties to appreciate archaeological heritage, and in consequence in need of being 'taught' (see Merriman, 2004: 5–8 for a first critical evaluation of this understanding). This notion not only ignores non-archaeological forms of knowledge of the past and of cultural strategies of making sense of it, some of which I have shortly discussed in the previous paragraph; at least implicitly, it also carries forward colonial discourses of Western hegemony and superiority. As Chandler and Reid (2018: 263) have argued in their deconstruction of the concept of the "indigenous": however defined, as long as it is constructed in opposition to Western normativity, it runs the risk "to valorize disempowering conceptions of subjectivity".

Within the outlined framework of the 'deprived' community, there is a clear idea about the aim of community projects. By offering education, they should assist local communities to "re-connect" with "their" heritage (e.g. Lorenzon and Zermani, 2016: 184; Moser et al., 2002: 221). Often, this approach is not disinterested. Instead, it is hoped that community projects will enhance "the efficacy on heritage preservation" (Lorenzon and Zermani, 2016: 184; Moser et al., 2002: 223), for "when people care about their past, they will do the utmost to protect it" (Lorenzon and Zermani, 2016: 184; Fushiya, 2010). While I applaud community-oriented projects for trying to transcend practices which ignore present-day contexts of archaeological intervention, it is still necessary to critically reflect on their agendas and interests (Pyburn, 2003, 2007; La Salle, 2010). It is a balancing act: while we are called to acknowledge the exploitive character of archaeology in the Nile valley and the effects it has had on how present-day communities interact with testimonies of the past, we must also be careful not to take it into the future by viewing present-day communities as in need of enlightenment. Urging them to adopt a position which essentially resembles ours simply means imposing our values on others in an imperialist fashion once again.

To counter this, community engagement should be open-minded and open-ended. It should also be honest with regard to its intentions and potential outcomes. Funding bodies often ask for the impact of proposed projects. But can community projects in Egypt and Sudan regularly create "economic opportunities" (Fushiya, 2010: 326; Moser et al., 2002: 221) and lead to "sustainable development" (Fushiya, 2010: 326; Lorenzon and Zermani, 2016: 184)? To do so they would have to be able to transcend the wider social, economic and political conditions in which they operate. I doubt that more than very few projects manage to effect major change in this respect (compare Byrne, 2012: 29–30; Bradshaw, 2018). I suggest that it is therefore necessary to consider both the impact collaborative projects can reasonably have in any given context, and how non-archaeological partners and their roles in these projects are conceptualized. In the following, results from two field projects in Sudan are

presented as a basis for discussing these points. The Mograt Island Collaborative Project evolved around the interest members of a local community voiced vis-à-vis our archaeological work and the archaeologically approachable past on their island. Building on its findings, a survey at the National Museum in Khartoum and the World Heritage site of Meroe aimed to improve understanding of Sudanese visitors' motivation to engage with archaeological heritage and their knowledge about it. The results of both projects do more than simply dispel the wholesale notion of present-day majority Muslim[4] communities being uninterested in the pre-Islamic past. Moving beyond conventional community archaeology frameworks in their analysis and drawing on research from other fields like museum studies establishes new perspectives on why and how local audiences engage with archaeological narratives. I suggest that this opens spaces for new questions and, potentially, new answers and thus identifies new ground for engagement.

The Mograt Island Collaborative Project

The Mograt Island Archaeological Mission (MIAMi) is a long-term project which aims to explore the archaeology of Mograt, the largest island in the Nile. It currently operates in a five-year funding scheme by the Qatar-Sudan Archaeological Project (QSAP) which will come to a close in 2019 (www.mogratarchaeology.com).[5] The aim of its community-oriented component is to collaboratively explore the interests which people on Mograt have in the past and to develop resources which meet these interests and can be used by both the inhabitants of the island and other publics.[6]

The Mograt Island Collaborative Project started in 2014 with a first season of fieldwork on the island. Following the superordinate goal, concrete aims of the first season were to establish dialogue with local inhabitants, introduce the archaeological mission and the community project, and learn whether and how inhabitants would want to engage with it and which issues they would like to see on its agenda (Tully, 2014). As publicity of the project grew, formal and informal interviews, home and site visits, visits to schools and other community fora were proposed by residents. From these, a series of key issues arose. They could be divided largely into an interest relating to the work of archaeologists in general and more specific queries regarding the history of Mograt and its connections to the wider history of Sudan. While these points were addressed directly in the encounters, they also formed the basis for organizing events on the island, developing the project website www.mogratarchaeology.com and compiling a first draft of a bilingual Arabic-English publication. A second season of fieldwork in 2015 served primarily to evaluate and expand this draft (Tully, 2015). Focus groups were conducted in three schools to collect feedback and work on the content of the envisaged publication. Based on this, "Discovering Mograt Island Together – بنا نستكشق معاً جزيرة مقرات هيا" (Tully and Näser, 2016) was finalized. After an interruption in funding, the book was printed in 2017 and taken to Mograt in spring 2018.

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[4] The phrase "majority Muslim" mirrors the description which Bradshaw (2017: 94–100, 132–145) gives of the role of (Sunni) Islam in public and private life of present-day Sudanese. In the projects presented here, data on personal faith were not collected (for reasons see Näser and Tully, 2019), but both projects were conducted recognizing that members of the social contexts approached generally and without saying identify as Muslims. As Bradshaw (2017: 132–133) states for the communities of her study, "religion (although not 'sect' or 'order') is one of the few things that unites all the residents, regardless of age, livelihood and *gabīla*. […] Islam underpins every aspect of life […]".

[5] For the context, and the technicalities, of this project, see in detail Näser and Tully, 2019 and Tully, 2019, 44–46. While the QSAP funding was connected to the express request for site management and public engagement (http://www.qsap.org.qa), QSAP did not call for actual community engagement. The introduction of collaborative approaches and the direction they took was thus dependent on the personal commitment of individual project directors (cf. Bradshaw, 2017: 269–270, 283–285).

[6] For a general survey of collaborative projects in Egypt and Sudan and the position of the Mograt Collaborative Project in this range, see Tully, 2016, and Näser and Tully, 2019.

As the feedback collected is discussed in greater detail elsewhere (Näser and Tully, 2019), only a short summary is given here. Reactions to the book were enthusiastic throughout. Most respondents were overwhelmed by the very existence of a publication solely about Mograt. For most schoolchildren, participation in the project was the first time they had heard of archaeology or realized that archaeologists were working on their island. Very few children had ever visited any of the archaeological sites discussed in the book (Figure 1). After reading it, they wanted to go and see them. Integrating the content of the book with previous knowledge, they learnt about new peoples, periods and cultures. Many children spoke about how the book had made them to see their island in new ways, inspired pride and created a desire for further information and collaboration regarding Mograt's history. Among teachers, there was consensus that the book would be a significant aid in teaching. The current curriculum contains nothing specific to local history. Any content about Mograt comes from individual teachers' knowledge. Several elements which had specifically been suggested for the book in the collaborative process of its development, namely a timeline, a map of Mograt and Arabic-English word swap boxes (Figures 2–3), were judged to be particularly beneficial. Many respondents also expressed pleasure at being actively acknowledged in the book. The quotes from schoolchildren who had participated in the book's development (Figure 3) triggered feelings of pride and ownership.

Figures 1–3 about here

Several people discussed wider implications which the book had for them. One respondent felt it addressed a sense of belonging together among fellow Sudanese. In others, it bolstered nationalist pride vis-à-vis the neighboring Egyptians. Sentiments like these highlight that different dynamics can spring from collaborative projects. How to deal with interpretations unwelcome to archaeologists has not received systematic attention in evaluations of community engagement so far. It is a point which is important to follow up and reflect on in future research. Overall, the book and the process of its production, which arose from the questions and perspectives of local residents, rather than from the expectations of archaeologists and preconceived ideas of what members of the community should 'learn' about 'their' heritage, were effective in sharing perspectives on the past and starting discussions. The vast majority of those involved expressed a keen interest in learning more about the archaeological narratives and having more resources on that topic (Näser and Tully, 2019).

What impact the Mograt book will have over time remains to be seen and should, despite the enthusiasm from all sides, not be overestimated. So far, it has acted as a springboard for consultation about further projects on the island and beyond (Näser and Tully, 2019). Proposals from Sudanese stakeholders included the development of resources for schools, a book in Arabic about the wider history of Sudan and the establishment of a museum. The latter is particularly interesting, as most people involved in the Mograt project had never visited a museum. Several of these suggestions are currently being followed up. This includes the production of additional teaching materials, the generation of an Arabic version of the project website and first steps towards developing a colonial period building offered by the commissioner of Abu Hamed, the local district town, into a museum (Näser and Tully, 2019).

Visitor survey at the Sudan National Museum and the World Heritage site of Meroe

The planning for the next steps of the Mograt Island Collaborative Project, which were to include the generation of resources for wider audiences, exposed glaring gaps in research regarding the types of knowledge of the archaeologically approachable past Sudanese publics commanded and their motivations for engagement with it. In order to augment the understanding developed on Mograt, we decided to target a different group, namely one who already engaged with archaeological heritage. Consequently we launched a survey among Sudanese visitors to the National Museum in Khartoum

and one of the Sudanese World Heritage sites, namely the Royal Cemetery and the Royal City at Meroe (https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1336; Figure 4). As the results of this project are presented for the first time, some details will be given here. Fieldwork was conducted in two periods in December 2017–January 2018 and July–August 2018. The first period was one with a potentially unusual visitor turnout as it included a major public holiday, namely 1 January, the Sudanese Independence Day (Figure 5). This was deemed appropriate as the aim of the study was not to establish a representative quantitative pattern, but sample a wide cross-section of visitors. In all, 32 interviews were conducted. All interviewees were Sudanese, some resident in Sudan (n=28) and some living abroad (n=4). Alongside the 29 visitors, three members of the non-academic staff at the site of Meroe were interviewed, as they expressed a keen interest in the study. The selection of participants was arbitrary: potential interviewees were approached in the museum garden and at the entrances to the two sites. Care was taken, however, to include individuals of all gender and age groups.[7]

Figure 4 about here

It is noteworthy that all visitors whom we approached were ready to give an interview.[8] A question-naire was used and completed in all instances. During the interview process it emerged that it would not be possible to conduct one-to-one interviews in the strict sense, as all visitors had come to the museum or the sites in groups or at least pairs (Figures 4, 6), and the discussion always attracted other members of the party who joined to listen or to comment. However, in most interviews one person emerged as the main respondent or was established in this role by their group at the outset of the interview. Often, this 'lead interviewee' was a person of authority in the group, e.g. the head teacher in cases of school visits or the father of the family in cases of private visits. In other instances, the 'lead interviewee' was considered the most knowledgeable by the members of the group, e.g. because she or he was a history teacher or was known to have the biggest interest in the topic. In that sense, most interviews were group interviews with a 'lead interviewee'.

Figures 5–6 about here (if it works better, Figure 5 could also be put directly after Figure 4)

The first question concerned the reason for visiting the museum or the site. 28% of those interviewed stated that they wanted to learn about the past, another 28% answered that they wanted to teach the past to the children or other family members who were with them (Figures 4, 6). The interviewees thus considered historical knowledge an educational resource which can, and should, be acquired and passed on through visits to museums and sites. 50% of those interviewed on 1 January 2018 mentioned Independence Day as the reason for coming to the museum, indicating that the visit had the character of an event (Figures 5–6).

The second question asked how visitors rated their own knowledge. 56% judged that they had a good understanding of the history and the archaeology of Sudan. 25% said that they had some knowledge,

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[7] The only group excluded were minors, as UCL ethics approval obtained for the project did not cover underage individuals. Interviews were conducted in Arabic by the author, with Rehab Ismail Alfaki, Osman Khaleel Elawad Karrar and Mohamed Mohamed Eltayeb Badri assisting in the translation, or in English by the author, depending on the priorities expressed by the interviewee.

[8] The only group of persons who did not consent to interviews were the guards at the National Museum whom we approached after their colleagues at Meroe had signalled an express interest in being part of the project. Upon discussion, the museum guards consulted a superior who came to the conclusion that interviews should not be given by members of staff without written permission from the head of the museum section of the National Corporation for Antiquities and Museums which was not sought.

while 19% thought that they had no good knowledge of these issues. Interestingly, this self-assessment did not correlate with the interviewees' actual knowledge: many respondents in the first group discovered during the interview that they could not answer questions about individual aspects of Sudanese history. Those who stated that they had some knowledge turned out to be the most knowledgeable group. Regarding the source of their knowledge, most interviewees mentioned school education and family. Some related the latter explicitly to information about their more personal past, i.e. the lifeways of grandparents or information connected to tribal affiliation (*gabila*; for an extensive discussion of this term see Bradshaw, 2017: 93–105). Less frequently, books and tertiary education were mentioned. One respondent who identified himself as Dongolawi Nubian explicitly referred to "Nubia, Corridor to Africa" (Adams 1977) as a source of knowledge, which underlines the outstanding role of this book (Näser, forthcoming). Two interviewees mentioned Charles Bonnet, one of the leading figures of Sudanese archaeology in recent decades, who lectured widely about his work at his excavation site in Kerma and in Khartoum. This shows that even an individual commitment can have an impact. Two interviewees reported that they had grown up in the vicinity of archaeological sites and related their knowledge of them, confirming that these sites matter to them and that they can be an anchor for outreach. This and the following findings relativize results of a study undertaken among residents of the World Heritage site of Meroe by Rebecca Bradshaw who noted in their narratives a "complete absence of any connection […] to the archaeological sites upon and around which they live" (Bradshaw, 2017: 173, cf. also pp. 154, 242 and Bradshaw, 2018). This divergence highlights the need for more case studies to better understand the dynamics which unfold in this field and the factors which impact on them (cf. already Humphris and Bradshaw, 2017: 209–211).

The question of whether the past was important to them received a strongly positive response from 97% of those interviewed. It should be noted that respondents related their answer to the *entire* past, not just individual periods such as the Islamic era. This association is a conscious one and is mirrored in the appreciation of pre-Islamic periods evident throughout the interviews. The respondent who had read "Nubia, Corridor to Africa" elaborated on this: "You should know that I am a Muslim brother, but that I am still interested in the past."

The question as to why respondents thought that the past was important produced an interesting range of answers: 33% of respondents (n=10) established a connection to their national identity and citizenship. Their answers included "because it is our country", "it is my roots", "it is my identity", "it is our backbone", "it is running in our blood", "it is our ancestors". 16% said that knowledge of the past would help to build the future. Two interviewees stated that the past is important to them because they feel they "belong" to it and "are part" of it. Several interviewees took a competitive outlook: four stated that the Sudanese civilization is one of the oldest in the world and that this should be shown or proved to the world. Others suggested that the Sudanese civilization and its monuments, namely the Meroitic pyramids, are older than the Egyptian one(s) or asked my opinion on that issue. My reasoning that the Egyptian pyramids are older was politely received but I had the impression that it did not make an impact. This example shows how historical narratives play different roles for individuals and social groups in different biographical and social situations. Nationalist sentiments arising from Sudan's colonial past and Egypt's role in it clearly overruled my archaeological interpretation. The constructive and historically sensitive engagement with such constellations is a major challenge for future collaborative projects in Sudan.

The next set of questions was designed to understand interviewees' knowledge of the major periods of Sudanese history and in which one they were most interested. The results can be summarized as follows:

- Almost all of those interviewed were confident about their knowledge of the 1956 independence of Sudan and the Mahdiyya, i.e. the 1880–1890s uprising of the Sudanese against the Turks, and de-facto English, rule. Most respondents readily related dates, places and figures involved in these events. This is not surprising, given that the Mahdiyya has been a focal point of national identity building in political and educational contexts since independence (Guta, 2009; Seri-Hersch, 2009).

- Only a few interviewees had knowledge of the periods before the Mahdiyya. A chronological understanding was almost completely absent. When respondents related isolated pieces of information, they often mixed them up. Thus, the Bronze Age Kerma period was repeatedly associated with the 1st millennium BC/AD pyramids at Meroe. Again, there were exceptions. For example, when discussing the Islamic period one interviewee correctly stated that the oldest preserved mosque in Sudan is in Old Dongola.

- Several of those interviewed remarked on the chronological relationship between the Sudanese and the Egyptian pyramids. All but one either expressed the view that the Sudanese pyramids were older or took the opportunity to consult me on whether this was the case. A variation of this theme is the assumption that the Sudanese 'civilization' is older than the Egyptian one, an idea to which 20% of the interviewees referred.

- Several respondents discussed the individual periods, particularly the younger ones, in an evaluative light. The vast majority rated the Mahdiyya as positive. That this understanding is, however, not universal is indicated by the fact that one interviewee called Muhammad Ahmad, the Mahdi, a "liar". A more diverse evaluation was connected with the colonial period of Anglo-Egyptian Sudan. Several of the interviewed mentioned the achievements of the British in the infrastructural and educational sectors. One interviewee suggested that independence had come too early, another felt that the Sudanese had not been "mature" enough for it. One wished for the British to come back. One interviewee wanted to learn from me whether I thought that independence was a "gift" of the British to Sudan or an actual achievement of the Sudanese. Despite these diverse views, all those who discussed the 1956 independence expressed their pride in it.

Almost all voiced a keen interest in learning more about the history of Sudan; the two exceptions were members of the non-academic staff at the World Heritage site in Meroe who felt that they already knew enough. Prompted as towhich period they wanted to learn more about, 22% answered "all of them"; 28% mentioned earlier periods, i.e. Stone Age to Pharaonic; 22% the Islamic period, the Mahdiyya and independence. The Napatan (n=0), Meroitic (n=1) and Medieval (n=1) periods sparked the least interest.

52% the visitors interviewed stated that they had no knowledge of archaeological work and how archaeologists learn about the past. 14% were undecided as to whether they knew something about it, but could not relate any information pertaining to archaeology when prompted. Only 34% stated that they had an idea of what archaeology is and what archaeologists do, e.g. dig holes, find pottery and skeletons etc. This knowledge had mainly been acquired through media, primarily TV, and was unspecific. Only a handful mentioned excavations.

A last series of questions concerned resources for learning about the past, introducing the Mograt Island Collaborative Project and the publication "Discovering Mograt Island Together – معاً جزيرة مقرات هيا بنا نستكشف". All those interviewed expressed a strong appreciation for the book and answered in the affirmative when asked whether they would give it to their children or children in their family. Without being specifically asked, many respondents underlined the need for more such resources. In order to plan the production of further resources, we asked what the interviewees thought was a reasonable price for the book and how much they would be prepared to pay for it. Five answered that it would be a priceless treasure, rhetorically underpinning their earlier statements about the need for more such resources. Actual figures varied from 10 to 300 SDG which primarily reflects the wide span of the economic resources of the interviewees.[9] Three expat respondents suggested prices between 10 and 20 USD for foreigners. Another question which produced a wide range of answers was whether future

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[9] Some interviewees without being prompted volunteered information about their financial situation when discussing this point. An employee in a governmental organisation and a member of the Faculty of Medicine of the University of Khartoum stated that they earn 1450 SDG and 9000 SDG respectively per month. Both reported that they supplement their salary with other income. For the wider economic context and income situations in current Sudan see Bradshaw, 2017: 101–135.

resources should be directed at younger children, teenagers and/or adults. 50% of respondents thought a book which would appeal to both teenagers and adults would be best. Most teachers suggested that a book should be targeted at teenagers. 44% of the interviewees advocated a book for younger children. 81% supported the idea of a website or social media resources in Arabic on top of print resources.

Integrating the results

The main finding of the two discussed projects is that members of the Sudanese public, at least from the demographics accessed in this research, voice a clear interest in the archaeologically approachable past. This interest includes both earlier historical periods and the Islamic era, as well as periods participants knew nothing about and periods with which they were familiar but wanted to learn more about. Three main motivations for visiting the National Museum and the sites of Meroe can be identified from interviewee responses:
- curiosity
- the wish to provide others, primarily children, with the opportunity to learn about the past
- the seeking of an experience and event.

This finding resonates with results from research in wider museum studies. Motivations for visiting museums and engaging in museum learning have so far been explored in Western contexts only (e.g. Falk et al., 1998; Falk, 2006). Falk (2006: 156–158) identified five main types of visitors which he characterizes as:
1. the explorer, who visits a museum "because of curiosity and/or a general interest in discovering more about the subject"
2. the facilitator, who visits "in order to satisfy the needs and desires" of a companion, very often their children
3. the professional/hobbyist who has a strong knowledge and a specific interest in the content of the museum
4. the experience seeker, a category often comprising tourists with a focus on recreation and activity who visit "in order to "collect" an experience, so that they could say they have "been there""
5. the spiritual pilgrim who "reflect[s], rejuvenate[s], or generally just bask[s] in the wonder of the place"; Falk (2009: 64) redefined this category as the recharger who seeks to "physically, emotionally, and intellectually recharge in a beautiful and refreshing environment".

In practice, visitor motivations often combine a number of these themes, with one being the dominant (Falk, 2006: 158, 2009: 85–88, 173, 188). A similar range of motivations has been recorded among visitors to archaeological sites in a US study (Ramos and Duganne, 2000: 22; cf. also Paardekoeper, 2012: 256–258).

Visitor motivations recorded in the survey at the National Museum in Khartoum and the archaeological sites of Meroe can mainly be classed in the categories of the "explorer", the "facilitator" and "the experience seeker". While the dimension of actively seeking out an experience is not as prominent in the case of outreach projects, participants in the feedback sessions on Mograt expressed a similar range of attitudes and emotions towards the publication and the entire collaborative project: curiosity, the wish to facilitate learning for others and the evocation of positive feelings such as pride and happiness deriving from this encounter. As is clear from the research cited above, these responses correspond closely to motivations detected in Western publics visiting museums and archaeological sites. While this finding is indicative rather than conclusive due to the small sample size, it still gives a good idea of why people engage with the National Museum, the sites at Meroe and the Mograt Island Collaborative Project.

In order to conceptualize how project participants interact with the offers made by archaeologists in these contexts, another concept from museum studies proves helpful. Research has underlined that people do not enter museums as "blank slates" (Doering and Pekarik, 1996: 20). They bring with them

their "entrance narratives", comprising personal histories, previous knowledge and past experiences (Doering and Pekarik, 1996; cf. McIntosh and Prentice, 1999: 607 for heritage sites). Research accords these entrance narratives a major influence on the outcome of visitor engagement. They "direct learning and behavior because visitors' perceptions of satisfaction will be directly related to experiences that resonate with their entering narrative" (Falk, 2006: 153; cf. Doering and Pekarik, 1996; Rounds, 2006). Studies have shown that these predispositions are self-reinforcing and determine the engagement to a degree which makes Falk (2006: 161) assert that "the visitor, not the institution, drives the visitor's experience in the museum". Transferred to the context of community projects, this means that project participants must not be seen as deficient or as blank slates. They bring their entrance narratives with them and we may expect that, notwithstanding the content offered or developed in a project, these narratives have a major influence on the outcome of the interaction.

These findings warn us against linking community projects in a simplistic way to expectations about knowledge acquisition, identity building and the reordering of heritage values in participants. This may be disconcerting, as we may feel that it diminishes the importance of these projects in terms of what they deliver and what they can achieve. But I suggest that stimulating curiosity and providing new experiences as well as emotional satisfaction are legitimate aims of engagement. Past research has acknowledged that communities are not uniform bodies, but vary in terms of age, ethnic affiliations, economic capacities and social positions (for Sudan see Bradshaw, 2017; Humphris and Bradshaw, 2017). Moreover, biographical situations change, and so do entrance narratives and motivations to engage with the past. Exploring this diversity and acknowledging a spectrum of interests in archaeological heritage among the people whom we address with our work may actually make our approaches to collaboration more sustainable. It can certainly help us to avoid a neocolonial perspective which prescribes project participants the position they should adopt vis-à-vis archaeological heritage. It also counters the neoliberal idea that the input of our projects will allow participants to change the conditions of their existence *ad hoc*. Whether a new way of engaging with the past is experienced as empowering and fundamental, or 'merely' as interesting and entertaining should be at the discretion of our partners in these projects. I suggest that embracing this recognition does more than simply prevent misunderstandings and frustrations in community engagement: it also allows us to think about how we can diversify our input in these projects and find a common language and shared interests with project partners.

Outlook: New ground for engagement

Perspectives discussed in this paper promote a shift in the conceptualization of non-archaeological partners in archaeological projects. As changing perceptions affect interaction and, consequently, power relations between protagonists, this opens new ground for engagement. To embrace the idea that local publics, present and future, may want to interact with archaeologists out of curiosity and for entertainment, that they may seek experiences reaffirming their entrance narratives and satisfying their interests, is a step towards recognizing them as empowered agents and acknowledging the complexities of their lives and the role that the archaeologically approachable past can reasonably play for them. The perspectives proposed here also move beyond the view of local partners as statically interested or not interested in archaeological narratives. They underline the processuality of engaging with the past. The children with whom we worked on Mograt and who visited the National Museum in Khartoum or the sites at Meroe will incorporate these experiences in their entrance narratives, perhaps finding and exploring new modes of engagement with the past when they grow up. Appreciation for archaeological heritage may become an additional way of knowing and learning about the past for them, or it may not. Linda Derry (2011: 541, 551) suggests that people engage with archaeology when it "becomes relevant, meaningful and personal, to their changing interests and daily lives". This is impressively illustrated by the second statement which I chose as an entry quote to this paper: Mua'awia Osman Al-Awad Al-Bashir, guard at the Royal City of Meroe for over thirty-five years,

was very clear about that archaeology is not only part of his life, but that he is also part of the history of archaeological exploration of Sudan.

In sum, the data from the two projects discussed emphasize one point: the enthusiasm of project participants to engage with the pre-Islamic past and the associated archaeological heritage on their own conditions. This perspective transcends the conventional rhetoric of both those who do not collaborate with present-day communities because of their supposed lack of interest and those who practise outreach with the understanding that communities 'need to be taught'. Starting from the interests and motivations of project partners, rather than from a fixed set of expectations about eventual project outcomes, may help to find new ground for dialogue and turn collaboration into an open-ended practice which is firmly anchored in the present and the social, political and economic complexities in which it operates. I suggest that the associated shift of perspective impacts on interactions and, in consequence, on power relations between protagonists. Thus, it may be one step towards tackling the colonial legacies which collaborative archaeology seeks to overcome.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declares no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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Figure 1   A teacher and pupils at Kalasaikal Bahri School studying a picture of al-Hilla fortress in the Mograt book. Source: Photo by Gareth Rees.

Figure 2   Residents of Mikaisir discussing the map of Mograt. Source: Photo by Gareth Rees.

Figure 3.   A page from the Mograt book with a word swap box, a quote and a photograph of children who played a part in developing the book. Source: Tully and Näser, 2016: 4–5.

Figure 4.   A family visiting the Royal Cemetery at Meroe, 29 December 2017. Source: Photo by the author.

Figure 5.   The Sudan National Museum on Independence Day, 1 January 2018. Source: Photo by the author.
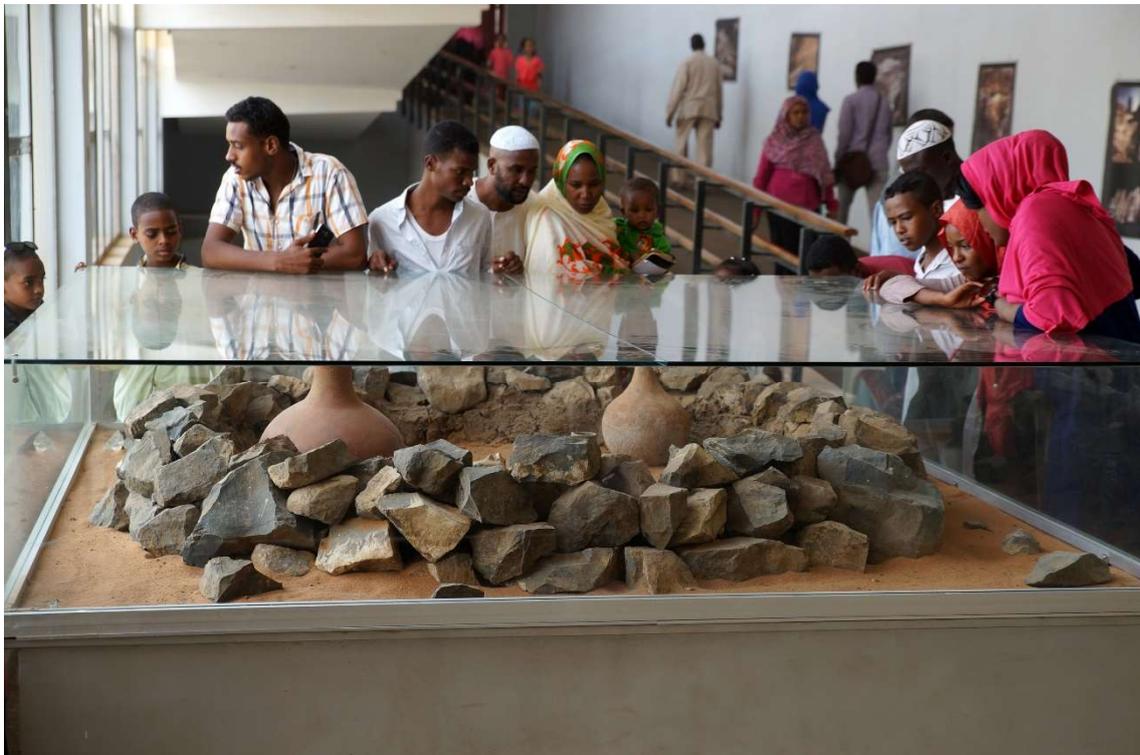

Figure 6.   Families examining an exhibit in the Sudan National Museum, 1 January 2018. Source: Photo by the author.