

## Practising Decoloniality in the African Museums

### Sudan as a Case Study

ممارسة إنهاء الاستعمار في المتاحف الأفريقية

(السودان كحالة دراسة)

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**Purpose** - This research addresses the theme of decolonisation within the context of the community museums in Africa. It does so by focusing on a case study of a community museum in western Sudan. Sudan was the largest African country until 2011 and it is now the third largest African country. Sudan has a long history of colonisation having been colonized by the Ottoman Empire from 1821 until the 1880s. It was later colonized by the British from 1896 to 1955 and British colonial rule was administered from Egypt (Elmukashfi, Ibrahim 2020).

**Design/methodology/approach-** The research focuses on three museums that represent the shared history and culture of western Sudan: the Khalifa House in Omdurman, Khartoum; the Sheikan Museum, El Obeid, North Kordofan, and the Darfur Museum, Nyala, South Darfur. The research consists of four areas of practices which was originally set by Csilla E. Ariese and Magdalena Wróblewska “A Guide with Global Examples, 2018”. This model of decolonisation practices are: Creating Visibility, Increasing Inclusivity, Decentring, and Improving Transparency. The researcher focuses on connecting these concepts with the experience of community museums in Sudan, but at the same time he emphasizes that there are no specific practices in the museum that can be described as practices within the framework of decolonization.

**Originality/value** – Sudan is going through the worst humanitarian disaster in its modern history, represented by the ongoing war between the Sudanese army SAF and the Rapid Support Forces RSF. This war began on April 15, 2023 and has led to the displacement of more than ten million people and the death of thousands. In addition, there has been the destruction of tangible and intangible cultural heritage

and the looting and smuggling of antiquities. Although this war appears to be a struggle over power and wealth, its causes are rooted in Sudanese history since the colonial period, which shaped many aspects of present-day Sudan. This glossary entry contributes to developing some aspects of the museum to ensure a comprehensive and fair representation of history and culture and to promote inclusion and recognition of marginalized voices and viewpoints, especially in the post-conflict period.

For me, the SAWA programme was a great way to exchange ideas, raise more questions and enhance my understanding of the importance of decolonising museums in different cultural contexts. Therefore, it is a platform for me to meet and engage in meaningful discussions about the practices, challenges and perspectives related to museums in Sudan. My experience in Berlin made it clear to me that colonial behavior still exists, even if colonialism has officially ended, and this is reflected in many forms, including the work of museums. The Berlin experience helped me to reconstruct decolonising practices from an African perspective and the Sharjah experience contributed to creating more discussions and questions about decolonisation in the Gulf region and what to expect in the future from museums and cultural institutions.

Historically the word 'decolonisation' referred to the political processes – including varied forms of anticolonial resistance – that ended direct colonial rule. Despite the formal end of colonial rule, the legacies of colonisation remain with us in many current political struggles and everyday experiences.

The term colonialism in the Arabic language, and in Qur'anic usage, revolves around the meaning of benefit and benefit from the land. By repairing, reconstructing, building, and planting it. As for the concept that was attached to the term later: It is a concept that revolves around destruction and corruption. Colonies in (English) send settlers to a place and establish political control over it. Colonise in Arabic is *إستعمر* *iistaemir* and relates to the land. For example to belt the land and provide it with the manpower it needs to repair and develop.

### What decolonising means for African museums today

On the one hand, decolonisation is understood as the process in which museums, archives, and other institutions take steps in order to broaden the perspectives they adopt beyond their own, usually those of the culturally dominant group. Second, and closely related, it refers to the goal of sharing authority over documentation and interpretation with others. This reveals that the process of decolonisation goes far beyond practical questions of representation, and restitution.

#### Creating Visibility:

Historically, museums are successors of private collections and thus increasing visibility was a crucial part of establishing modern museum institutions. By providing access to collected objects, museums seemed egalitarian and democratic in their service. However, they represented a particular system of Western knowledge, even though the objects presented were taken from all over the world. For the Sudan Community Museums Project, the three museums, despite their rich collections from different historical periods, were designed based on the Western model. This model focuses on the chronological sequence in displaying the artifacts, and thus needed to be rearranged to reflect the different periods and cultural groups that produced these artifacts. Changing the identity of these museums from museums based on the chronological approach to community museums has enabled them to increase visibility. Through this process, museums became not only a place to display collections, but also a place for the makers of these cultures from local communities to display their knowledge and skills as part of the story of the museum and the history of the place.

#### Increasing Inclusivity:

Historically and traditionally, museums have been closed spaces and realms of elitism – whether cultural, religious, aristocratic, or intellectual. Making the museum public, and opening it up to audiences and visitors, has been an ongoing process since the late 19th century. The ideal is to involve non-museum actors in every part of the workings of the museum. The approach taken to this component of the (WSCM) project was to encourage ideas that might attract a wider range of visitors, engage

and encourage them to stay longer, come back, or share with their friends and family. The key issue was how to engage with Sudan's biggest audience, its youth. The media element focused on capturing Sudan's rich and living intangible heritage through making short films that could be shown as examples both of subject matter and as models of what could be made and added to the collection.

### Decentring:

Museums tend to operate according to prevailing norms, and such decentring processes and changes are destabilizing and uncomfortable. It requires either deep self-reflection or other/external voices to realize that an alternative mode of operation is even possible or desired. As such, decentring is a balancing act which requires careful consideration beforehand.

The process of decentralization that has taken place in the community museums project has involved changing narratives as well as changing the identity of the museum itself. The museums have a shared graphic identity and typography that will help strengthen the museum missions, from signage, to displays, to social media.

Now the community museum is a tool for communities to build collective self-knowledge. The community museum has a different origin. Its collections are not the result of looting or expensive collectibles, but rather the result of conscious decisions to support a collective initiative. It is worth noting that the revolutionary social movement demanding integration and uprooting an area of memory is the context that led to the emergence of the idea of community museums in the Western context. The matter is different in Sudan, where the idea of the community museum emerged as a supranational idea linked either to the project of the nation-state and its attempt to produce a national narrative and memory by referring to the Mahdist and colonial legacy. Furthermore, the project was linked to a supranational level represented by the cultural arms of the international system in the twentieth century, such as ICCROM, the British Council, UNESCO, and supranational bodies concerned with preserving cultural heritage.

In contrast, among the justifications presented by the founders of the project in Sudan was the following: to support the protection and restoration of three

Community Museums in western Sudan, enabling them to provide for the educational and cultural needs of their communities and, thereby, visitors and tourists.

### Improving Transparency:

Transparency is a crucial aspect of museums that nowadays are expected to be institutions of social trust and social justice. It concerns collections, whose provenances are more often than ever subjected to detailed examinations and whose published results increasingly have consequences, like planned restitutions. Moreover it also entails a much wider set of problems caused by museum practices related to colonial pasts that have not been dealt with and often affect the present. One of them is authorship, which is understood in a wide sense as the privilege of presenting one's own point of view. Transparency also concerns museum policies, such as hiring, acquisition, management, and funding.

It's been almost two years of war between the Sudan Army Forces (SAF) and Rapid Speed Forces (RSF) that has resulted in the killing of tens of thousands of people, and forced millions more to flee their homes, and to leave the country. This threat to Sudanese culture appears to have reached an unprecedented level, with reports of looting of museums, heritage and archaeological sites and private collections.” [1]

Tens of thousands of artifacts have been looted from Sudanese museums regarded as one of the most important in Africa, One official at the National Museum in Khartoum said satellite images taken last year showed trucks loaded with artifacts leaving the museum and heading for Sudan's borders, including that with South Sudan.[2] The object were smuggled out of the war-torn country, and sold online.

UNESCO, the UN's cultural body, is particularly concerned by reports of looting at the National Museum of Sudan, as well as the Khalifa House Museum in Omdurman and Nyala Museum in South Darfur. UNESCO reiterated its call upon the public and the art market involved in the trade of cultural property in the region and worldwide to refrain from acquiring or taking part in the import, export or transfer of ownership of cultural property from Sudan. [3]

Cultural heritage institutions in Sudan should provide full transparency on the issue of trafficking cultural heritage objects because this concerns the heritage of all

Sudanese. Therefore the Sudanese must engage in the process of preserving and protecting it.

### Conclusion:

There is no way to evenly compare decolonial practices, nor is it fruitful to speak of 'best' practices – or 'worst' practices, for that matter. Therefore, this glossary entry is a collection of practices, but it does not aim to present evaluations of the examples included. Instead, this entry argues that practicing decoloniality, regardless of the scope or 'results,' is crucially important for museums. The examples collected in this entry aim to share practices from different contexts. They are intended to serve as inspiration to anyone wishing to undertake their own decolonial approach. As the examples show, practicing decoloniality is a complex issue and there is no one single solution that fits all.

Decolonisation cannot be reduced to a simple return of artifacts or whole collections. It inevitably has to be accompanied by reconsidering and questioning the procedures and the very fact of collecting. The following question could be posed: what are the reasons for and the origins of the respective museum's collections? Why and how were these objects assembled? What kind of information and knowledge have been recorded and circulated? This again implies rethinking the structures and the ways of functioning of ethnological collections and museums in general. It means scrutinizing the very concept of the ethnographic / ethnological as part of a cultural history museum. Practicing decoloniality is happening all around us, in all kinds of museums, whether we consider them to be overtly colonial or not. Both in large urban institutions as well as in rural areas or individually owned museums.

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[1] <https://thearabweekly.com/unesco-warns-looting-sudan-museums-and-damage-heritage-amid-war>

[2] <https://www.theguardian.com/world/article/2024/sep/09/sudan-national-museum-khartoum-artefacts-looted>

[3] <https://www.taipeitimes.com/News/world/archives/2024/09/14/2003823782>