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Soba Expedition Preliminary Fieldwork Report (2022–2023)

The fieldwork was focused on activities involving the communities living in Soba. In the previous seasons (2019–2020 and 2021–2022), it became clear that most of the current residents of modern Marabiyya, Gana'ab, and Salama (the districts of Soba closest and overlaying the archaeological remains of the former metropolis) have settled in the region in the last decades. They came from various regions of Sudan and the neighbouring countries (mainly South Sudan, Eritrea, Egypt, and Ethiopia).

On the one hand, these rapidly growing communities with their own histories, traditions, and customs attempt to form ties with the new place of residence and seek to understand the surrounding landscape. On the other hand, the archaeological site is being overbuilt with modern settlement and is constantly under threat of urban and rural expansion. In this context, our aim was to integrate various researchers (both from Poland and Sudan) with local communities, making the first steps towards sustainability in heritage studies in Soba.

The purpose of the program was to meet the largest group of residents, in this case these were school-age children as well as community

members who are locally considered to be holding the vastest knowledge about the past and cultural traditions, that is, the oldest women. The meetings aimed to initiate discussions about the history of the region, material remains of the past, and traditions which are considered to be long-lasting. Moreover, a field school for students and graduates from the Sudanese universities and a workshop for experienced researchers were organized. This capacity building events aimed to involve early and experience researchers in debates on various methods of archaeological research, data creation, and processing as well as the results and challenges of most recent research in Soba.

The fieldwork lasted from December 4 to 14, 2022, and from February 6 to 23, 2023. The members of the team were the following: Professor Włodzimierz Rączkowski – archaeologist (Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań), Associate Professor Maciej Kurcz – cultural anthropologist (University of Silesia in Katowice), Dr Mariusz Drzewiecki – archaeologist, head of the Soba Expedition (University of Warsaw), Dr Joanna Ciesielska – archaeologist, head of the Keepers of Tradition ethnographic project (University of Warsaw), Agnes Dudek – cultural anthropologist (Adam Mickiewicz Institute), member of the Keepers of Tradition ethnographic project, Fatima Edris Ali – archaeologist (University of Shendi), member of the Keepers of Tradition ethnographic project, Nagla Abdeen Mohammed – NCAM inspector, and Yassin Abdelmajid Bashir Suliman – language interpreter and resident of Soba.

Workshops in Primary Schools

With the support from the National Corporation for Antiquities and Museums of Sudan, permission for work in primary schools has been obtained from the Education Office based in Soba East. Moreover, meetings with the headmaster/headmistress of each school have been arranged in order to discuss the idea of the workshop and to ask for permission to meet with the children. The teachers selected the classes in which the workshop could be conducted. In most cases, these were the oldest pupils (the 7th and 8th grade).

The workshops were designed to involve the pupils. At first, the following topics were discussed:

- archaeology as a science – the children were asked if they knew what archaeology is, what can be the subject of archaeological studies, and how such research is conducted;

- the archaeology of Soba – during this part, discussion was focused on the history of Soba and its material remains, the pupils were asked

what they knew about the old city and how they thought the metropolis looked like in the past;

– oral histories – the pupils discussed stories referring to the past of the region with a cultural anthropologist.

Subsequently, the children were asked to draw pictures that would present the past in general, material remains of the past or various stories which in their opinion related to the past. Afterwards, all the participants of the workshop were awarded with booklets *Layla and Karim discover the archaeology of Sudan* (prepared by SFDAS and NCAM and kindly provided by SFDAS). Authors of selected drawings received additional awards in the form of school supplies (donated by Polish children from the Community Elementary School no. 4 in Cracow, Poland, and III Community High School in Cracow, Poland).

The following schools have been visited:

The Primary School for Boys in Gana'ab (date 05.12.2022)

Participants of the workshop: 72 pupils, age 9–12

Information about the school: public school, founded in 2005, c. 600 pupils

The Primary School for Boys and Girls in Gana'ab East (date 05.12.2022)

Participants of the workshop: 81 pupils, age 9–10

Information about the school: public school, founded in 2016, c. 700 pupils

The Primary Schools for Girls in Gana'ab (date: 07.12.2022)

Participants of the workshop: 104 pupils, age 9–14

Information about the school: public school, c. 760 pupils

The Primary School for Boys in Marabiyya (date: 08.12.2022)

Participants of the workshop: 70 pupils, age 9–14

Information about the school: public school

The Primary School for Girls in Marabiyya (date: 12.12.2022)

Participants of the workshop: 81 pupils, age 12–14

Information about the school: public school, c. 800 pupils

The Kingdom of Soba Primary School in Gana'ab for Boys and Girls (date: 13.12.2022)

Participants of the workshop: c. 60 pupils, age 12–14

Information about the school: private school, founded in 2006, 225 pupils



Fig. 1. Drawing by one of the pupils from the Primary School in Soba-Gana'ab.

Our discussions undoubtedly had an impact on the drawings prepared by the children who participated in the workshops. Most of the issues raised during the meetings were incorporated in the drawings. The works can be divided into the following general groups:

1. Monuments and sites related to the Kushite period. The pyramids were among the most often depicted objects. These monuments are well recognized and have the status of national heritage in the official discourse.

2. Former Soba. Only a few of the children made an attempt to refer to the old Soba in their drawings, which turned out to be a difficult task since currently there are basically no visible remains of the former city in the archaeological zone. However, some children tried to show the architectural fabric of Soba by means of drawing brick houses – they explained that the former city was known for its characteristic red bricks. In several works, the inspiration for children in this respect was the mosque in Old Dongola, whose photo can be found in history textbooks.

3. The Gate of Suakin which is also depicted in history textbooks.

4. Landscapes of the Nile valley: trees, flowers, birds, fish, etc. along with a wide, often centrally located river. Interestingly, some works on this subject depict mountains that would be hard to find in the Soba area. There is a noticeable gender accent in the works. The girls were very eager to draw “a woman and her world.” For example, tools for applying

henna, coffee utensils or typical traditional kitchen utensils. The boys, in turn, presented spears, bows, swords, and cars. In general, all the children were very happy to paint the equipment from the imaginarium of traditional culture. One of the most often depicted ones was undoubtedly a ceramic water container (arab. *zir*) – it was also quite frequent to depict how it works. Beds, mats, and various dishes were also presented.

5. “I am Sudanese” – noteworthy are the works of a clearly patriotic character. Almost all of them referred to the revolution of 2019 and the protests after the coup in 2021 (Figure 1). One of the works presents the figure of the first president of Sudan (Ismail al-Ashari). The drawings show national flags and figures with their faces covered.

6. “The Legend of Ajoba” – drawings present the main protagonist, the costume of the legendary woman often bears national colours. The term “kandake” is often used on the drawings to stress the strong authority of Ajoba. This is a reference to the involvement of women in recent protests, and shows attempts to reinterpret a popular legend under the influence of current events (Figure 2).

7. Islam – a large number of works depict the holy places of Islam, that is, the Kaaba or the Dome on the Rock.

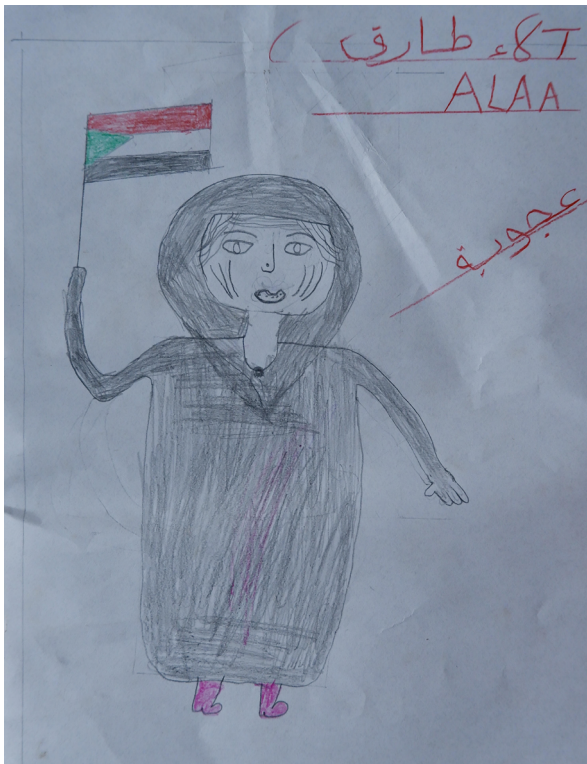


Fig. 2. Drawing by one of the pupils from the Primary School in Soba-Gana'ab.

Summing up, the children's works present how the past is conceptualized. On this basis, we can say that the past is symbolized by traditional material culture, which is still known to children in a rudimentary form. The past is not yet a time when everything was done differently. The old histories connect children with the idyllic landscape of the Nile valley – in contrast to the degenerate ecology of the great modern city in which they grew up. Finally, the past can also be a pretext for reflection on the present or the future. It is worth adding that there are two schools in Soba named after historic Soba: The Kingdom of Soba Primary School in Gana'ab and The Kingdom of Alwa in Sigeila.

Field School for Young Professionals

Between February 6 and 16, 2023, field school in Soba was taking place, during which six young professional researchers in archaeology worked with specialists from Poland to learn how to operate a drone, used handheld GPS devices, make an inventory of small finds and work with GIS software. History of research in Soba, various approaches to archaeological investigations in Soba as well as challenges faced by the researchers have been discussed in detail. The participants were students at Al-Neelain University and trainees at NCAM (Figure 3).

Workshop for Experienced Researchers

Between February 19 and 23, 2023, workshop on remote sensing and GIS applications in archaeology have been conducted at NCAM (Figure 4) and on-site in Soba. Participants from NCAM, Al-Neelain University, University of Khartoum, University of Bahri, and University of Shendi discussed theoretical and historical applications of remote sensing in archaeology, as well as practical training in GIS software (QuantumGIS), aerial photography, and GPS positioning.

Ethnographic project: "Keepers of Tradition: Communicating status via attire among Sudanese women"

The aim of the project is the investigation of customs concerning traditional garments and the way in which they are used to communicate one's status through ethnological fieldwork among modern Sudanese women. Previous research indicates that in Nubia, women were the keepers of traditions and cultural practices and as such, they may



Fig. 3. Students and graduates received certificates on the last day of the field school.
(Photo: Amal Awad).



Fig. 4. During the workshop for experienced researchers.
(Photo: Mariusz Drzewiecki).

constitute the greatest repository of historical knowledge. This research involved a pilot study into the continuity of everyday customs and traditions among modern Sudanese women, as a part of a large-scale investigation of the women's lived experience in historical Sudan.

The project entailed six weeks of anthropological fieldwork with selected Sudanese communities representing different ways of living: rural Miseeda in northern Sudan and Soba East in Khartoum's suburbs. The fieldwork was conducted between January 15 and February 23, 2023, with first three weeks devoted to the research in the northern Mahas region and the following three weeks spent in Soba. Information was collected during both semi-formal individual interviews and informal individual meetings, and group discussions. In addition to dedicated home visits, information was collected in more informal settings, such as group meetings of neighbours over coffee and sweets. The interviews with local women were conducted by Ms. Agnes Dudek, cultural anthropologist, and supported by the participation of a local collaborator Ms. Fatima Idris Ali Mahmoud from the University of Shendi. We gathered between 30–40 recorded formal interviews. The exact number of the participants is hard to pinpoint as in most interviews many persons were involved in each setting.

We managed to gather information on the significance of the *tobe*, its local and/or preferred styles, colours, the significance of those colours, its historical and present-day heritage. We discovered changes in tradition and certain possible aspects for those discerned changes. The empirical data also allowed insight into the similarities as well as differences of the traditions being practised – in clothing but also at home – in Soba and in the Mahas region. This discovery allows us to better comprehend whether a custom or tradition is more local or whether it has dispersed into becoming a general Sudanese tradition. We also collected information on what specific traditions women are the keepers of in each region. This can include the local dishes, interior and exterior styles of houses, the way houses are kept, items in or outside the house which hold particular value within the home or community. The development of this project would also require from us a more careful examination of the words such as tradition, custom, culture, and Sudanese due to the formalities required of us in contemporary cultural anthropology as well as due to the modernization of Sudan, which is also the result of the loosening of local borders and ease of transportation. We plan on supplementing our ethnographic research with applicable as well as relevant academic texts or books.

The core of the project is close international cooperation with Sudanese researchers and local communities, which will serve to strengthen and expand the potential of humanities' research conducted by joint

Polish-Sudanese projects. In addition, the wider aim of the project is to preserve the quickly changing as well as disappearing regional knowledge of smaller, indigenous communities in what is now considered modern-day Sudan.

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Having completed our research work we attempted to contact the persons featuring in the photographs presented herein in order to be granted their consent for making their images public; however, in the process we were faced with insurmountable difficulties. The Editors thereby declare that they used their best efforts to have found copyright holders and/or administrators. If you happen to be one of the aforementioned persons but have not been identified, please send us a message.

List of Figures

Figure 1. Drawing by one of the pupils from the Primary School in Soba-Gana’ab.

Figure 2. Drawing by one of the pupils from the Primary School in Soba-Gana’ab.

Figure 3. Students and graduates received certificates on the last day of the field school. (Photo: Amal Awad).

Figure 4. During the workshop for experienced researchers. (Photo: Mariusz Drzewiecki).