

# Old Dongola and the foundations of practicing public anthropology – a case of own research



**Abstract:** Although public engagement has a long tradition in anthropology, the public role of anthropology is still a largely unorganized and informal specialization, not free from controversies due to the entanglement of science in historical processes and the subjective nature of social phenomena. The paper examines some activities of an engagement nature (social interaction, interest in local culture, education, and social criticism) that resulted from the systematic ethnographic research on the occasion of archaeological work in and around Old Dongola. The paper aims to look for connections between ethnographic research and public engagement and their possible outcomes.

**Keywords:** Old Dongola, ethnographic research, public anthropology

Public engagement has a long tradition in anthropology. It is often claimed that, from the beginning of its existence as a scientific discipline, anthropology has been involved in socially important issues relevant to the studied communities (Low and Merry 2010: 203). Regardless of the nature of this involvement and the ambiguity of the term itself (involvement, engagement, and applied, public, or practical anthropology), this type of social activity has changed over time: from political

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manipulation in colonial times to participating in transformation processes, asking socially important questions, or giving a voice to local communities later on (Sochacki 2010). This process runs along the same path anthropology itself has taken, from ethnocentrism to cultural relativism (Bodley 2020: 27). The fundamental distinction between emic (cultural meanings derived from inside a local culture) and etic (cultural meaning as translated for an outside perspective) is the starting point for engaging initiatives. Therefore, despite allegations of bias (Hastrup and Elsass 1990), the awareness of the public power of anthropology has increased today to such an extent that we talk about a specific subdiscipline — public anthropology (sometimes also referred to as “engaged” or “activist” anthropology), which focuses on the interplay between anthropology as an academic discipline and a broader public that supports and, ideally, finds much value in it (Borofsky 2020). Carole McGranahan (2006: 256, after Brocki 2018: 22) points out that public anthropology is a largely unorganized, informal trend, not associated with any specific theory or scientific specialization, claiming that “...public anthropology is most simply understood as an anthropology engaged with public, real-life problems and issues”.

My fieldwork, conducted in both Sudans since the onset of the 21st century, makes for an exciting example of intrinsic bonds between anthropological practice and public engagement. Old Dongola plays an important, one might even say, formative role in this respect, as it shaped my style of fieldwork both methodologically and scientifically. The

ruins of Old Dongola were the terrain (to use the language of sociology) through which the trajectory of my fieldwork in this corner of Africa unfolded. It was the place I kept coming back to for research (in 2003, 2004, 2010, and 2014), where I set up a kind of real and metaphorical agenda of fieldwork in Sudan, including the willingness to deal with problems relevant for the local communities and participatory activities for both communities and their members.

In this article, I would like to focus on ethnographic research from a perspective of public-engaged practices. Anthropological tradition (similarly to archaeology) advocates long-term research, and scholars often recall field reports and experiences, thereby gaining an additional “inner perspective” (Bruner 1986: 9). This approach, often called auto-ethnography, occupies an important place in anthropological reflection (Holman Jones 2005; Kafar 2010; Rabinow 2010; Kacperczyk 2014; Buliński and Posern-Zieliński 2021). I would like to focus on my field experience as a way to examine the public consequences of such actions. While carrying out my research in and around Old Dongola, I did not engage in any formal types of social activism like linking local communities and research problems and taking intentional action to bring about social or political change. Still, I was able to see the potential of such activities, precisely indicating their location and paving the way for their implementation in the future. This article, therefore, reflects on the nuanced context of fieldwork, which led, over time, to the involvement of specialists, including archaeologists and anthropologists,

to make their research more visible and accessible to the public and to ensure that the knowledge produced was as useful as possible in improving people's lives.

Let me briefly mention a few aspects of such fieldwork. Anthropology distinguishes several forms of engagement: (1) sharing and support, (2) teaching and public education, (3) social critique, (4) collaboration, (5) advocacy, and (6) activism (Low and Merry 2010: 204). My public fieldwork has also taken many forms, from everyday social interactions through intercultural educational practices to social critique. It was driven more by a desire to study rather than to look for actual problems. It has aimed at establishing relations, engaging specialists, and initiating essential conversations and scientific collaboration in heritage maintenance, history, archaeology, and anthropology. After years of fieldwork, I see and feel a growing need to engage in the issues of the com-

munities I study, stimulated internally by cultural competencies and “intimate experience.”

In my case, being institutionally associated with the Polish archaeological missions in and around Old Dongola, a relatively universal ethnographic dilemma of involvement by assuming the function of a local community's representative quickly became apparent. “Speaking on someone's behalf” is deeply rooted in anthropological epistemology. At the same time, as said earlier, it is one of the factors conditioning its public involvement (Kellett 2009). My involvement also resulted from a desire to expand the archaeological work to include the ethnographic context and the recent past. For a young ethnographer like myself at that time, this seemed cognitively attractive and ethically necessary. In retrospect, my motivation paved the way for the engaging activities undertaken in Old Dongola and its surroundings in recent years.

## **A SHORT HISTORY OF MY OWN RESEARCH IN AND AROUND OLD DONGOLA**

Back in 2000, while still a student of ethnology and archaeology at the Jagiellonian University in Kraków, I made my first trip to Sudan to participate in the Joint Polish Archaeological Expedition on the right bank of the Nile between Old Dongola and Zuma, led by Bogdan Żurawski [Fig. 1]. At that time, the expedition rented a house in the village of Bokkibul, located just a few kilometers from the ruins of Old Dongola and inhabited by descendants of former dwellers of Hillat Dongola, the “Abandoned Village”. My

interest in Old Dongola continued when I returned to Sudan for the second time, in 2001, when I worked and lived in the village of Banganarti — on the so-called “Tangasi Island”. Old Tangasi, once located on a Nile island, is a fascinating archaeological and ethnographic area, largely unexplored, located only a few kilometers upstream from Old Dongola. Back in 2001, it featured ruins of a church located among mostly deserted houses, which, according to local residents, survived only thanks to its use as a mosque

[Fig. 2]. In 2004, I took part in an archaeological mission in Old Dongola under the leadership of Stefan Jakobielski, conducting my first ethnographic field project, funded by the Committee for Scientific Research (KBN), at the same time gathering material for my master's thesis in archaeology, devoted to domed tombs. In Sudan, Sufi sanctuaries —most notably the distinctive domed tombs— are often located on the sites of older, pre-Islamic places of worship (e.g. Diffar, Jebel Barkal, Soba, Deiga, Old Dongola). Therefore, they struck me an ideal subject for ethnoarchaeological research. The ethnographic project concerned everyday life practices of rural communities from the area of Old Dongola: their religious rituals,



Fig. 1. The author in one of the windows of the old mosque at Old Dongola, 2001 (Photo M. Kurcz)

consumption habits, ways of farming and spending free time. The research area covered the adjacent village of Ghaddar, the “Abandoned Village”, and the necropolis of holy men located nearby. With the help of local friends I practiced itinerant anthropology — walking around the area, I was able to experience the ruins of Old Dongola firsthand. It turned out to be a precious experience to learn about the sacred landscape of this region. Pre-Muslim ruins —in a sense abstracted from the local cultural context— are seen as magical places where jinns and sorcerers are believed to dwell. Sometimes, the ruins are directly associated with evil. In Old Dongola, there is *Arjum al-sheitan*, that is, “stoning the devil”, *ارجم الشيطان* — a cursed place where a passer-by is obliged to throw a stone as a gesture of renouncing the devil. Almost every village has such a place, usually located on the outskirts, near abandoned houses (Kurcz 2007). The conceptualization of archaeological sites in Sudan is not fixed but exists along a continuum — from sacredness and taboo to fear and hostility. As part of this Old Dongola experience, I met, among others, a “mad dervish”, who should perhaps be considered the last “resident” of the ruins. In 2004, during one of the Islamic festivals, I participated in an ecstatic Sufi celebration and had an opportunity to taste some local dishes, including a highly unorthodox dish made of raw sheep offal — the so-called *marara*. The ethnographic research was so inspiring, and the relations with the locals so cordial, that I returned to Ghaddar two more times — once in 2010 with a group of ethnology students from the University of Silesia in Katowice.

## SHORTENING THE DISTANCE

Thanks to the almost uninterrupted presence of Polish archaeologists in the Old Dongola region since the 1960s, in my case, access to the local community—one of the fundamental difficulties of ethnographic research—could be overcome relatively quickly. From the beginning, I benefitted from the credit of trust and positive image of Polish archaeologists, embodied by the long-time director of the Polish archaeological mission in Old Dongola, Stefan Jakobielski. The local population valued small courtesies, everyday interactions, and respect for local customs and religion, which the Polish archaeologists demonstrated. Incidentally, no one treated these matters as “public engagement”, but as ordinary human cordiality and good neighborly practice-

es. The archaeological mission house in Ghaddar was an ordinary Nubian mud-brick house on the village outskirts. Not only did it not stand out from the surrounding houses in any way, but with time it became run down to a point of being less functional and comfortable than other buildings. Still, it used to be a place for neighborly meetings and help, as well as formal public engagements. The house was a social space that integrated archaeologists with the village community, making the archaeological team an episodic, but still normal, element of the local reality. Incidentally, the ingenuity of Polish archaeologists in the vicinity of Old Dongola is an engaging example of the integration of foreigners with the local community, achieved



Fig. 2. “Mosque-church” on Tangasi Island, 2013 (Photo M. Kurcz)

in various ways. This topic, however, deserves a more detailed study. One of these ways was participation in countless social gatherings —Friday breakfasts, courtesy visits, and wedding celebrations— that usually took place in the colder months and during religious holidays. For archaeologists, they were distractions from the field routine — for me, opportunities to observe, talk to, or simply tighten relationships with the ordinary people. The Durkheimian tradition looks for deeper social meanings in such phenomena. I am referring here to wedding ceremonies, which undoubtedly occupy a central place in folk rituals, integrating the local community and affirming its existence as a social entity. Some seemingly small gestures which also aimed to integrate the team with the community included wearing local costumes, headscarves in the case of women, and decorating the body with henna or Sufi amulets. Expedition members usually developed their own forms of non-verbal interaction with the local culture.

All of the above practices shortened the distance. As I have already mentioned, the ongoing archaeological research initially made my work easier. I did not have to convince anyone to talk to me or look for gatekeepers. This trust, resulting from the enduring presence of Polish archaeologists in this area, had to be extended to ethnographic research. Not everyone understood my work — and why I was not taking part in daily archaeological responsibilities. The ethnographic method required more intensive interactions from me than the locals were used to, which, after some time, became the cause of a crisis in their perception

of my person. I conducted ethnographic research, but I was still perceived as a member of the archaeological expedition. Although I was, in fact, a member of the archaeological team, this caused some confusion among the locals. Before they reached a new understanding of my work, I was doomed to various perturbations, sometimes unpleasant, at other times humorous. Fieldwork is a dynamic and long-term process of gaining acceptance among the studied community — a process that never ends, nor does it concern all community members to the same degree. We could raise the question at this point what the term local community really means? Fortunately, over time, I finally achieved a status that allowed me to work comfortably. I do not remember doing anything special to gain people's trust. I was just nice and kept doing my work. In the eyes of my interlocutors, I was no longer an archaeologist, but a member of the expedition conducting my own research, more or less understandable, yet still scientific. Over time, my status in the eyes of the local community evolved to a point where I was regarded as a "harmless lunatic" — someone who deviates from the social norm but, although not particularly intelligent or well-mannered, can still be considered completely harmless and, at times, even likeable. This is how I would describe —half-jokingly— the way I was perceived by the local community at that time. My status had at least one more serious consequence, which today, when I cooperate with archaeologists in the field, seems particularly important to me. I came to play the role of an intermediary —a kind of metaphorical shaman—

someone in-between archaeologists and the local community, not being actually part of either group. In times when archaeological work in Sudan almost always touches upon social issues, such as difficult heritage, natural resources, and land rights, to name only the most current ones (Bradshaw 2017; Fushiya and Radziwilko 2019; Fushiya 2021), the intermediary status of my role in the research grows in importance.

Gaining access to the community was hardly an effortless endeavor. One of the factors that contributed to my reception was a certain local dish called *tarkin* in Nubian. Anthropological studies include research into kinship systems, rituals, and beliefs, along with experiencing the local smells, tastes, and textures. Nothing escapes an anthropologist's attention in the field, including themselves, which helps interpret seemingly insignificant matters or individual stories taking into account the complexity of relationships of human experiences and the depth of their meanings. That is why sharing meals with local people was part of my everyday field activities. In this context, it needs to be explained that *tarkin* (*meluha* in Arabic) is not just an ordinary dish, and neither is it easy to consume. It is a paste made of fermented fish, with a pungent smell that indeed makes the dish controversial — to say the least. For the Nubians, preparing and eating *tarkin* is a matter of good taste, sophistication, generosity, tradition, and health, while other Sudanese, or even Nubians living in the diaspora, treat it rather with disgust. Food of this kind —one that can be labeled extreme or liminal— expresses familiarity and otherness at the same time. This

dish today serves as a social boundary in Nubia, including the vicinity of Old Dongola, emphasizing the differences between the Nubians and other Muslim communities inhabiting Sudan. It is also of particular importance for the diaspora living in the capital and is treated with nostalgia as a modern symbol of identity. Sigmund Freud (1961) ironically called the phenomenon of manifesting and exaggerating differences in an environment where there are close similarities between groups “narcissism of small differences”. In Sudan, however, this phenomenon is more complex. As we know, people often define themselves through refusal, or we deal with “structures of refusal”, in the words of Marcel Mauss. A decision whether or not to accept a given institution has a deeper dimension (Graeber 2013). As noted by David Graeber and David Wengrow (2022: 175), it reflects questions about values and identity. In Islam, food is a vehicle for creating group identity and evaluating moral worth in terms of religious axioms (Eickelman 1989). In Sudan —a country inhabited since its inception by diverse communities— food has become particularly important in creating a network of social boundaries, especially the one between Islamic and African identity — an issue fundamental to modern political processes. Meals can also be viewed as extremely expressive, perfectly fitting the role of “silent communication” (Matejowsky 2013). In my case, I noticed that my preference for unorthodox food made my research more understandable to people, thereby boosting my credibility. In their eyes, I became a representative of a foreign culture who not only wants to understand

their lifestyle, but can also appreciate it. In this way I also gained some authority among them. Local cuisine can often become a source of pride and satisfaction, especially when foreigners appreciate it. The fermented fish paste influenced my research in a very positive way. Thanks

to it, among other things, I was often invited, subjected to (culinary) tests, and consequently also appreciated. Extreme food affects access to the studied community. One of my informants put it bluntly: “If they make *tarkin* for you, it’s a sign that you are welcome.”

## ETHNOGRAPHY OF AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITE

In my work in Old Dongola, I did not anthropologize its history, but tried to reconstruct the past, searching for new threads in its interpretation. My interest at that time, which may seem somewhat anachronistic today, was entirely focused on folk culture — the so-called *Volkskunde*. The focus of my attention was the ruins of Old Dongola, which I treated as a still-living place, full of little stories and case studies, and part of religious folklore [Fig. 3]. The ruins were also, to some extent, a discursive space, especially in relation to memory and identity. My “interview research partners” (to quote

Sharon E. Hutchinson (1996), an anthropologist working with the Nuer) were ordinary residents of the surrounding villages, especially Ghaddar.

As James Clifford (1997: 54) demonstrates, the “field” is created as a consequence of historical, political, and scientific conditions. This applies to archaeologists and ethnographers alike. For me, the ruins of Old Dongola became not so much an archaeological site — exclusive and abstracted — a no one’s place, connected with a magnificent past and a colorless present — but a place still alive, shaped by the people and rooted in



Fig. 3. View of the cemetery of “holy men” in Old Dongola, 2001 (Photo M. Kurcz)

the local mystical geography as an ambivalent space associated with the activity of various supernatural forces. For the local community, it was primarily a space that evoked a certain anxiety linked to jinns and Satan. It was therefore rarely visited, especially at night. At the same time, in line with the broader understanding of ruins in Sudanese culture, it was a space of magical rituals or practices related to the memory of the dead — something I became fully convinced of during Muslim festivals.

With this in mind, as I reported, I made the cemetery of holy men in Old Dongola, famous in the whole of Sudan, the focus of my research. Tombs and places associated with Islamic religious leaders had not been subject to any systematic research, with one significant exception: Salah Omer As-Sadiqa (1996), *The Domed Tombs of Eastern Sudan*. This unique and still-living form of sepulchral architecture is an essential element of individual and group identity, symbolizing the Sudanese Islam and the national culture. The necropolis in Old Dongola is exceptional in this respect. Right next to the remains of the “Abandoned Village” is one of Sudan’s largest necropolises of holy sheikhs. According to tradition, 99 “saints” are supposed to rest there. It is primarily a place of various visits in moments of crisis, but also during holidays or major family celebrations. I diligently observed and recorded these visits, which was greatly appreciated by the local population, who were rather accustomed to foreigners being interested in a more distant past (Kurcz 2002).

Old Dongola also made me realize that ruins, cemeteries, and deserted

places are associated with the unorthodox Sudanese: sorcerers, rainmakers, prophets, and “living saints”. In Nubia, these are people of the Sufi faith, most often called dervishes. They lead lives that differ significantly from the normative model (they have no wives, children, or homes), and they can be found, among other places, in necropolises where venerable religious men are buried, as in the case of the Hamad el Nil cemetery in Omdurman or Old Dongola itself (Trimingham 1965). In the oral tradition, many ruins are associated with mysterious dervishes or have become their eternal resting places (Old Dongola, Jebel el Alim, Abkur, Diffar, Bahit, Deiga, or Jebel Barkal). A case in point may be the medieval fortress in Abkur, situated on top of a panoramic hill called Jebel el Grenn, after a Muslim mystic who, allegedly, lived there in the 19th century. Similarly, in Jebel el Alim, located in the village of Banganarti, where the hill is named after Sheikh el Alim, who once lived there, and his domed tomb is located nearby.

A reinterpretation of the ruins was essential for intensifying cooperation with the locals and Sudanese archaeologists, who also saw the importance of the folklore aspect for their archaeological work. In my research at Old Dongola, I was fortunate to work with three Sudanese archaeologists: Nahla Mustafa, Mustafa el Sharif, and Mahmoud Suliman Bashir. They were delegated *ex officio* by the National Corporation for Antiquities and Museums (NCAM) to work with the Polish archaeological missions in 2000, 2001, and 2003, taking on, disinterestedly, the task of interpreting.

Mahmoud Suliman Bashir, who conducted his ethno-archaeological research in parallel with me, was indeed exceptional in this respect. In 2000, during archaeological field reconnaissance, he collected specimens of oral tradition related to archaeological sites such as Old Dongola, Abkur, Diffar, Bahit, Deiga, and Jebel Barkal (Bashir 2003). My cooperation with local scientists, dictated by the objective need to communicate with the local community, became the cornerstone of an agenda of expanding archaeologi-

cal work to include ethno-archaeological issues and to use the knowledge of the local people to a greater extent. It is worth noting that a great supporter of this approach is the Sudanese archaeologist Ali Osman M. Salih (1982), who attempted to understand the history, politics, and culture of the Middle Ages from the perspective of Nubian folk culture. Over the years, his approach gained popularity with a number of archaeologists working in northern Sudan (e.g. Edwards and Soghayroun 2011).

## TEACHING AND PUBLIC EDUCATION

Teaching is an engaging practice that takes many forms: school lessons, group discussions, professional training, and other pedagogical and didactic activities. Engaging students in their own research or social activities is another facet of this practice (Low and Merry 2010: 208). The project “Nubia, Corridor to Africa. Ethnographic fieldwork of students of the University of Silesia in Africa” (named after the famous book by William Adams, *Nubia: Corridor to Africa*) started in November 2010, with a group of ethnology students visiting Sudan under my supervision [Fig. 4]. It was a field reconnaissance of selected areas of northern and central Sudan: the Khartoum agglomeration and, above all, the villages on the Nile, in the area of Old Dongola, where I had conducted my fieldwork in the years 2000–2004. During the trip, the students collected data for their theses by conducting conversations and observations, but also, quite simply, learned about the Muslim culture in its living, local dimension.

We were interested in how African folk culture “works” in a borderland situation, a centuries-old location at the junction of two great civilizations: the Middle East and Sub-Saharan Africa. The object of scientific observation was selected spheres and cultural institutions of everyday life of the Sudanese Muslims, which seemed to be related to the “borderland” experience: the institution of female genital mutilation, *zaar* exorcisms, beliefs related to the Nile, or the issue of ethnic stereotypes. On top of acquiring hands-on experience with ethnographic methods, the students also had the opportunity to make friends with the inhabitants of Ghaddar, where we worked and lived. Neighborly visits or solemn wedding ceremonies facilitated this. It seems that the local community was especially impressed that my fieldwork could have a practical dimension and lead, among other things, to instilling respect and sympathy for Nubian culture among young people.

## OLD DONGOLA AND SOCIAL CRITIQUE

Social critique, in its broadest sense, refers to anthropological work that uses its methods and theories to uncover power relations and structures of inequality (Low and Merry 2010: 208). In my opinion, archaeological research is an excellent opportunity for anthropologists to be involved in the process of knowledge production and in the translation processes between local communities and the global scientific community. In Sudan, local people were consistently ignored and devalued in their rights to historical heritage (the names of sites such as Jebel Barkal or Meroe can serve as an example). At the beginning of the 20th century, after a period of rob-

bery and clandestine excavations, many Sudanese ruins became “archaeological sites” with their own borders and legal protection. In a sense analogous to game reserves, they became spaces with severely restricted access.

On the one hand, representatives of local communities were made responsible for the sites’ physical protection, on the other, they were perceived as the greatest threat to this heritage. The ruins of Soba —the former capital of medieval Alwa— are a case in point. Only selected past events were considered valuable — others were condemned to slow agony. Much has been written on this subject



Fig. 4. Participants of a student ethnography camp in Sudan and their hosts in Ghaddar, 2010 (Photo M. Kurcz)

(Daly and Hogan 2005; Bradshaw 2017; Kurcz and Drzewiecki 2022; and others). Old Dongola is part of the “authorized heritage discourse” in Sudan and—as a place of particular importance, primarily from local and regional perspectives—an area inhabited by people who still call themselves Nubians (e.g. the Danagla community<sup>1</sup> and other riverine groups popularly called “children of the Nile” in Sudan). In this sense, the archaeological site in Old Dongola does not belong to any particular group—just as it is not absent from official narratives about the country’s history. A manifestation of this “presence” is the old mosque in Old Dongola—a former throne hall of the Makurian kings, commonly known among the Sudanese, for example, from history textbooks. This monument—especially the medieval inscription informing about its conversion into a mosque in 1317—currently symbolizes the end of the times of “ignorance and darkness”—the so-called *jahiliyyah*—and the beginning of a new era of Islamic and Arab Sudan. Let us remember, however, that there is no heritage without controversy. The pyramids of Meroe, the ruins of Soba, or the tomb of Sheikh Idriss Wad Mohamed el Arbab in Eilafun are all places “... haunted by many different spirits hidden there in silence, spirits one can “invoke” or not” (de Certeau 1988: 108). This is due to phenomena from the past (colonialism and imperialism) and from the present (armed conflicts, economic crises, nationalism, racism, and chauvinism). Old Dongola raises some controversy due to the imperial burden of archaeological research

in Sudan (Näser and Kleinitz 2012). As I have already indicated, archaeology at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries was strongly connected with European imperialism. It often served to favor Europe and its heritage over the “colonized others” (Bradshaw 2017). “Colonial archaeology”, like “Victorian anthropology” of that time, was not exempt from establishing hierarchies and classifying non-European cultures (Meskell 1999). In this way, science was only a camouflaged form of the “divide and conquer” policy. For a long time, European scholars believed that the exciting achievements of Sudanese cultures were the monuments influenced by ancient Egypt and, later, the Christian period, which, in turn, came to be seen as noteworthy in contrast to the more recent past (Giffen 1905; Reisner 1918; Moorehead 1960; 1962; Mohammed and Welsby 2011). Although this situation is changing rapidly today, as evidenced by Old Dongola and research on the post-medieval remains of the city, it is still primarily a “Christian site” for an average Sudanese, with a clearly outlined identity (religious and ethnic). For many, it is a source of distance or even hostility. This state of affairs, going back to at least the 1990s, has been further worsened by the Sudanese policy of promoting a single normative model of national identity based on Islamic and Arab values, in which the culture of the minorities or the “distant African past” are somewhat doomed to marginalization. The Christian heritage of Nubia is reduced in this narrative to the role of a final page of the African history of this corner of Africa.

1 An ethno-linguistic branch of the Nubian community.

## CONCLUSIONS

An anthropologist in the field cannot stand aside (e.g. Barth et al. 2005). This is due both to the pressing social questions they are expected to address and to the nature of ethnographic research, which requires engagement in a network of social interactions that often continues long after the fieldwork has ended. Social involvement of anthropology manifests itself in various ways, from emotional support to various forms of activism aimed at providing real help to groups at risk of exclusion. This becomes especially challenging when social activism becomes the primary goal of one's actions, as scientists—including anthropologists—are generally expected to demonstrate objectivity and impartiality rather than humanism or ordinary empathy. Social involvement of anthropology becomes even more complex when cultural differences come into play or when one is confronted with methodologies from other scientific disciplines. In such situations, the anthropologist should act less as an advocate and more as a moderator. The anthropologist-as-moderator can play a crucial role in translating universal discourses for representatives of local communities, shaped by their own specific experiences, and in generating effective forms of communication between individual actors. Finally, Western researchers working in the Global South—regardless of their discipline—should be particularly

sensitive to the legacy of colonialism and imperialism. Given historical conditions, it is essential to consider parallels between even progressive and universally valued actions and “civilizational processes” rooted deep in colonial times.

The current armed conflict—unprecedented in Sudan's history—will likely bring new challenges for social engagement, including the appreciation of historical heritage. Local communities draw on the past to organize everyday life and to respond to changing political, economic, and ecological realities. A future full of hope will matter even more, as a desired social category associated with progress, modernity, and prosperity. Colonial times and the years that followed were marked by “cultural wars”. Today, we are witnessing new wars that have brought about dramatic devastation—such as the destruction of Sudan's largest museums. These acts of violence against the most vital elements of national cultural heritage are not merely acts of common vandalism but rather deliberate expressions of hostility. Yet many questions remain unanswered. When the war (finally) ends, which past events, places, or sources will still hold value and meaning for the Sudanese—and in what ways will they continue to function? Is a more nuanced “national heritage discourse”, one that includes the heritage of remote communities, possible?

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