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Museums, Memory and Meaning. Politics of Identity and Representation in the Context of Sudanese Archaeological Museums

The present synopsis is based on a PhD-project which aims to study the politics of identity and representation in the context of two archaeological museums in Sudan – the first in Khartoum (Sudan National Museum) and the second in a small town situated 600 km north of the capital (Kerma Museum). The approach of the project is anthropological in the sense that it departs from an understanding of the museum as a 'culturally' shaped institution, i.e. an institution shaped by discourse and ideology.

The foundation of the first museum in Sudan in 1904 originates from the British colonial period. Since the early years of its existence, the museum displayed items related to Sudanese material culture. The ethnographic objects procured through colonial conquest originated mainly from the peripheral and remote areas of the country whereas for reasons related to the history of discovery and colonization, the archaeological findings originated mostly from excavations and surveys in the Nile Valley. While the ethnographic objects were regarded as 'cultural indices' testifying to the living traditions of indigenous peoples, the archaeological artefacts were important regalia for the secular colonial state. Anthony Arkell, the first Commissioner for Archaeology and Anthropology for the Sudan, argued in this sense «the importance of archaeology for creating a national history to which the Sudanese people could relate» (Trigger 1994, p. 334).

The incipient dichotomization and hierarchisation in the interpretation of cultural heritage in favour of archaeological artefacts and monuments from the Nile Valley increased in the aftermath of independence and was linked to the discoveries made in the context of the great Nubian campaign. While the archaeological findings were transferred to the newly

constructed building of the Sudan National Museum at the Nile Avenue, attempts to relocate and enlarge the Ethnographic Museum failed. Inaugurated in 1956 as branch of the Sudan National Museum, it was reorganized and reopened under the direction of the German ethnologist Lothar Stein in 1972 at its initial premise in a former officer's club (Stein 2010, p. 300). In 2002, the Ethnographic Museum was administratively separated from the Sudan National Museum and renamed Sudan Civilization Institute. While the National Corporation for Antiquities and Museums (NCAM) is a well-established institution with several dozens of employees and an appropriate budget, the Sudan Civilization Institute is rather marginalized and neglected. In this sense, the dichotomization between 'tribal societies' and 'high civilizations' is closely mirrored in the politics of museum display and representation. However, the dichotomizing and hierarchising view on the Sudanese past is increasingly challenged both by scholars and representatives of the civil society. For instance, critical voices point on the paradox, that although Nubia is portrayed in museum contexts as the cradle of Sudanese civilization, the Nubian language and cultural heritage are verging on extinction. They further call for a fair and equal representation of all people and societies in order to come up with ICOM's (International Council of Museums) definition of a Museum as a «permanent institution in the service of society and its development» (point 3. of the statutes of the International Council of Museums).

In a comparative perspective between the Sudan National Museum (seen as the repository of the national history) and the Kerma Museum (which aims at tracing the history of Kerma), the proposed study will explore the moments and strategies of how hegemonic forms of representation are perpetuated and/or challenged within museum practice and discourse.

It is against the background of these considerations that the following working hypotheses prove to be fruitful:

(1) The traditional understanding of museums as promoters of national unity is inextricably linked to hegemonic ideologies of representation. These prevailing ideologies of colonial institutions and policies persisted after independency and are only gradually challenged by scholars and activists from the civil society. The following quotation by Edward Said best illustrates the role of intellectuals in this process:

«The intellectual's role is first to present alternative narratives and other perspectives on history than those provided by the combatants on behalf of official memory and national identity – who tend to work in terms of falsified unities, the manipulation of demonized or distorted representations of undesirable and/or excluded populations, (...)» (Said 2001, p. 34).

This understanding of the intellectual's role is akin to Antonio Gramsci's concept of the 'organic intellectual' (cp. Gramsci 1971, p. 6 ff.) as the one who negotiates the contrast between thought and action.

- (2) The conception of the museum as an institution that shapes and manipulates cultural heritage in order to reify constructions of national culture and identity is giving way to an understanding of the museum as a 'contact zone' or a 'civic laboratory'.

On the one hand, this hypothesis draws from James Clifford's view on museums as being involved in «an ongoing historical, political, moral *relationship* - a power-charged set of exchanges, of push and pull» (Clifford 1997, p.192, his emphasis). The museum as a 'contact zone' (in opposition to the model of the museum as a frontier) is a space of ongoing exchange, negotiation and communication between museum authorities and community groups in which both sides need to make adjustments.

On the other hand, the hypothesis builds on insights from Tony Bennett's conception of museums as civic and reformatory apparatuses (Bennett 2005, p. 539). The value of this conception, according Bennett, «depends on the light that such an analogy is able to shed on the modus operandi of museums as technologies that, by connecting specific forms of expertise to programmes of social management, operate in registers that are simultaneously epistemological and civic » (Bennett 2005, p. 522).

A critical evaluation of the above stated hypotheses will strengthen the connection between theory and practice in the context of museum ethics and might have a direct implication on the daily practice of museum work and heritage management by enhancing the capacity for self-reflexivity of the various actors involved in the domain of heritage-making and heritage management in Sudan.

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