

Fashion Meets Archeology: Safeguarding the Heritage of Sudan Countering Cultural Appropriation. A Conversation with Ahmed H. A. Adam.

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Professor Ahmed Hussein Abdelrahman Adam: Associate Professor in the Department of Archaeology and Head of the Directorate for University Museums (University of Khartoum). He is also the Director of The Suakin and the Red Sea Project for Archaeological, Environmental and Cultural Studies and Co-Director of The University College London — University of Khartoum — NCAM Expedition to the South Gezira (Sudan). Currently, he is a researcher at the Faculty of Communication, Culture and Society at the Università della Svizzera Italiana, Lugano.

Piancazzo: This conversation takes place after our previous discussions in which we noticed a lot of intrinsic relations between the analysis of fashion, from a cultural point of view, and archaeology. Before delving into this topic, I would like to give the interview path following your paper “Archaeology in Sudan: A Sudanese Perspective Archaeology in Sudan: A Sudanese Perspective”. Here, you stated “Up to the 1960s, the interpretation of Sudanese heritage by European archaeologists was obsessed by a concept that both manifested and justified a colonial policy”¹. At the same time, by appealing to inspiration² and traditionally placing fashion in the dream worlds, the fashion industry justifies its relationship with colonial practices³. Could you please explain in which ways colonial policies affected the study of historical manufacture, for example in relation to fashion, giving me some examples?

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1. Ahmed Adam and Shadia Taha, *Archaeology in Sudan: A Sudanese Perspective Archaeology in Sudan: A Sudanese Perspective*, 2022, 5 <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190854584.013.565>
2. Minh-Ha T. Pham. “Racial Plagiarism and Fashion,” *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking*, Vol. 4, n. 3 (2017): 67–80, <https://doi.org/10.14321/qed.4.3.0067>.
3. Mariella Lorusso. “The Global ‘Wardrobe’. Ethnic Counter-Conquest in the Language of Fashion,” *ZoneModa Journal*, Vol. 9 n. 2, (2019): 89–102, 98, <https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2611-0563/9967>.

Adam: The colonial era witnessed the birth of Gordon College, later the University of Khartoum the educational institution. After the establishment of the university. One of the results of their activities was the curtailment of the Arabic language in northern Sudan in particular, to push it towards Britain and the West, while southern Sudan, which was mostly Christian, remained far from learning Arabic. The corollary of English endeavors was the spread of Western culture in clothing and ideas and everything.

Piancazzo: In that paper you stated that “there are very few postcolonial countries whose laws provide for the protection of living traditions, intangible heritage, cultural landscapes, maritime heritage, vernacular architecture, traditional knowledge, living heritage, and other forms of heritage representations.”⁴. Do you think that this lack of legal protection for heritage allows cultural appropriation, making the perpetuation of colonial practices still possible and, in a way, making the dissemination of knowledge more difficult?

Adam: Cultural heritage can offer tangible and intangible traces of the past. A past that shapes cultural identity for nations and communities, so heritage is a vehicle of memory, that contributes to historical knowledge, but can remain marked by a certain form of subjectivism during the conservation operation, for which heritage professionals and representatives and the authorities are responsible. Yet, the responsibility for conserving cultural heritage also implies the need to avoid any loss of heritage and to fight against oblivion, so who gets to decide what is considered heritage according to the law, and whether there is something such as a collective human right to cultural heritage, as some of the countries in Africa signed for the second Hague convention for the protection of cultural heritage, Sudan exception. So, it is very important to know what cultural heritage should be remembered, and what is to be protected and promoted, as normally and traditionally, the State is perceived as the steward of cultural heritage and therefore must protect it, notably by elaborating heritage policies, adopting legal measures, and providing financial support. But how is it possible to regulate such complex matters? Especially in a multicultural society where several cultural identities, and therefore several cultural heritages, coexist with lack of funds and interest and lack of awareness.

Piancazzo: In the same work you argued that dividing the field of heritage into cultural and natural sites, as proposed in the 1972 World Heritage Convention of the World Heritage Committee can be an oversimplified division and problematic. In this perspective, the fixed study of cultures can give insufficient attention not only to the intangible heritage for example related to practices such as ceremonies but could also led to a wrong or not exhaustive reading of objects that relates with these practices. Do you agree?

Adam: This is what happens exactly according to the lack of information and scarcity of training in the cultural heritage’s research.

Piancazzo: In our previous talks you showed me an object, that in my perspective of Fashion Scholars it is a fashion item, since it is related to the human body. Could you please mention something about the hairpin?

Adam: The hairpin, crafted from bones or ivory, derives from the Sudan and African culture, it was a part of hair combs and used in Sudan for decoration besides brushing hair which is the main function. To sculpt this pin, the artisan would have used a type of early hand-turned lathe exclusive to Sudan and Ethiopia. The pin has been made in one or more than one sections with a decorative band of ebony inserted between the lower and upper sections. The pin exhibits a lovely tapered form that culminates into a thin pointed end. It is still used in South Sudan and Eastern Sudan by some tribes in these regions.

Piancazzo: Now, I will show you some pictures, and I will ask you to comment.

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Adam: So, when you see pictures with these cowrie shells [Figure 1], and I'm doing research about cowrie shells, for me, the first thing is decoration, because of the design of the cowrie shells, that is fantastic, very nice and it is an international object. But one more thing is that some people in Africa believe that cowrie shells can protect you from magic. People use it to protect themselves, like an amulet. Moreover, in the past cowrie shells were used as currency, so they are essential. These shells besides decoration, up today are used to predict the future, if you want to get married, to find something you lost for a long time, read the future in general. In the other picture [Figure 2], cowrie shells are with beads, and beads are very important. Beads were used also like an amulet, and they had the same use as cowrie shells, so that's why they are essential.



Figure 1: Skirt decorated with beads. Underwear shop. June 2023. Property of the author.

Piancazzo: So, in Sudan you have object like these necklaces or bracelets, that are made with beads and shells.

Adam: Yes, and it is a kind of appropriation. Even the colour of the bead is the same. When we find beads in our excavations, we are very happy because beads have many meanings, and it is a matter of identity [Figure 3].

Piancazzo: What do you think about finding these objects in Europe, sold as summer stuff?

Adam: I said that in the past shells were used as currency. Historically even European population used these shells, but in Africa they have a different meaning, it can be cultural continuity.



Figure 2: Necklace and bracelets. Shop. June 2023. Property of the author.

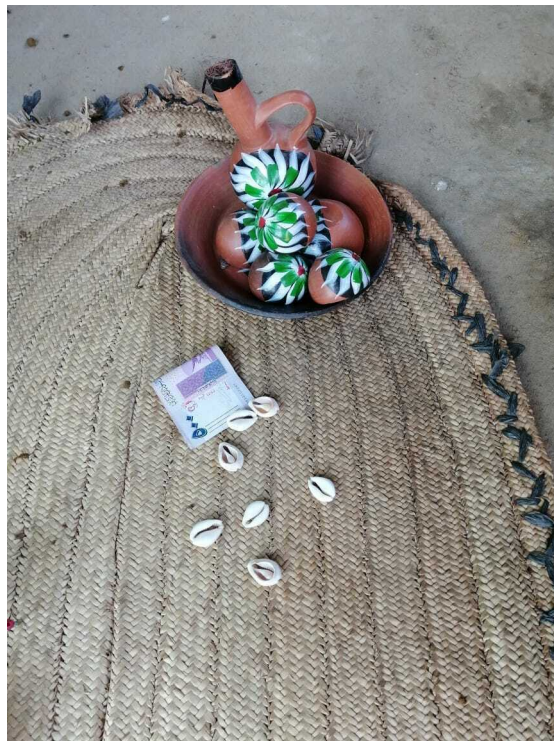


Figure 3: Woman using cowrie shell to read the future. Sudan 2022 in all Blue Nile and White Nile area. Property of Dr. Adam.

Piancazzo: At this point, I have a last question. In your article I used as framework for this interview, you stated: “Heritage has been employed in several countries worldwide for their state formation. In several African countries, the Middle East, and Europe, archaeology has been used as a vehicle of a national pride, and museums were used as a medium for these messages.”⁵ I would like to know, according to your studies, if Sudanese fashion could fit this statement and in which way Sudan is taking actions to preserve its identity and subsequently avoid appropriation above all from Western countries.

Adam: Sudan has established several museums to preserve its cultural identity, and the names of kings and queens have become a source of pride for revolutionaries such as Kandaka which represent all Sudanese women as she Roman during Meroitic time (350 BC - 350 AD), Sudanese are always proud of their culture and history. But I must add one more thing, some people in Sudan feel discrimination, but after the beginning of the Sudanese revolution in December 2018 people turn back to the history, looking for unity from the past. Sudanese became aware of the history, visiting museums, appreciating their history and their roots. We are all Sudanese, so proud of our history, culture and identity.

Piancazzo: Dear Ahmed, thank you for the discussion, and I hope you will work in the field of fashion and cultural artefacts in Sudan again.

5. Adam, p. 11

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