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The Kirwan Memorial Lecture

Forts in Upper Nubia and a new perspective on the first centuries of Alwa and Makuria 1-21
Mariusz Drzewiecki

Reports

Sai Island: defensive architecture of a New Kingdom town in Nubia 22-38
Franck Monnier and Vincent Francigny

Sai Island: medieval architectural remains of a flourishing era 39-52
Hugo Dussart and Vincent Francigny

Newly identified macrobotanical remains from Old Dongola (14th-18th centuries AD), Northern Sudan: a breakthrough in archaeobotanical research **53-64**
Mohammed Nasreldein

Keepers of tradition: preliminary remarks from the ethnographic investigation of customs associated with clothing and authority among Sudanese women **65-72**
Joanna A. Ciesielska, Agnes Dudek and Fatima Edres Ali Mahmoud

Jebel Barkal 2018–2023: new research on the Napatan and Meroitic city 73-98
Geoff Emberling, Tim Skuldbøl, El–Hassan Ahmed Mohamed, Sami Elamin, Gregory Tucker, Pawel Wolf, Burkart Ullrich, Suzanne Davis, Saskia Büchner–Matthews, Dobiesława Bagińska, Rebecca Bradshaw, Tohamy Abulgasim, Jan Peeters, Timotheus Winkels, Richard Redding, Anna den Hollander, Dorian Q Fuller, Abagail Breidenstein, Taylor Bryanne Woodcock, and Jochen Hallof

Rescue excavations at Jebel Barkal by Dongola University's Department of Archeology (Seasons 14 and 15) **99-109**
Mohamed Fath al-Rahman Ahmed Idris

Survey of the Meroitic site of el-Hassa. Understanding the links between the Amun temple of Amanakhareqerama and the settlement **110-131**
Tomasz Herbich and Marie Millet

Archaeological discoveries in the hills and coastline of the Red Sea State, Eastern Sudan 2016-2021. Preliminary report **132-151**
Fakhri Hassan Abdallah Hassan

The Sudan Military Railway between Wadi Halfa and Abidiya 152-193
Derek A. Welsby

Archaeological and paleoenvironmental survey in the White Nile state (first season, 2022) 194-210
Hamad Mohamed Hamdeen, Al Bagir Badwi, Siddig Mahadi, Manahil Mohammed Farah, Mukhtar Maalieldin and Abdelhai Abdelsawi

Studies

Excavating 'Areika': Cuthbert Balleine and the 1907 Eckley B. Coxe Jr. Expedition to Nubia 211-222
T. O. Moller

Metal anklets at Faras and other Meroitic sites: form, function, chronology and a response to Vila's 'gens à anneaux' **223-256**
Henry Cosmo Bishop-Wright

Darfur in the early 1980s: a photographic record of communities, craft, and change 257-266
Zoe Cormack

Further insights into a forgotten aspect of Meroitic religion: the amulets of Apedemak 267-278
Mahmoud A. Emam

The ancient Nubian skeletal collection at Universidad Complutense de Madrid, Spain 279-289
Mar Casquero, Víctor M. Fernández, Salomé Zurinaga Fernández-Toribio, Mohamed Saad and Luis Ríos

Sudan in Swansea 290-302
Kenneth Griffin

Obituaries

Professor Dr Ibrahim Musa Mohamed Hamdon – Director General of NCAM **303-305**
An homage to his work
Ghalia Gar el-Nabi

Professor Khider Adam Eisa (1947–2023), Cairo 306-307
Professor Intisar Soghayroun el-Zein

Professor Ibrahim Mousa Mohamed Hamdoun (1953-2024), Cairo 307-308
Professor Intisar Soghayroun el-Zein

Professor Abdul Rahim Mohamed Khabeer (--2024), State of South Sudan 308-310
Professor Intisar Soghayroun el-Zein

Professor Mahmoud El-Tayeb (1957–2024), Poland 310-311
Professor Intisar Soghayroun el-Zein

Professor Herman Bell (10th March 1933-7th February 2023) 311-314
Kirsty Rowan

Henry (Harry) Sidney Smith (June 14th, 1928–September 8th, 2024) 314-318
Robert Morkot

Biographies

Miscellanies

Front cover. General view of Site WNP-J-22\1, Al-Jabalain, White Nile State. Photo by Hamad Mohammed Hamdeen.

Darfur in the early 1980s: a photographic record of communities, craft, and change

Zoe Cormack

Among the pictorial collections of the Department of Africa, Oceania and the Americas at the British Museum are two important photographic collections from Darfur. The photographs were taken between 1979 and 1985 by Paul Wilson (who worked as a teacher in Buram, South Darfur) and Natalie Tobert (who worked first as a teacher in El Fasher and subsequently conducted anthropological research in North Darfur). Together, they comprise 325 black and white prints and around 1000 colour slides. They were given to the British Museum alongside object collections, assembled contemporaneously by each donor. This article introduces the collections and explains current work to make them digitally accessible. It concludes with some reflections about the value of photographic archives in cultural protection projects.

At the time of writing in 2024, these images were in the process of being digitised as part of a British Council 'Cultural Protection Fund' project called 'Safeguarding Sudan's Living Heritage' (SSLH).[1] This wider project (of which the British Museum Department of Africa, Oceania and the Americas and Department of Egypt and Sudan are partners) was working to document, preserve and promote aspects of Sudan's intangible cultural heritage that are at risk from the effects of conflict and climate change. The Darfur photographs (and the Darfur collections at the British Museum more broadly) were identified as a priority area because of the devastating impacts of political and humanitarian crises in Darfur since the mid-1980s (Flint and de Waal 2005). As a result of these protracted disasters, Darfur's heritage is increasingly endangered. Photographs and objects from Darfur in museum collections form an important material record and provide an opportunity for UK based museum curators to join efforts in Sudan to document and research cultural heritage at risk (e.g., Ibrahim 2023, 265-286).

Our attention to the Darfur collections also builds on growing scholarly and curatorial interest in the photographic record from Africa. The history of European photography in Africa has a complex and often troubling past, entangled in colonial practices of categorisation and control (Landau and Kaspin 2002; Basu 2021). However, in recent years, studies of African photographs have demonstrated the value of these collections for recovering African perspectives from the colonial archive, deepened understandings of the visual construction of anthropological knowledge, and generating new historical insights (Morton and Newbury 2015; Hayes and Minkley 2019). This work has also established the importance of photographic collections for museums in building relationships with communities. When approached collaboratively and with care, the sharing of historic photographs can help to build trust and offer ways of returning research and reconnecting with communities (Morton and Oteyo 2009; Carrier and Quaintance 2012; Nur Goni 2018).

Browsing the Darfur photographs in the pictorial store for the Department for Africa, Oceania and the Americas at the beginning of 'Safeguarding Sudan's Living Heritage' (SSLH) project, we were immediately struck by the importance of these photographs. Both Wilson and the Tobert had spent many years living in Darfur, and their collections showed very close and sympathetic portraits of life there. They were clearly the product of relationships of trust. As part of the SSLH project, we had initially planned to share

[1] https://www.sslh.online/en. The digitisation was led by Zoe Cormack (Project Curator: Sudan's Living Heritage, British Museum) and involved two volunteers: Sabrin Ahmed and Emily Lewis-Wright, with the oversight and advice of Julie Hudson (Curator: Africa, British Museum). The photographs and slides were digitised using an Epsom Expression 10,000 flatbed scanner. Slides were scanned at a resolution of 800dpi, photographs at 400dpi. The images were described using information from the donors, and museum records (and in some cases, from cross referencing with the photographer's publications and between images, and in consultation with Natalie Tobert and the family of Paul Wilson).

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digitised images from these collection with community groups in Darfur and Khartoum. We envisaged using photo-elicitation (sharing the photographs with community members and seeking their insights and observations on changing practices) as a tangible starting point for wider discussions about the impacts of conflict and climate change on living heritage in Darfur. However, the devasting ongoing conflict in Sudan (2023 to present) made these plans impossible. Instead, we have progressed the digitisation, aiming to make these images available for the future, and have been exploring, in consultation with experts from Darfur, other ways to connect the images with communities. Following these consultations and an internal ethical review, digitised images are being made available on the British Museum's Collection Online database.[2] Several are included in a virtual museum of Sudanese heritage being developed by the SSLH project.[3]

Paul Wilson collection

Paul Wilson's collection was assembled when he worked as an English teacher at Buram Boys' School in South Darfur in 1980-1982. Wilson had a lifelong engagement with Sudan. After moving on from teaching, he became a book dealer specialising in rare books on Sudan and Africa. He was commissioned by the businessman Mahmoud Salih to assemble the collection of the Sudan Library in Bergen and was working with the Emir of Kano to establish a library in northern Nigeria. He died in 2018 (Johnson 2019).

Wilson sold 219 objects to the British Museum (then the Museum of Mankind) in three packages in 1980, 1981 and 1982.[4] These were mostly (but not exclusively) assembled in South Darfur. They mainly represent pastoralist material culture – particularly from Rizayqat, Felatta and Baggara communities. The photographs were given alongside the objects as a way of contextualising the material culture. They include 162 black and white prints and 331 colour slides. The black and white prints were described precisely by Wilson, so we know the locations they were taken and, often, the names of people in them. The slides are less well described: 139 have a location and date, while the remaining 192 are only known to have been taken between 1980 and 1982. Most are likely to have been taken in South Darfur, where Wilson was based. However, he also travelled across Darfur and across the Bahr el-Arab river into what is now South Sudan.

One of Wilson's objectives for these photographs was to give additional context and information about the material culture that he had collected. Figure 1 shows the inside of a tent, where objects similar to those Wilson sold to the Museum can be seen hanging on tent poles. These include three *omra* (a basket container), one *kerio* (a basket container with a long neck) and a *hamira shuf* (part of a ceremonial camel trapping with tassels, decorated with cowrie shells). Other photographs show the makers and sellers of those objects. Figure 2 shows a woman making a mat, similar to those Wilson sold to the Museum.

While part of Wilson's intention was to illustrate the cultural context of the objects he had assembled, many of the photographs go beyond a strict focus on material culture. They depict relaxed and friendly scenes, such as picnics with other staff from Buram Boys' school (Figure 3). A cluster of images was taken in the camel herding Rizayqat camp of Shaykh Mohammed Sayara Abu Zakariyya at a place called Umm Korara, five miles south-east of Rajaj. Some of these (including Figure 1) focus on material culture, but they also show Wilson's friends and acquaintances in their everyday lives. These young women (Figure 4) are sharing a joke while collecting water.

There are also many portraits, including a merchant from Buram called Ahmad Khojali and his daughter Shaardiya (Figures 5 and 6). Others depict notable people, such as Margi Daud who is identified as the

[2] For more information about this process please contact zcormack@britishmuseum.org.
[3] See Britishmuseum.org/collection and https://www.sslh.online/en/blog.
[4] The object collections are Af1980,22.1 to 92; Af1981,18.1 to 70; Af1982,17.1 to 57.

Figure 1. Photograph taken by Paul Wilson in the Rizayqat camp of Shaykh Mohammed Sayara Abu Zakariyya at Umm Korara (near Rajaj, South Darfur) in May 1981. Described by Wilson as '3 *omra* and a *kerio*; on right *hamira shuf*'. (Af1981,18.82). Copyright of Paul Wilson © The Trustees of the British Museum.

Figure 2. Photograph taken by Paul Wilson in Rajaj (South Darfur) in May 1981. Described by Wilson as 'making sections of a *birish* mat' (Af1981,18.129). Copyright of Paul Wilson © The Trustees of the British Museum.

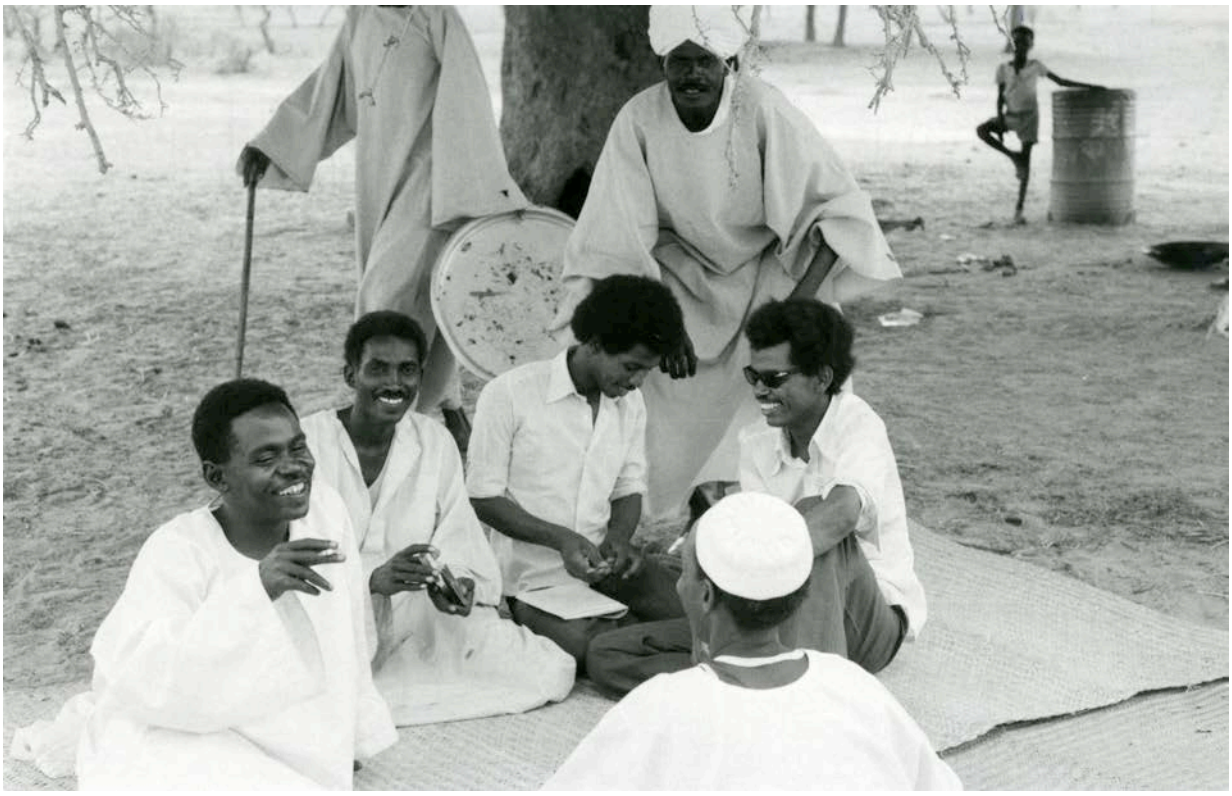

Figure 3. Photograph taken by Paul Wilson in Buram (South Darfur) in April 1981. Described by Wilson as ‘Staff of Buram Boys’ Secondary School on [a] day outing’. (Af1981,18.228). Copyright of Paul Wilson © The Trustees of the British Museum.

Figure 4. Photograph taken by Paul Wilson in the Rizayqat camp of Shaykh Mohammed Sayara Abu Zakariyya at Umm Korara (near Rajaj, South Darfur) in May 1981. Described by Wilson as ‘Rizayqat jammala girls at the well collecting water’. (Af1981,18.97). Copyright of Paul Wilson © The Trustees of the British Museum.

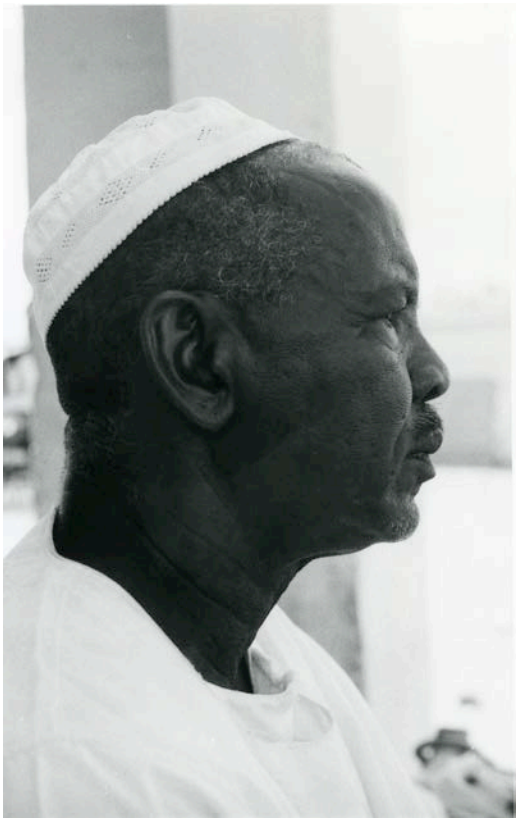

Figure 5. Photograph taken by Paul Wilson in Buram (South Darfur) in May 1981. Described by Wilson as 'Ahmad Khojali, Buram merchant'. (Af1981,18.179). Copyright of Paul Wilson © The Trustees of the British Museum.

Figure 6. Photograph taken by Paul Wilson in Buram or Nyala (South Darfur) in 1981. Described by Wilson as 'Sha'ardiya *bint* Ahmad Khojali'. (Af1981,18.113). Copyright of Paul Wilson © The Trustees of the British Museum.

Omda of the Felatta community in Rajaj (Figure 7). There are multiple photographs of him and his family, suggesting that Wilson knew them well and was a regular visitor to their home.

The colour slides cover part of South, West, East and Central Darfur – and some of Northern Bahr el-Ghazal in South Sudan. Describing his slides has been more challenging because Wilson provided less information on them. They too show his interest in daily life and many are market scenes. For example, Figure 8 from Jebel Marra shows a woman selling a fermented product called *kalwal*, used as a flavour enhancer and often a famine food.

Natalie Tobert Collection

Natalie Tobert first went to Darfur in 1979, working as an English teacher at El-Fasher Girls' School. She then returned for doctoral research on pottery making and made further trips, the longest in 1982 and 1984-1985. Tobert spent much of that time in the area around Kebkebiya in North Darfur. A village called Kireika was the main study village for her PhD. She currently lives in London.

Tobert sold an object collection to the British Museum in 1980 and gave accompanying photographs.[5] The photographic collection includes 161 black and white prints and approximately 700 colour slides. All prints have been digitised and we are in the process of digitising the slides. The prints are relatively

[5] Tobert also sold or donated objects from Darfur to the Horniman Museum in London; the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford; National Museums of Scotland in Edinburgh and the Phoebe A. Hurst Museum of Anthropology (formally Lowie Museum) in Berkeley, California. To the Pitt Rivers she also left field research journals and a collection of prints and slides (which are related to the collection at the British Museum).

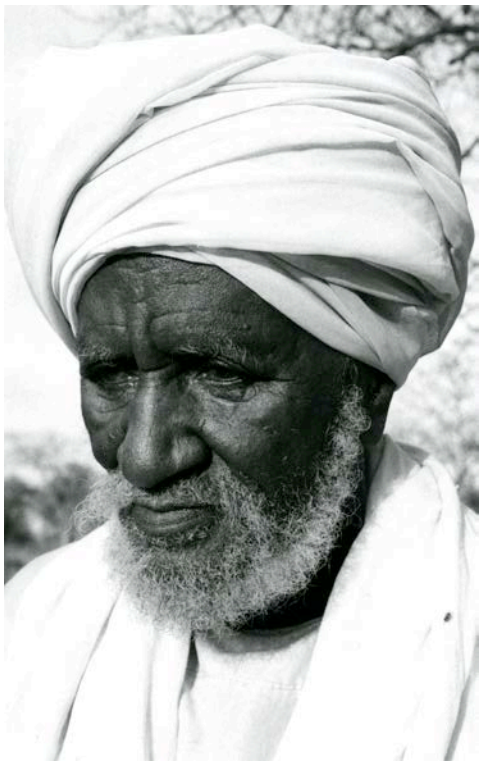

Figure 7. Photograph taken by Paul Wilson in Rajaj (South Darfur) in May 1981. Described by Wilson as 'Omda Margi Daud – chief/'mayor' of Fellata Rajaj'. (Af1981,18.133). Copyright of Paul Wilson ©

well described and many have been featured by Tobert in small exhibitions or publications. While cataloguing, we have been cross referencing her published descriptions with information from her field diaries (in the Pitt Rivers Museum) and between annotations on the slides and prints.

Most of the photographs were taken in the context of Tobert's ethnographic research on pottery making and the settlement patterns of itinerant Zaghawa potters and blacksmiths in North Darfur (e.g., Tobert 1985a; 1985b; 1987; 1988). The potters with whom she worked spent six months a year farming, and in the other six months they would move to commercial centres, where they set up small encampment where they made pots for sale. Zaghawa society is highly stratified, and potters and blacksmiths were at the bottom of the social hierarchy. Craftspeople travelled long distances and had extensive networks across Darfur that they relied on to subsist using their creative skills. The images therefore feature some of the most marginalised people in Darfur society. They give an insight into the lives of people who made objects similar to the ones in the Museum's collection. Figure 9 shows a blacksmith making a throwing knife, much like those on display in the Sainsbury African Galleries at the British Museum.

The collection includes close portraits of several of these women potters, their families, and their work. These intimate

Figure 8. Photograph taken by Paul Wilson on a trip to Jebel Marra (West Darfur) between 1980 and 1981, showing

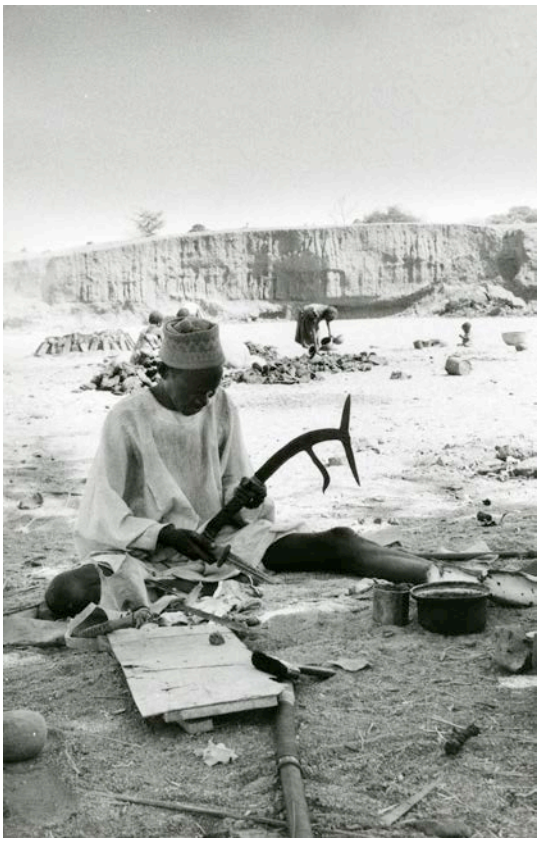

Figure 9. Photograph taken by Natalie Tobert in Kebkebiya (North Darfur) in 1982. Showing a blacksmith at work on the dry bed of the Wadi Borgo. This blacksmith is identified by Tobert as the husband of Miriam (daughter of Fatna). (Af1980,21.264). Copyright of Natalie Tobert © The

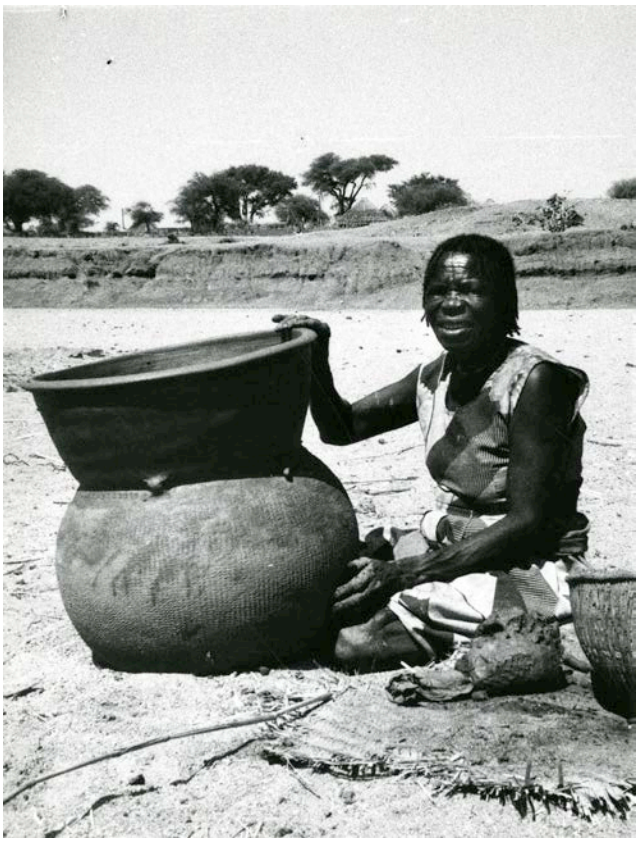

Figure 10. Photograph taken by Natalie Tobert in Kebkebiya (North Darfur) in 1982. Showing Fatna, a Zaghawa potter working in the dry bed of the Wadi Borgo. (Af1980,21.252). Copyright of Natalie Tobert © The Trustees of the British Museum.

Figure 11. Photograph taken by Natalie Tobert in Kebkebiya (North Darfur) in 1982 showing Fatna, a Zaghawa potter. This colour image of Fatna was identified during the digitisation project (Af1980,21.729). Copyright of Natalie Tobert ©

Figure 12. Photograph taken by Natalie Tobert in North Darfur (Kebkebiya?) Showing the temporary home of a potter on a dry riverbed (Af1980,21.302). Copyright of Natalie Tobert © The Trustees of the British Museum.

Figure 13. Photograph taken by Natalie Tobert in Tina (North Darfur) in 1984. Described by Tobert as 'Empty granaries in an abandoned house' (Af1980,21.828). Copyright of Natalie Tobert © The Trustees of the British Museum.

Figure 14. Photograph taken by Natalie Tobert in Um Boro (North Darfur) in 1984. Showing sand encroaching around a mud and thatch house (Af1980,21.830). Copyright of Natalie Tobert © The Trustees of the British Museum.

portraits are a key feature of the collection. Figure 10 shows a woman identified by Tobert as 'Fatna' whom she met and photographed while she was living with her daughter Miriam in a camp on the dry bed of the Wadi Borgo in Kebkebiya. This camp consisted of 16 other family groups (women and children only) who lived and worked together. Tobert (who was herself a potter) closely documented how the vessels were made, where the raw materials were gathered and where they were sold. She visited the women potters in the small market towns where they sold their finished wares.

In the slides, we are starting to find additional colour images of the women – including Fatna in Figure 11. The colour detail reveals the ash on her arm, as the image was captured as she removed fired vessels from the kiln (visible behind her). Figure 12 shows a roofless thatched structure (similar to the one visible behind Fatna in Figure 11) providing an insight into the potters' lives. These were the temporary houses the potters lived in while working. The encampments were set up on dry riverbeds, close to the source of clay.

The final batch of images come from Tobert's field trip to North Darfur from September 1984 to March 1985. This trip coincided with a period of drought and famine – as rain and crops failed for several consecutive years. There is a notable change in the subject of the images, many of which show hardship and crisis. They present an opportunity to explore what photographic archives may reveal about the impact of drought and displacement.

At one level, the images show how rural life was pushed to breaking point by the 1984/5 famine. An image (Figure 13) from Tina (a town on the border between Chad and Sudan) shows three granaries (*dabanga*) that had been left empty in an abandoned house. Traditional methods of storing grain had become obsolete because there was no grain to store. A cluster of photographs from this trip (including Figure 14) depict sand encroaching into villages and homesteads, leading residents to leave these areas. She wrote 'sand dunes had crept forwards to such an extent that they threatened to engulf houses... in some places the weight of sand was so great that it forced down compound walls [and] whole village populations had moved together' (Tobert 1985b).

Other contemporary sources provide similar descriptions of disruptions to the physical and moral landscape, as a consequence of the failed rains. In a village near Kutum, the anthropologist Alex de Waal recorded a woman's complaint that 'we are eating the desert' as sand was literally engulfing houses and filling empty cooking pots (de Waal 2005, 89).

Reflection: digitising photographs during crisis

One reason for digitising these photographs under the framework of a Cultural Protection Fund project was recognition of the ongoing impacts of conflict and climate change in Darfur. The subjects of many of the images represent now endangered cultural practices. From my own perspective as a museum curator, the work of cataloguing and digitising these images is important because it makes them more widely accessible.

While researching and documenting these photographs, I have also reflected on the value they may have for understanding the impacts of conflict and climate change in Darfur. Through these collections, we see communities in a process of decisive social and environmental change. This is particularly evident in Natalie Tobert's later images of the drought in North Darfur in 1984. As Tobert herself has noted, itinerant Zaghawa potters (like Fatna, Figures 10 and 11) had already experienced the Sahelian droughts of the 1970s. The commercial necessity of moving from place to place to make and sell pottery was itself a response to past instability and climate shocks. Mobility provided a form of protection in 1984 because potters had built networks across Darfur. They could draw on these networks when drought and famine came again. This was a part of their long-term strategy to mitigate against the impacts of insecurity.

These photographs give us a rare insight into the adaptive strategies and the lives of people who worked in small scale creative industries in Darfur in the 1980s. While it would be wrong to romanticise their experiences, they can help to visualise and evidence cultural practices for dealing with uncertainty, climate change and crisis. These are insights that may be more important today than ever.

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