



Sudan Memory: conserving and promoting Sudanese cultural and documentary heritage

Marilyn Deegan

Introduction

While Sudan's archaeological heritage is well-known through the many local and foreign teams that have been working in the country for more than 100 years, its non-archaeological culture is less known and understood outside the country, and much of this is in danger of deterioration and loss. Within Sudan, the Arabisation of recent decades has been a force for flattening the less mainstream cultures and languages, and the Bashir government implemented policies that have been damaging for the arts, with cinemas and theatres closing, music and musicians banned, and writers and artists leaving the country. Much of Sudan's intangible tribal culture is not recorded, or is recorded in obsolete formats or on rapidly decaying media, and ancient practices are being lost to younger members of society, with their reliance on smartphones and social media. But Sudanese people are justly proud of their culture and are passionate about its survival. Given the ethnic diversity of the country, with 19 major ethnic groups and almost 600 subgroups who between them speak more than 100 languages and dialects, the richness of the culture cannot be overstated. Urban areas too, especially Khartoum, are highly cosmopolitan, with inhabitants from neighbouring countries as well as significant and long-established European populations: British, Greek, Italian, Armenian, etc. This all contributes to a varied and vibrant cultural milieu.

The artefacts that represent the many cultures of Sudan include film, video and audio tapes, manuscripts, photographs, art works, and documents in archives throughout the country. The extent and scope of these is vast, and many are in a poor state, disintegrating, not well catalogued or curated, and in need of some kind of preservation. To give some examples, Sudan has one of the largest film archives in the whole of Africa, the Sudan Film Archive, containing news reels, reportages and some documentaries based at the Sudan Radio and TV Corporation (SRTC). It has content going back to the 1940s and 50s, with around 13,000 film rolls, mostly 16mm and 35mm. These are of crucial importance as they record many different occasions and events in Sudanese public and private life: the first meeting of the Sudanese parliament in the run-up to independence; the independence ceremony; Queen Elizabeth visiting Sudan in 1965; regional dances and music; nature in different regions of Sudan; the industrialisation of the country in the 1960s and 70s; the Sudanese railways, which used to have the longest network in the whole of Africa; cultural practices. They are in a very poor state, and scanning is the only realistic option for saving the content. SRTC also has a large archive of radio and video

tapes, some of which have been digitised, many more of which need conservation and copying.

The National Records Office works under the auspices of the Council of Ministers and receives government documentation in hard copy. They claim to have items that go back as far as 1504, and it holds around 30 million documents (Plates 1 and 2). Of particular interest to the project are 40,000-50,000 letters from the Mahadia revolution/uprising at the end of the 19th century. The Ministry of Culture has a photo archive of millions of negatives and prints from the beginning of the 20th century until the 1960s, covering a vast range of topics. The National Corporation for Antiquities and Museums also has an archive of many thousands of slides, photographs, and large format maps and plans of archaeological sites (Plates 3 and 4).

The University of Khartoum is a major repository of important cultural records. The Sudan Library, part of the main university library, has the most important collection of books and manuscripts in the country, dating back around 800



Plate 1. Photograph of Halfa Reach (1920s), National Records Office.



Plate 2. Photograph of British soldiers embarking on a train, National Records Office.

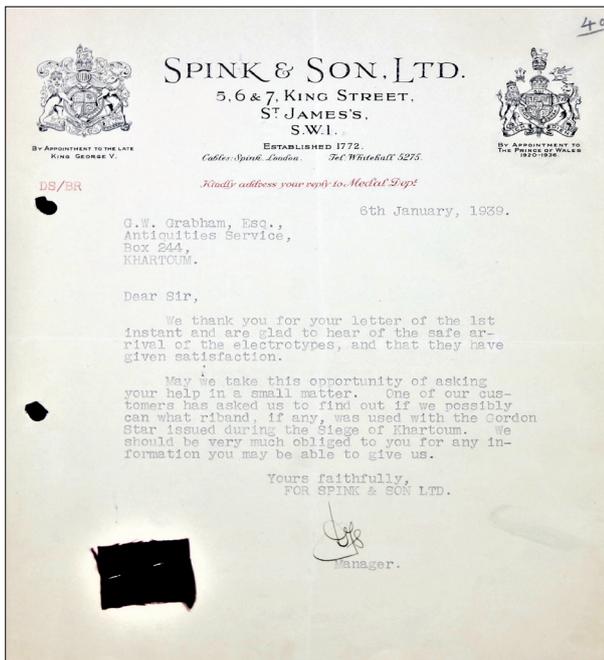


Plate 3. 1939 letter, National Museum, NCAM.

years, and it functioned as the National Library until relatively recently. It has manuscripts that go back to the birth of Islam, as well as more modern materials: newspapers, magazines, printed books, and maps. It is also rich in content concerning the period of British rule in Sudan (Plates 5 and 6). We hope to be able to capture content from the Folklore Archive in the Institute of Africa and Asian studies, which holds mostly sound and film. There are more than 5000 sound tapes, cassettes and reel to reels, and around 2000 films on video and DVD. These cover music, folklore, religion and history from different parts of Sudan. The Departments of Archaeology and of Engineering have maps, plans and manuscripts, and the Natural History Museum has a unique collection of the flora and fauna of Sudan that is being photographed for Sudan Memory (Plates 7 and 8). Outside Khartoum, other educational institutions hold significant content. For instance, Nile Valley University in the town of Atbara has local archives containing mostly 19th and 20th century materials, including local documents, some government documents, and some personal archives.

Content is also held in personal collections and in small museums and archives. The largest private photo studio in Sudan, the Al Rashid Studio in Atbara, has 4 million negatives dating back to the 1940s of public, private and family events, as well as of local industries: Atbara is the centre of the railway industry and has a railway museum. Atbara is a politically significant city, being regarded as the cradle of the Sudanese trade union movement and of Sudanese communism. Collections of individual photographers have also been offered to us, such of those of the archaeologist Pawel Wolf who has been photographing the people and landscapes of Sudan for many years. There are also many small museums in towns and villages that hold content of

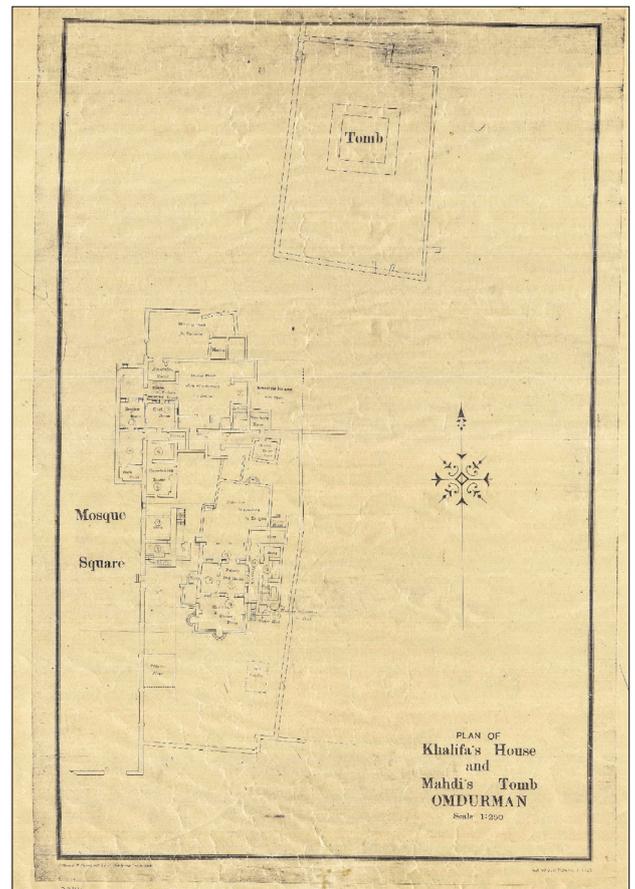


Plate 4. Plan of Khalifa House, National Museum, NCAM.

value and interest to local communities, and families have collections that they are keen to preserve. One personal local collection is the Women's Museum in Nyala in Darfur (Plate 9), and a private collector in Omdurman has set up a museum-like display in his home, with many examples of aging technology (radios, televisions etc.) as well as magazines, newspapers and photographs. Archaeologists from the British Museum recently established a House of Heritage (Beit Lil Turath), in the town of Abri, close to the Amara West archeological site, so that some findings could be displayed, but also to provide a cultural centre where people could share their own collections of artefacts and images (Plates 10 and 11).

The Sudan Memory project had its genesis in a tragic event: the destruction of libraries in Mali in 2012 by rebels and jihadist groups that resulted in the loss of many ancient and unique manuscripts. The Sudanese Association for Archiving Knowledge (SUDAAK) approached the Sudan Archive at the University of Durham for help in finding someone to advise on digitisation, as they feared the loss of much of their own cultural heritage, given the long-term conflicts the country had been and still is facing. Durham in turn contacted the Department of Digital Humanities at King's College London, and we began working with SUDAAK in early 2013.

In 2013, I made an initial visit to Sudan to assess the collections and the potential for digitisation. Many ideas



Plate 5. Front page of *Al Sybian* magazine, 1st January 1956. Independence edition. University of Khartoum.



Plate 7. Snake, Natural History Museum.



Plate 8. Falcon, Natural History Museum.

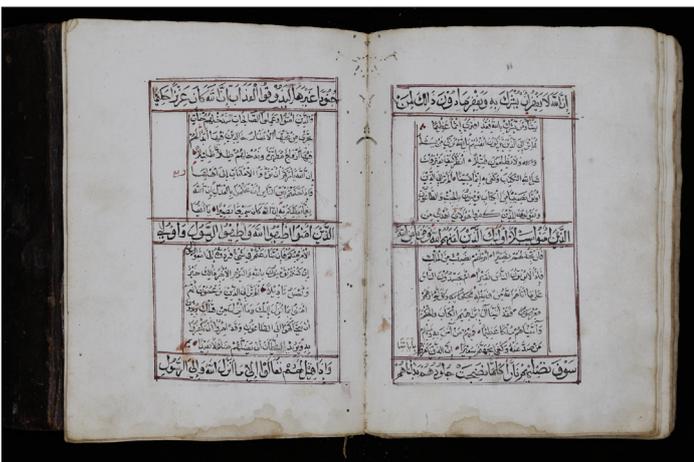


Plate 6. Islamic manuscript, University of Khartoum.



Plate 9. Women's Museum Darfur (photograph: Kate Ashley).

were considered, but without substantial funding they were just dreams. In 2016, the British Council, funded by the UK's Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS), announced a new three-year initiative, the Cultural Protection Fund, targeted at 12 countries in Africa and the Middle East, to promote the protection of cultural content that had been affected by conflict. Sudan was on this list, and the local needs for cultural protection matched very closely with the aims of the fund. A group of institutions led by the Department of Digital Humanities at King's College, including the University of Liverpool, the Sudan National Records Office, Africa City of Technology and the

Sudanese Association for Archiving Knowledge, got together to apply for funds to digitise cultural materials, and to train staff in the archives and museums in Sudan in conservation, digitisation and asset management. First time round we were unsuccessful, but were fortunate enough to secure a large grant at the end of 2017. In 2018, the Cultural Protection Fund also gave support to a related initiative, the Western Sudan Community Museums project for the renovation of 3 museums: Khalifa House in Khartoum, the Sheikan Museum in El Obaid, and the museum in Nyala, Darfur. Besides the renovations, the project is creating community spaces and developing community activities, and Sudan Memory is supplying equipment and training to enable the museums to capture cultural content digitally from the local communities, which will be made available on the Sudan Memory website.

The overriding aim of Sudan Memory is the promotion of the culture of Sudan to its own people and to the wider world. Alongside this is preservation and conservation, skill development, education, the preservation of disappearing cultures, and of personal and family memories. Our initial intention was to establish a professional digitisation service in Khartoum that would serve the public institutions, with roving scanning facilities being sent out to other regions. We hit our first snag within one week of the project starting: institutions refused to send out their content under any circumstances, despite having originally agreed to this. We then proposed sending expert teams into the institutions, which was also refused. The institutions wanted equipment and training in their own premises for capacity building and sustainability. This we agreed to, but it has put a severe strain

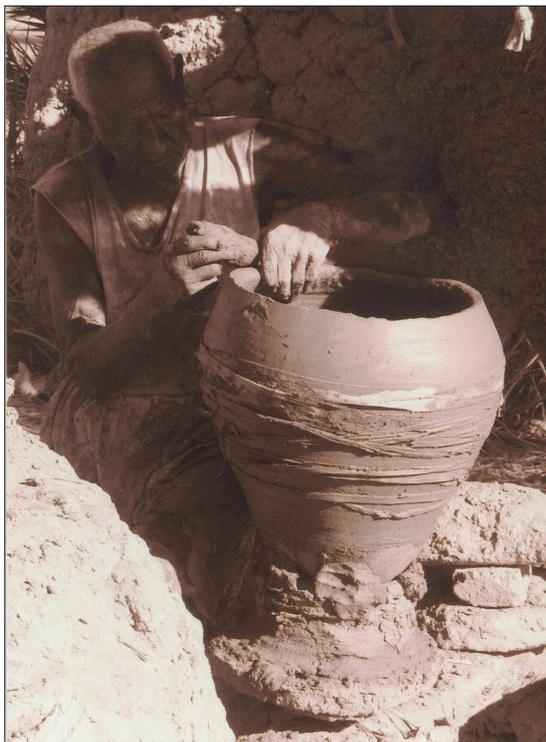


Plate 10. Photograph of potter,
House of Heritage, Abri.



Plate 11. Photograph of a male figure, 1944,
House of Heritage, Abri.



on project resources. We have had to scale back considerably the amount of material that we can capture – instead of being a mass digitisation project, we are creating a curated collection to be presented on a Sudan Memory portal with good metadata, contextual information and stories to connect content.

Why digitisation?

In an ideal world, with substantial funding, the first task of a project to help archive and conserve historical documents in Sudanese archives would be the conservation and protection of the analogue artefacts. But it was clear from our first experiences in Sudan that this is far beyond the scope of a short project, and the best we can aim for with the resources available to us is training and the raising of awareness of the staff in archives in the appropriate handling of their contents. Digitisation allows the creation of surrogates that, while they can never fully replace an original, can at least present an image and preserve its meaning. As Walter Benjamin pointed out “even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its unique existence at the place where it happens to be” (Benjamin 1968, 220). But despite loss of authenticity, digital surrogates offer many advantages. They can be displayed in many places simultaneously; they can be shared and reproduced; they can be saved multiple times for safety. The loss of authenticity can be compensated to some degree with the use of good contextual and explanatory descriptions, and widespread dissemination offers the opportunity for learning and understanding. Sudanese culture will benefit from being better known. The digital of course also has downsides: images need to be protected from unlicensed distribution and commercialisation, and digital data needs a long-term preservation plan if it is not to be subject to deterioration and loss even faster than the originals.

We started from a perspective of first-world assumptions about standards and methods, and I do admit to a certain degree of naivety about working in Sudan. The last big project some of us had been involved in was the Gacaca Archive in Rwanda where we had installed equipment and trained staff to scan around 40 million pages in less than two years. Fresh from this, I thought I had learnt all I needed to know about working in Africa. The lesson (in humility) I learnt is that Africa is a huge and diverse continent and working in one African country does not necessarily give you the skills you need to work in another. Also, as a medievalist and a manuscript specialist, I come from a world of forensic accuracy in digitisation: we want to see every scratch gloss, every hair follicle on the parchment. Damaged and poorly conserved modern papers and film in a country like Sudan are a different proposition, and you have to work out not what is the counsel of perfection, but what is good enough? What is better than doing nothing? Happily, digitisation has moved a long way since the early 1990s, when I began working in this area, and it is possible to get good enough results with lower cost equipment. We are working with a

huge range of types of capture equipment: from the high-end forensic quality scanners we are using at the University of Khartoum and the National Records Office, to mobile phones and low-end scanners costing less than 100 dollars that we will be sending to small villages to capture family documents and photographs.

As ever in digitisation projects, while scanning can be a challenge, metadata is an even bigger one. Working with large institutions like the National Records Office and the National Museum, we were assured that they had catalogues and that we would have access to the records. But the catalogues are many and varied, and much material is not catalogued to the degree we need or in the best way for online retrieval: they have gaps and many documents are misplaced, e.g. put in the wrong box; some cataloguing is only on box level, and some items are not catalogued at all. Scanning can be done at the click of a button (once the equipment is set up). Metadata takes much longer. We have therefore had to set up our own relatively simple cataloguing system, and to train the Sudanese staff in this. We are also building a custom thesaurus that is easy to use, but sufficiently rich for browse and retrieval. Metadata and keyword assignment are difficult tasks for even trained librarians and archivists; for the untrained staff that we work with they are formidably hard and results need a great deal of checking. One of the most challenging problems is the paucity of information that comes with the content. When the images are made available we hope to enhance the descriptions by crowdsourcing and asking users to add to the metadata.

Challenges

One of the biggest problems we have had in the institutions has been the low level of skills of the staff assigned to the project in some institutions. We had no choice in the people we were assigned, and while many if not most are graduates, their computer skills and knowledge of archiving are minimal – even in the National Archives. We have been told anecdotally that people who were more expert in content knowledge were removed by the Bashir regime for political purposes. The staff however are enthusiastic and willing, and one of the key outcomes of the project is their training and empowerment.

Content selection for scanning is random and can be highly political: in the National Records Office, we were not allowed to select content on slavery, even though the documents are over 100 years old, and tribal borders are another contentious issue. We were also discouraged from putting too much weight on documents from the Mahadia period because their descendants still head the biggest opposition party, the Umma party. In a manuscript archive in one university, we had to discuss for weeks whether we could put images online for free at low resolution, and this resulted in the university administration declaring its intention to sell the manuscripts, given that they were clearly valuable. In a country as poor and ravaged as Sudan, selling off the assets is a dangerous temptation, and has been done regularly throughout the

country for short-term gain. Another barrier that we had to cross was negotiating agreements to carry out the scanning. The project was instigated by Sudanese organisations, so I had imagined that the way would be smoothed for making agreements to digitise. As a project, and on behalf of the funders, what we sought was permission to do image capture, and to make available viewable images on the website, protected with watermarks if necessary. Copyright and high-resolution images would be the property of the providing institution, and we sought no commercial advantage. Indeed, we expressed ourselves willing to assist the institutions in creating revenue streams from the high-quality images. To give an example of the difficulties, at the time of writing, we have been negotiating with the Ministry of Culture for more than a year for permission to scan photographs in the photo archive. Each time we arrived at a draft of an agreement that seemed acceptable to the Minister, the Minister changes and we had to start again. We have been through four ministers and are currently halted because there was no minister at all – in fact, there was no real government, given the continuing protests and crackdowns in the country.

There have been other practical challenges, like the continuing sanctions that have made it difficult to get money in to the country to pay staff, and the huge delays at customs: we have had to wait 3-4 months for each shipment of equipment.

What we have achieved

Despite the many issues we have faced, there have been some notable successes. In the Sudan Film Archive, a local company, Dal Group, built a new facility for the storage of the deteriorating films. The University of Bergen, with funds from the Norwegian Embassy in Khartoum, installed film scanning equipment in the Archive and trained around 15 staff in its use. The funding for the staff ran out in June 2018, and so Sudan Memory stepped in to continue the support, and we incorporated the project (and the project manager) into Sudan Memory. Of the 13,000 extant films, 1000 have been cleaned, repaired and scanned.

The National Corporation for Antiquities and Museums has also been running scanning projects in an archive which contains slides, photographs, and large format maps and plans of archaeological sites. Originally equipped by the Deutsches Archäologisches Institut, we have contributed two high power professional scanners for maps and photos, as well as other photographic equipment. The technical manager of the archive said in a recent meeting that the Sudan Memory contributions were, for them, a dream come true as they could never have imagined being able to complete the scanning without some other injection of equipment or cash.

At the National Records Office, staff have been scanning manuscripts, newspapers, magazines and photographs. There is material from the Condominium period, including some interesting medium format photographs from the 1920s taken by British officials and covering a range of subjects through

the country. For example, there are photographs of the area around Wadi Halfa, which was flooded by the building of the Aswan Dam, and so show things which are no longer visible. There are also many photographs of the large engineering projects undertaken by the British: dams, bridges, the railway, as well as what are clearly personal holiday pictures.

The University of Khartoum team has scanned manuscripts, printed books and magazines, although at the time of writing, the University has been closed for several months because of the anti-government protests. Some of the non-governmental magazines that have been scanned ceased publication in the Bashir era, even those aimed at children, a result of a package of economic policies and legislative amendments. For example, the Al-Sybian serial (Plate 5) established in the 1940s ceased publication in 1994 (Fayez 2017). It was highly popular and influential, and we are trying to track down all the issues of it in order to present the complete run. Much of this has already been scanned by the University.

We have made good progress with personal collections: we have installed internet routers, scanners and computers in the House of Heritage in Abri - a town which has only had electricity for two years. Scanning has started on the Al-Rashid collection, equipment and training have been given, and we are providing facilities for a mobile team of technicians to go into people's homes to capture materials.

Digitisation in the middle of a revolution

In December 2018, riots broke out in several cities in Sudan, protesting at an increase in the price of bread in particular, and the mismanagement, corruption and oppression by the military/Islamist government in general. Peaceful protests continued on a daily basis for some months¹. This escalated in February, when President Bashir declared a state of emergency and dissolved the government, and in April the protests increased with a massive sit-in outside the army headquarters which resulted in the ousting of Bashir by senior military officers. At the time of writing (4 June 2019) the protestors have been subjected to violence by the security forces, and we do not know what the outcome will be.

What does this mean for the project? Everyone involved is of course completely supportive of the aims of the protesters to achieve a civilian government through peaceful democratic means. On the one hand, the uprising has greatly disrupted the project: the University of Khartoum is closed, people are on the streets protesting instead of working, many roads are closed so it is difficult to get around. However, it has been interesting to see how social media has been used to communicate between the protesters and to the outside world. Also, there has been an explosion of creativity in the streets with art, music, poetry, and film being created constantly. We have been trying to document some of this as it happens,

¹ A transitional civilian and military council, the Sovereignty Council of Sudan, led by Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok, was established in August 2019. However the text has been left as written as it reflects the situation at the time (ed).



and we plan to create a module on the revolution, setting it into a historical context with the revolutions of the past in Sudan (Plates 12 and 13).

What next?

In the final six months of the project we will, as far as circumstances allow, continue scanning in the institutions that have already started, and we will also have an increased focus on private collections with magazines, photos and objects. We have also engaged a photographer to capture images of some of the historic architecture of Khartoum. Editing and correcting of the metadata and other texts are under way, and are proving to be challenging. Arabic grammar and spelling are extremely complex and can only be reliably checked by an expert, not by any mother tongue speaker. The Arabic then has to be translated into English and the English into Arabic.

Work has started on the portal and on plans for long-term preservation of the data, and we will be uploading images and metadata for testing very soon. We are commissioning short articles on a variety of topics to contextualise the scanned materials, and will make connections with other works and with international archives that hold content from Sudan: reunification of Sudanese materials in the digital space.

After such significant investment in the project by so many stakeholders, not least the British Council who provided the funding, it is essential that it survives and thrives for the future. Currently we are in discussion with various organisations about the possibility of setting up a social enterprise to carry the work forward. This of course to a large degree will depend on what kind of Sudan will emerge from the present revolution.

Acknowledgements

There are so many organisations that have contributed and continue to contribute to the project. First of all the British Council: the Cultural Protection Fund and British Council



Plate 13. Street art from the 2019 protests (photograph: Katharina von Schroeder).

Sudan, Catriona Jackson and her team at the CPF, and Robin Davies and his team in Sudan in particular. Then the partners listed above, and staff in all the contributing institutions (the National Records Office; the University of Khartoum; the Rashid Photo Studio; the National Museum; the Natural History Museum; Sudan Radio and TV Corporation); and all the participants in the Western Sudan Community Museums Project. Technical developments are led by ScanDataExperts, our main digitisation consultants, together with the software company, Inrandra GmbH, and our equipment and training suppliers, Genus Ltd. Finally I'd like to mention the highly efficient and helpful staff at King's College London who deal with our complex technical and financial needs.

Bibliography

- Benjamin, W. 1968. 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', in H. Arendt (ed.), *Illuminations*. New York, 217-251.
- Fayez, Y. 2017. 'Publishing for the Children of Sudan...Readers vs Regime', *Nasher News* (Oct 18, 2017), <https://nasher-news.com/publishing-for-the-children-of-sudan-readers-vs-regime/>.

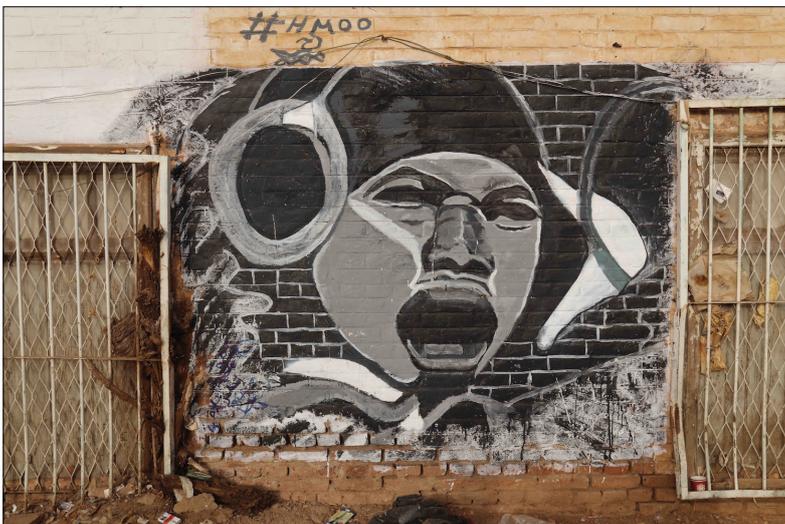


Plate 12. Street art from the 2019 protests (photograph: Katharina von Schroeder).