

A high-angle photograph of a person's hand holding a smartphone over a table. The table is covered with several historical photographs and documents. One photograph shows a group of people, another shows a landscape with a large structure, and a third shows a group of people in a field. The person is using the smartphone to take a picture of one of the photographs on the table. The background is a plain white surface.

# Working with South Sudanese museum collections

Workshop report of the AHRC network 'New Explorations into South Sudanese museum collections in Europe'

Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford 10-11 January 2018



### *About the South Sudan Museum Network*

The new state of South Sudan is best known for its deeply troubled history, from enslavement and colonisation in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, to the prolonged civil wars that led both to its independence in 2011 and to continued post-independence conflicts. This history of violence and victimhood poses both analytical and practical challenges to scholars and nation-builders alike: how can we better understand the interactions and strategies pursued by people even in violent contexts? How can we study and celebrate the creativity, resilience and reciprocities that also run through South Sudanese history? How can we gain a richer picture of the region's past, one that reaches beyond deterministic narratives of conflict and ethnic division?

One resource for doing this lies unexploited in our midst. European museums house an estimated 20,000 objects, originally acquired by European travellers, traders, missionaries and officials in the Southern Sudanese region in the nineteenth or early twentieth century. These items range from household objects, jewellery, weaponry and musical instruments to large, visually striking figurative statues. They are now housed in locations as diverse as St Petersburg, Rome and Kent. Many of the collections have rich supporting documentation - including accounts of expeditions, diaries, photographs and correspondence concerning acquisitions by museums. Yet they have not yet been the subject of extensive comparative enquiry.

'New explorations into South Sudanese museum collections in Europe' is an AHRC-funded international research network investigating this huge but largely untapped resource for advancing understandings of South Sudan's history, global connections and creative arts. Not only do these collections provide new sources on the region's past, they also expose complex narratives of interaction, in both its violent and more peaceful aspects. Exploring material connections and reciprocities will make new intellectual advances in the history of South Sudan possible and allow us to rethink this history with potential for significant intellectual and social impacts.

The network brings together academics from different disciplines with museum practitioners and heritage stakeholders to develop a research agenda on South Sudanese museum collections across Europe. It is the first of its kind to connect these dispersed collections with South Sudanese communities, addressing not only the collections' academic significance, but also their potential contribution to developing more inclusive understandings of South Sudanese identity. These objects can reveal histories of economic and cultural exchange within the region that has become South Sudan. Through their acquisition, export and display in Europe, they also embody the often violent and extractive incorporation of this region into imperial and transnational economies, and offer the potential for deeper and more nuanced understandings of how people in the Upper Nile region negotiated the new trading opportunities as well as coercive predation through which these objects were acquired.

Through three workshops with international participants, the network will make tangible steps towards a major programme of research on the collections, involving institutions in both Europe and South Sudan. It will serve as a unique international hub for museums with significant South Sudanese collections, facilitating new comparative perspectives on as yet

disconnected collections and histories. A key priority is to involve South Sudanese in this research process, while providing an important opportunity for current curators and researchers to reflect on the past and present display of these collections, their reception by European audiences and the narratives they project.

### *About the workshop*

This was the second of three workshops exploring the potential value of South Sudanese arts and heritage in European museums. The first workshop, held at Durham University in July 2017, focused on understanding the content and history of the collections. The report from this workshop can be read online <https://southsudanmuseumnetwork.com/workshop-1-2/>. Building on these discussions, this workshop considered different ways of working with the collections.

### *The Pitt Rivers Museum*

The Pitt Rivers Museum displays archaeological and ethnographic objects from all parts of the world and all time periods. The Museum was founded in 1882 when General Pitt Rivers, an influential figure in the development of archaeology and evolutionary anthropology, gave his collection to the University of Oxford. The Pitt Rivers Museum holds one of most important collections of South Sudanese visual and material culture in Europe.

### *Participants*

Helen Adams (Pitt Rivers Museum), Anyieth d'Awol (Roots Project), Adut Ayik (Cambridge University), Nicholas Badcott (British Museum), Paul Basu (SOAS), Annie Coombes (Birkbeck), Zoe Cormack (Oxford University), Jeremy Coote (Pitt Rivers Museum), Kathryn Eccles (Oxford University), Francis Gotto (Sudan Archive, Durham University), Marko Frelih (Slovene Ethnographic Museum), Urška Furlan (Slovene Ethnographic Museum), John Giblin (British Museum), Yotam Gidron (Durham University), Nadja Haumberger (Weltmuseum, Vienna), Angela Impey (SOAS), Helene Joubert (Quai Branly), Ludmilla Jordanova (Durham University), Douglas Johnson (Rift Valley Institute), Wendy James (Oxford, Emerita), Jok Madut Jok (Sudd Institute), Zachary Kingdon (World Museum, Liverpool), Cherry Leonardi (Durham University), Inbal Livne (Powell-Cotton Museum), Sarah Longair (Lincoln University), John Mack (UEA), Crina Mares (Franz Binder Museum, Sibiu), Chris Morton (Pitt Rivers Museum), Mawan Muortat (Independent), Youssef Onyalla (National Archives of South Sudan), John Ryle (Rift Valley Institute), Elke Selter (SOAS), Anna Siim (Kunstkamera, St Petersburg).

Report prepared by Zoe Cormack and Cherry Leonardi.

Cover image: A workshop participant looks at the South Sudan photographic collections in the Pitt Rivers Museum research room (photo credit: Yotam Gidron).

## **Session 1: Building on past initiatives**

*The workshop began by examining past experiences of creating and working with South Sudanese museum collections, both within and outside the country. How can we historicise our current projects and build on previous work? It might be assumed that heritage initiatives in South Sudan are starting 'from scratch'. While it is true that governmental neglect of the southern region under previous Sudanese regimes and the devastation wrought by prolonged conflicts has precluded any effective museum or heritage preservation programmes, there have been some initiatives since the 1970s which can provide valuable lessons and points of reflection. We began our workshop by learning about three past projects: one focused on collecting objects, another on digitisation of a South Sudanese collection in the United Kingdom, and a third on planning a national museum in South Sudan. What did these projects try to do, what did they achieve and what hasn't worked?*

### **Archaeological research and collecting in Southern Sudan 1978-1980**

John Mack, Professor of World Art Studies at the Sainsbury Research Institute, University of East Anglia

John Mack opened the workshop by recounting his first-hand experiences of an archaeological and ethnographic research project in Southern Sudan, supported by the British Institute in Eastern Africa from 1979 to 1981. The aim of this project was to expand archaeological work in Southern Sudan to explore and collect contemporary material culture. This was the period when ethno-archaeology was being pioneered and archaeologists were looking for ethnographic parallels to inform archaeological data. Led by Nicholas David, the team consisted of John Mack, Patti Langton, Paul Harvey, Jill Goudi and Alex Opira-Odongo. One hope was that the resulting collections would form the basis for a museum in Juba, an idea supported by the ministry of culture and particularly by Severino Matti.

There were two main research trips. The group that went in 1980 worked in the south-western part of Southern Sudan, from the Moru area to Wau, Wunrok and then back to Zande areas. Archaeology was the main focus: the ethnographers were collecting largely ceramics, but expanded to basketry and weaponry. Then, as now, there was no antiquity law in Southern Sudan; permission to export the objects was granted from Khartoum and then from the Ministry of Culture in Juba. An agreement was made to deposit a duplicate of objects acquired in Juba; the others were taken to museums in the United Kingdom. An unusual transportation method was devised: at the time, there was a lot of aid coming into Juba, and planes were going back empty, so some objects were sent back to Europe on returning aid flights.

John Mack led the second research trip to primarily Toposa areas around Kapoeta in Eastern Equatoria and the Ilemi Triangle. The work was funded partly by the Royal Geographical Society to commemorate the discovery of the source of the Nile. This period of research was

more challenging and highlights the difficulties of collecting/conducting research with rural communities during times of stress. It was the time of the Karamojong drought, which also affected the Toposa, together with conflict in Uganda spilling over the border. This created both practical and ethical problems because people were suffering food shortages and insecurity. To reduce pressures on the host communities, the team split up. The archaeologists went to Yei; Mack moved to the Imatong Mountains, and collected some objects in Lotuho areas.

A publication arising from this research, 'Culture History in Southern Sudan', which contains more details of the research findings, can be downloaded

<https://southsudanmuseumnetwork.files.wordpress.com/2017/02/mack-and-robertshaw-1982-culture-history-in-southern-sudan.pdf>

Details on Patti Langton's research from this project is available

<http://web.prm.ox.ac.uk/reel2real/index.php/patti-langton.html>

And in a series of blog posts

<http://pittrivers-photo.blogspot.co.uk/2013/07/the-larim-boya-of-south-sudan-part-1.html?view=mosaic>

<http://pittrivers-photo.blogspot.co.uk/2013/11/the-larim-boya-of-south-sudan-part-2.html?view=mosaic>

<http://pittrivers-photo.blogspot.co.uk/2014/04/the-larim-boya-of-south-sudan-part-3.html?view=timeslide>

## **Recovering the material and visual cultures of Southern Sudan: a museological resource**

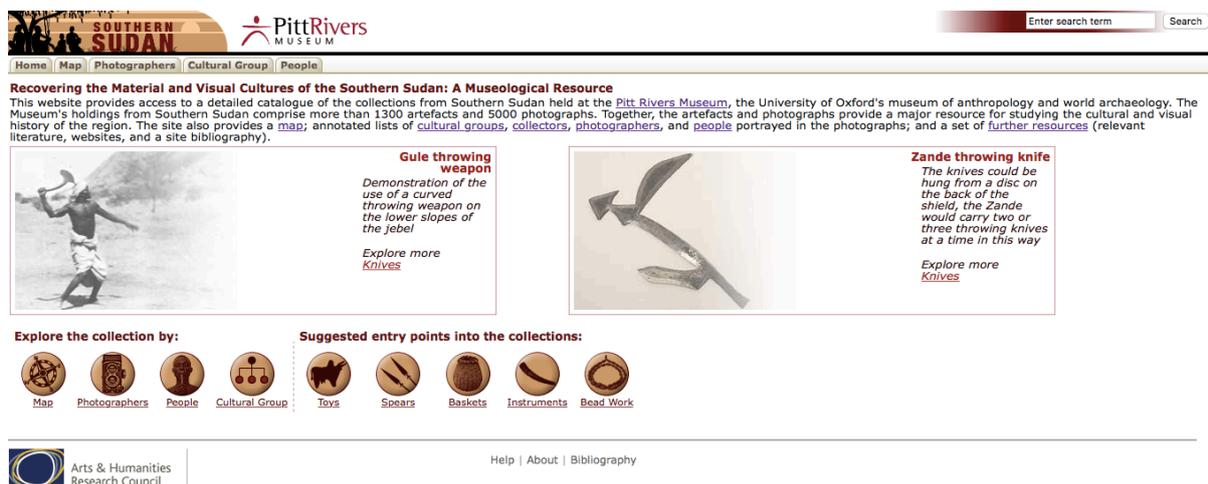
Chris Morton, Pitt Rivers Museum and Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology, University of Oxford

'Recovering the material and visual cultures of Southern Sudan: a museological resource' was a project run by the Pitt Rivers Museum (PRM) between 2003 and 2005. This project produced an online platform providing access to most of the PRM's South Sudanese collections (objects and photographs).

This project was initiated amidst early discussion about the possibilities and challenges created by museum web activity. By 2002, all major museums had an online presence – but they were still struggling to find connections between the artefacts in the collections and their online presence. The UK Arts and Humanities Research Council (then Board) provided funding for a project on the Southern Sudanese materials – a particularly rich section of the PRM's collections, which is important not only for the museum but also for anthropological scholarship. The idea was to allow new interpretations and thinking about these collections and the visual materials to emerge.

Photographs were scanned, and the object images were digitized. Detailed descriptions of objects and all catalogue details were entered onto the resource. There were logistical issues of scanning so many images, and some challenges in creating the online platform. The website, overall, presents a variety of options and searches, and provides some biographical notes on the photographers.

The online publication of the collections led to increased exposure and the number of enquiries about them also increased. New material has come into the museum because of the greater awareness of its South Sudanese collections. However, newly acquired materials are not included in this database – for various reasons – and not all the data is up to date. Some of the functionalities of the websites were also lost because of technical issues with the web-based platform. Morton highlighted the central challenge of using web resources which, like publications, represent a snapshot of knowledge and representation at a particular moment – but unlike printed books, websites are expected to be up-to-date, and yet their coding may inhibit or prevent updating.



Screenshot of the Pitt Rivers Southern Sudan online resource. 23.01.2018

## The South Sudan National Museum / Archive project

Elke Selter, PhD candidate, SOAS; formerly UNESCO South Sudan

The South Sudan National Museum initiative emerged after South Sudan's independence in 2011, as UNESCO started to move beyond a focus on education to develop a cultural program. The idea of a cultural institution was very much tied to a nation-building agenda, and intended to encompass history, research, heritage and outreach. It was envisaged by UNESCO as an institution that would tell the story of the people of South Sudan, by and for the people of South Sudan. But how do you make sure that people find themselves in that story? How do you make sure that it is not the story only of the leaders? Practically, there was also a question about making the institution relevant and accessible for a large number of people, given the transport challenges and issues of language and literacy. There were also social barriers:

people were not familiar with the concept of a museum and don't necessarily relate to it. There were also a large number of refugees and diaspora – so what is the 'community' that the museum caters for? UNESCO wrestled with how to avoid creating a 'spaceship' that would land in Juba and not resonate with the population.

One conclusion reached was that a National Museum project shouldn't all be about a building in Juba. There was some desire for a symbolic building, but this should not be the only thing. The building could be about preservation, but the link to the people should be primarily through education – working with schools, with communities across the country. All of this is very difficult to practically implement.

There was an international design competition for the museum building itself and a plan was chosen. However, it was never constructed, and the project ended with more open questions than practical implementation. The outbreak of conflict in 2013 made work on a national museum project and building both more difficult practically and more politically contentious than ever.

There was some piloting to develop a project that would create the content for the museum. We were aware of objects being in the community – and in foreign institutions (but knew little in detail). Many issues – including restitution – were conceived of as footnotes that would be dealt with later. Oral histories were another pillar. There was an idea of a traveling museum exhibition. The hope was that this would create a collection for the museum, while also showing communities around the country what other communities had contributed already. The 'Travelling Exhibition' was developed in collaboration with the Ministry of Culture, UNESCO and the Open Society Institute for Eastern Africa and ran in three states in 2014.

## **Discussion points**

Mack was asked more about the process of collecting objects from communities, and explained that a 'Smithsonian' model was used: enquiring about different categories of objects, building up a picture of the material culture, and then trying to acquire examples methodically. He highlighted some of the potential risks and complexities of creating a market for artefacts, and also emphasised how the project sought to involve local people in all aspects of the process and to provide a degree of training in object handling and so on. This is obviously crucial to the success and sustainability of any project of this kind.

The discussion moved on to important questions about the politics of museum-related initiatives in a context like South Sudan. If the expertise and models are coming from outside, is there any wonder these fail? Is there a deeper problem with the assumption that museums and archives need to exist? One answer is that this is not simply a foreign assumption: South Sudanese government officials, designers and others bought into the recent idea of a national museum, and saw it as part of the process of establishing new South Sudanese statehood as well as building national identity. But Selter also talked about the very different perspective of South Sudanese schoolchildren elicited during the UNESCO project, who had no idea what a museum even was. "They didn't just think out of the box, they had no box." But Selter

argued that this presented an opportunity rather than an obstacle, encouraging innovative and imaginative ways to rework what 'museum' could mean in such a context. Annie Coombes urged a focus on the *process* by which the idea of a museum is transformed through discussion and action. The Kenya peace museums are an instructive comparative example: initially 'museum' might be just a term to get resources but it can *become something else through community use* and engagement. Anyieth d'Awol similarly called for a flexible approach to the concept of museums, to accommodate both the disruptive history of colonialism and conflict in South Sudan, and the existing, fluid practices by which South Sudanese have kept and protected significant objects, memories and relations. A museum building may still be of value to some people, but we need to be creative and use all available avenues to share, preserve and discuss material culture. The discussion concluded with the hopeful idea that objects could play an important role in bringing people into dialogue and addressing the traumatic and destructive history of conflict.



The 'Travelling Exhibition' in Wau, 2014. Photo credit: El-Fatih Maluk Atem

## Session two – Making connections through collections

*Our next session reflected on current work being done with South Sudanese collections. We heard about two different pieces of research in progress that involve working with South Sudanese museum collections. These examples show different ways of working with objects.*

### **Mbitim ‘an artist of exceptional skill’**

Inbal Livne (Powell-Cotton Museum)

Inbal Livne, Head of Collections at the Powell-Cotton Museum, gave a presentation about her research into ceramics attributed to a Zande potter called Mbitim. The potter Mbitim gives us a unique way of approaching the South Sudanese collections at the Powell-Cotton Museum. He is a rare example of a named artist among the collections. He produced pottery at the leprosy hospital in Li Rangu (Western Equatoria), which was opened by the British in 1931. The Powell-Cottons purchased seventeen pottery items in 1933 and recorded their hour-long meeting with Mbitim in a diary entry. But there are many unanswered questions. Who was producing this pottery? How many people worked with Mbitim? Who was running the workshop? Why was Mbitim there? Was he sick? Where was he originally from? Who bought his pots and how far did his influence spread?

Once inside the Powell-Cotton museum, the objects were recorded in the catalogue as Mbitim’s. But the museum has probably over-emphasised his individual role. The next steps of the research are to look for other objects attributed to Mbitim and see what connections can be established. There are many questions still to answer. But this one pottery workshop at Li Rangu is a really interesting study as a ‘contact zone’ between Europeans and local artists, through which influences may have spread in multiple directions.



Pottery bookends attributed to Mbitim in the Powell-Cotton Museum. Source: [www.100objectsken.co.uk](http://www.100objectsken.co.uk)

## Research with the Bongo community in Juba

Zoe Cormack (Oxford University)



Zoe Cormack presented some reflection about work with the Bongo community in Juba. The Bongo are a minority group in South Sudan, but one of the most widely represented in museum collections. There are plenty of accounts of trade in Bongo material culture and sculptures from the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and the market in these objects flourished throughout the second civil war (1983-2005). Cormack's research is focused on their funerary art, notably statues (pictured below).

Part of this research has involved meeting with Bongo people to try to understand more about funerary practices. In September, Cormack held a meeting with the MP of Tonj South (representing the largest Bongo constituency) and students from the University of Juba. The group was very aware of the trade in funerary statues during the conflict. Cormack asked about the different emotional reactions that collections can produce – do the objects bring up painful histories?

Bongo oral history remembers the 19<sup>th</sup> century as a period of destruction and enslavement. Engaging with these memories has to be part of the engagement with the collections and objects.

The group acknowledged that it was members of their own community that took part in the trade in their own artefacts and sculptures. People were reluctant to pass judgment on these strategies that people resorted to during the time of conflict, however. Next steps for the project will involve more photo elicitation interviews with images of objects, to discuss what information can be established about their histories.

Image: Bongo funerary statue in the British Museum (Af1973,35.1)

### **Session three: managing the needs of different audiences**

*If we are to research and display South Sudanese heritage in global museums, who will see these objects and what are the different audiences? Many of our discussions have been framed around how collections could be connected with South Sudanese audiences. But 'South Sudanese' is a diverse category. One of the most obvious distinctions to draw in the case of museum collections is between South Sudanese diaspora audiences and audiences at 'home'. The diaspora may have greater access to museum collections – because they live closer to them. They may also have a different – and complex – relationship with cultural artefacts from South Sudan. Other European audiences are also important to consider. Many of these collections have been in Europe for over a hundred years. In that time, they have taken on different local significance. The transport of objects from South Sudan to European museums also entailed transformations in their value and meaning. In the Slovenian context, for example, the Knoblecher collection in the Ethnographic Museum in Ljubljana has a significant place in the Slovenian national imagination not only in terms of Knoblecher or his mission, but in terms of the historic connection it forged between his home area and what is now South Sudan. This session addressed the question of how to engage the multiple (and potential) audiences for these collections.*

#### **Ignaz Knoblecher and the Slovenian Public**

Marko Frelj and Urška Furlan (Slovene Ethnographic Museum)

Ignaz Knoblecher was born in 1819; in 1849 he travelled to what is now South Sudan and started a Christian mission station at Gondokoro (near present-day Juba). Two years later, he founded the Holy Cross Mission between Bor and Shambe. He was not only a missionary but also an explorer and collected objects and wrote articles on his journeys. His scientific diary disappeared after his death but the objects he collected were preserved. His work attracted a lot of attention in Slovenia. Most objects in the collection itself are from Bari communities.

In his place of birth, Scocjan, Knoblecher is celebrated every year. There have been several attempts in Slovenia to celebrate Knoblecher's work and make it accessible to the public. The first exhibition of his objects was held in 1950. There was another one in 1968, but religious evangelism was not a very popular topic during the socialist period. After Slovenian independence in 1991, interest began to grow in Knoblecher as a significant national figure. In 2008 there was another exhibition, and some objects from South Sudan are in the permanent exhibition. In 2009 was the biggest event – an exhibition that attracted a lot of interest from the public. Next year (2019) is the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Knoblecher's birth and there will be events celebrating his life, including a special exhibition in Scocjan. The local community are very aware of Knoblecher and his work, and would like to establish a multicultural centre, for Slovenian missionaries and people from across the world.

## **The South Sudan National Archives and public history in Juba**

Youssef Onyalla (South Sudan National Archives)

Youssef Onyalla described ongoing work to establish a National Archive in South Sudan, with a reflection on a recent public history initiative to engage residents of Juba with the archival documents.

The archive in South Sudan was initiated after the 1972 peace agreement. During the 1983-2005 war, these documents were just moved from place to place: some documents were put in the basement under the governor's offices; some were in Juba Girls Secondary School. After the signing of the CPA in 2005, we put all of them temporarily into a large tent, with some funds from the US government for the preservation of the South Sudanese history, and we started a project of archiving the documents. Later the archive was moved to a house.

We started to register the documents, to see how many files we have of any province. The Rift Valley Institute trained the South Sudanese staff on how to digitize the documents. We categorised the documents, and started to sort them out, and scanned them. Because of termites, some documents were destroyed. Sometimes, water entered the place, and the boxes that were on the floor were damaged. Now there are shelves (brought in by UNESCO).

There was a recent exhibition, *Tarikh Tana* (Our History), with documents from the archive. It was in the National Assembly, and later in Custom Market. Many people attended or passed by it. People in Juba know that there is an archive now – a place to get the information. There was another exhibition behind Konyo-Konyo market.

## **Diaspora audiences in the UK**

Mawan Muortat

Mawan gave a reflection about the value of these collections to South Sudanese audiences in the UK. He posed the question, 'what is important about these objects and why should South Sudanese in the diaspora care about them?' His answer was, to me these things are important because they are about us; they are about people, and about a future that can be better than the past. Also, for countries and communities to coexist, there has to be something that binds people together, a story to be told. In the case of South Sudan, something has been lost. We have lived through this: I was born in the 1960s; we grew up with this as our experience. Growing up in northern Sudan in a political family, we lived together and were Southerners. We all used to bundle into the same car to go to school and we didn't know what tribe people came from. At that time, we knew who South Sudanese were and we knew our struggle. But after the 1972 agreement, things started to look different. These internal tensions began to emerge. Then the story of South Sudan continued to unfold before us in a terrible way. Of course, good things happened: we became independent, and that was something incredible. But it wasn't easy and achieving it came with a cost. Part of it is the fragmentation of our society – the pressure that has been put on us – we have been pushed to the brink. And we

are living with those costs at the moment. So this is why these things are important. It is not only in South Sudan, that these things have to be preserved. In London, there is a lot of relevance. We have to think of ways people could engage with these objects. I think there is hunger for it among South Sudanese; everyone is talking about ways we could reach out to each other – how can we overcome this terrible state that we are in at the moment? But we need to think about how to make things like these museum objects accessible to people and make them part of their lives, in the way that new popular music is reintroducing the diaspora youth to traditional music in vernacular languages. We need new ways of reaching people – eg taking photos to community centres, so that we can start to ‘own’ these cultural heritage initiatives.

### **Discussion points**

Questions were raised about the ambiguities and divisiveness of things like missionary histories, the role of the churches or the position of diaspora communities, and how these could be addressed publicly. A central issue which emerged from the discussion was the potential for museum collections themselves to be divisive or unifying. For example when the National Archive organised its exhibitions, there were inevitably some people questioning why there were documents from certain areas and not others. Similarly our discussion raised concerns that the South Sudanese diaspora is becoming more divided and fractured, and that more events are needed to bring people together. The museum collections themselves often reflect colonial systems of categorisation which need to be rethought, not only in terms of ethnic categories but also thinking beyond and across national borders. Creative practices and material cultures tend to transcend boundaries, yet they may be represented and displayed in ways that reinforce difference and division. The idea of a travelling museum exhibition was intended to encourage a sense of unity instead, with objects presented by function rather than by tribe, to focus on similarities and sharing of styles and skills as well as celebrating cultural distinctiveness.



(From left to right) Youseff Onyall, Urška Furlan, Marko Freljih, Mawan Muortat, Jan 2018.

## Session Four: Consider the 'Nuer and Dinka' case at the Pitt Rivers Museum



*We used one session to put our general discussions - about history, curatorial responsibility and contemporary concerns - into practice, through an example of a specific curatorial dilemma. The 'Nuer and Dinka' case on the upper gallery of the Pitt Rivers Museum was installed in 1992. At that time, the aim of the case was to produce a display that would illustrate the ethnographic literature on Dinka and Nuer societies. It used historical and contemporary photographs to illustrate the environment and cattle-keeping. However, there is no way in which a small display can adequately illustrate the way of life of more than a million people through a complex history. What messages does this case project? What*

*is – or what could be – the point of a ‘Nuer and Dinka’ museum display? What is the legitimacy of a display designed primarily to showcase ethnographic literature? How can a display do justice to Nuer and Dinka people in the world today? What alternative strategies or questions could be developed in the display? Should the idea of a ‘Nuer and Dinka’ case be dispensed with entirely? If so, what could be the focus of a new case?*

A selection of the points raised in our discussion:

#### *Defining ‘subjects’*

Should the case be called “Nuer and Dinka”? Maybe *peoples of the flood plain*. If it were to remain “Nuer and Dinka”, then its significance in the history of anthropology needs to be highlighted for audiences that might not be familiar with that context. It is really a case about the ethnographic work of the anthropologists E. E. Evans-Pritchard and Godfrey Lienhardt. There is a need to be explicit about the role of ethnographic categories within the case.

#### *Representing violence*

The display speaks more to conflicts between Nuer and Dinka people than cooperation. If a dominant theme in the case is war and violence, there should also be references to peace and reconciliation.

The central feature of the case is the ‘sunburst’ display of weapons, very reminiscent of a colonial trophy display of weapons. Seeing the objects displayed in this way predisposes the viewer to think about the objects (and people) in a martial way. It also imposes its own temporality onto the case – invoking the colonial, or even the medieval. In fact, some of these “spears” are not spears for fighting at all – they are ceremonial objects, but here they are thrown in with war objects and the viewer correspondingly sees them as evidence of violence. Even the choice of red backdrop seems to add to this impression.

Perhaps there should be less focus on violence overall. It reinforces that this is, in many ways, a very gendered and stereotypical case. Could women’s lives be made more explicit?

#### *Communicating information*

There were suggestions to have a video or a voice recording explaining the objects, rather than long texts which distract from the objects and lack a clear narrative.

#### *Exploring continuity and change*

There is also a question about continuity – can new objects be added to the case? Contemporary items could re-inforce the idea that there is a complex history here. However, there might also be a value in preserving history in the case. Many of the traditional objects seen are being replaced by imported objects in South Sudan itself.

Most importantly – who are we displaying this for?

## **Session five: Exploring digital possibilities**

*Given the dispersed nature of these museum collections, and their physical distance from South Sudan, digital platforms offer exciting possibilities for connecting the collections to audiences in South Sudan and for making new connections between different collections. The final session of the day explored how digital technology could be used to expand access and create new understandings of South Sudanese collections. We heard about two ongoing projects at the University of Oxford which are breaking new ground in the use of digital technologies for interpreting museum objects.*

### **The Cabinet project**

Kathryn Eccles, Oxford Internet Institute

The Cabinet is an online platform, which is accessible to students and the public. It aims to make Oxford University's library and museum collections more accessible through digitisation. Photogrammetry allows the creation of 3D models of objects, allowing objects to be seen from different angles and perspective on screen. The Cabinet is a teaching resource: students can explore the objects online, based on the classes they take. There is also a tagging feature so educators can highlight particular features for the student's attention. There are also considerable opportunities for wider public engagement: this platform creates potential to connect collections with people. It allows us to see more than one viewpoint, therefore there is greater room for multiple interpretations. The next step now for the project is 3D printing. 3D models allow people to explore objects with their hands without the original objects.

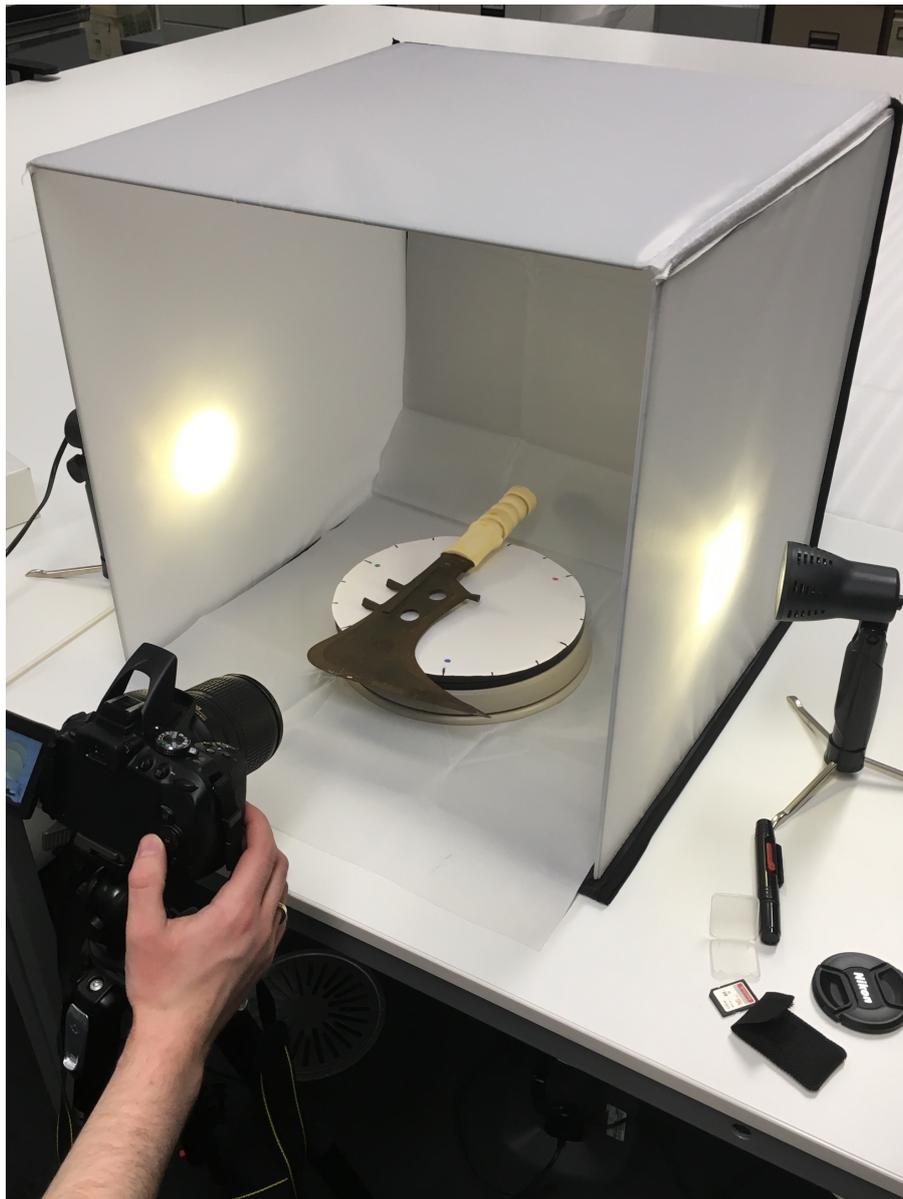
In the run up to the workshop the Cabinet team created 3D digital models of two South Sudanese objects from the Pitt Rivers Museum collections.

### **Mobile technology in the Pitt Rivers Museum**

Helen Adams, Pitt Rivers Museum

Mobile technology and crowdsourcing techniques have potential for democratising knowledge within the museum space and about museum collections more widely. Helen Adams took us through experiences of using mobile technology in the Pitt Rivers Museum. The PRM historically has been a technology-free zone, with no touch-screens, buttons etc. But it has begun to explore mobile technology. Smartphones offer new opportunities to incorporate technology, given that almost everyone has them. They experimented with 1) QR codes, to link objects on display to web pages and more information. There are logistical problems with this, as you cannot put the code behind the glass. 2) Audio guides and information on Soundcloud (accessible through the free public Wi-Fi). Some of the South Sudanese material is on this resource. 3) 'Ibeacons' these are Bluetooth devices that emit information that is received through mobile phones They can be used to give information about particular objects and displays through an app that visitors can download.

The next step (still in pilot phase) has been to create ways to diversify the stories that are told within the museum. The 'Diversifying the voice' project developed a mobile site which is a platform for co-curation. Students, visitors and others can upload information and stories about objects in the museum. The idea is that this will create a space for more personal and non-institutional perspectives about the collections.



The process of creating a 3D digital image of a *kpinga* (collected by Evans-Pritchard) at the Pitt Rivers Museum. Image credit: Zoe Cormack

## Conclusions

The workshop as a whole confirmed and encouraged an exciting sense of the potential for a range of important work with the South Sudanese museum objects held in Europe and for broader explorations of the idea of museums, material culture and heritage in/of/for South Sudan.

In Europe there is clearly a range of possibilities for rethinking and reworking how South Sudanese objects are identified and displayed, for exploring the histories and cultures they embody, and for engaging new or existing audiences, including South Sudanese diaspora or visitors. But there are also constraints and challenges for curators and others seeking to work with the collections, including very real resource limitations and the interests of museum publics. For South Sudanese, there may be uncomfortable aspects to the history and experience of ethnographic museums – balancing the contradiction of feeling on display, yet at the same time not recognising oneself within a museum cabinet. As Sessions 3 and 4 particularly highlighted, there is an important question for curators, academics or anyone working with these collections about how to deal with the categories and identities which are reified within the museum – and which may be a source of division among South Sudanese today as well as revealing wider histories of inequality, imperialism and injustice. There is considerable enthusiasm among the network participants for collaborative initiatives that could bring contemporary perspectives together with historical knowledge in and on South Sudan to better describe and display some of these objects. The digital possibilities offer the potential to share images or reproductions beyond the European museums, as well as to better engage and inform museum visitors. The example of the ‘Reanimating Cultural Heritage’ project on Sierra Leone which Paul Basu talked about in the first workshop also demonstrates the kind of creative, dynamic work that can be done to ‘reanimate’ museum artefacts.

This leads to broader questions and ideas around what museums and cultural heritage might mean in contemporary South Sudan and its diaspora. The very real and painful challenges of working in this area with the (re)current sense of crisis and conflict in South Sudan may also have positive implications if creative solutions can be found to open up the concept of ‘museum’. Perhaps, like the schoolchildren Elke Selter referred to, we can think not just outside a box, but without a box (or case) at all. It is after all their movement from one place to another that gave the museum objects in Europe their original value for European collectors and audiences; we can think in new ways now about the value of movement and sharing of material cultures within and beyond South Sudan. The workshop discussed the potential use of objects in school education or diaspora community events, travelling exhibitions or art and performance. By opening out and transforming assumptions about what a museum is and what it can do, there is clearly scope for using objects to explore and generate a sense of shared heritage and history, in all its complexity, trouble and dynamism.

