



# South Sudan Museums Network

Connecting the arts and heritage of  
South Sudan in European Museums

Workshop report

## Connecting museum collections with South Sudan

28-29 June 2018, UNESCO, Juba Office, South Sudan



Pitt Rivers  
MUSEUM



Durham  
University



## Summary

This workshop was convened as part of a research network programme funded by the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council and titled '[New explorations into South Sudanese museum collections in Europe: Connecting the arts and heritage of South Sudan in European museums](#)'. The network aims to explore the potential of museum objects to advance understandings of South Sudan's history, global connections and creative arts. Previous workshops in the UK provided the opportunity for museum curators to discuss their South Sudanese collections with academics and stakeholders from South Sudan and Europe. The aim of the Juba workshop was twofold. (1) To provide an update on the ongoing work on South Sudan's historical cultural heritage in European institutions. (2) As an opportunity for deeper discussion of the relevance and potential of museum objects for developing cultural and research initiatives that will connect communities and enrich understanding of South Sudanese history, heritage and arts. The workshop facilitated an extended conversation among South Sudanese heritage professionals, academics and artists about the priorities for future research and action.

## List of participants

Justin Billy Buwali (University of Juba); Valentino Modi (Jubek State Ministry of Culture); Frazier Kenyi (Jubek State Ministry of Culture); Joost Fontein (British Institute in Eastern Africa); Jande Lasu (Rift Valley Institute); Jimmy Wongo (MP, South Sudan Parliament); Deng Nhial Chioh (Maale Heritage Development Foundation); Michael Nasr (University of Juba); Jacqueline Nyiracyiza Bwesigye (Uganda Museum, Kampala); Wafa'a Housseini (University of Juba), Akuja de Garang (Festival for Arts, Peace and Fashion); Nicki Kindersley (University of Cambridge); Alex Miskin (University of Juba, Rift Valley Institute); Joseph Basan (University of Juba); Esther Liberato Bagi (University of Juba and South Sudan Theatre Organisation); El-Fatih Maluk Atem (Likikiri Collective and Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports); Rebecca Lorins (Likikiri Collective and University of Juba); Florence Henry Lokule (; Becu Thomas (UNESCO South Sudan); Cherry Leonardi (Durham University); Paul Lane (University of Cambridge); Edward Settimo Yugu (Director General for Culture, Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports); James Aguer Garang (Studio One, #Anataban); Opoka Musa (National Archives of South Sudan); Youssef Onyalla (National Archives of South Sudan); Stanislaus Obede (South Sudan Theatre Organisation and Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports).

This report has been written by Zoe Cormack.

## Programme

### Day 1

Thursday 28<sup>th</sup> June

- 9am            **Introduction to the South Sudan Museum Network**  
Dr Cherry Leonard (Durham University)
- 10am           **'South Sudanese arts and cultural heritage in European museums: what, where, when and how?'**  
Dr Zoe Cormack (Oxford University)
- 11am           **'Collaborations between artists and scholars'**  
Dr Joost Fontein (British Institute in Eastern Africa) and Dr Justin Billy Buwali (University of Juba)
- 12:30pm       Lunch
- 1:30 pm        **UNESCO Museum Recommendation**  
Becu Thomas (UNESCO South Sudan)
- 2pm            **'Archaeology, history and material culture': deepening understandings of South Sudan's past'**  
Deng Nhial Chioh (Maale Heritage Development Foundation) and Dr Paul Lane (University of Cambridge)
- 3:15pm        Tea and coffee
- 3:30pm        **'Connecting communities through museum collections'**  
El-Fatih Maluk Atem and Dr Rebecca Lorins (Likikiri Collective)
- 5pm            Close

### Day 2

Friday 29th June

- 9am            Concluding discussion
- 11am           Close



## Discussion themes

This short report presents a thematic summary of key points arising from the discussion and presentations. These are:

<b>Imagining the social role of museums in South Sudan</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>The value of heritage</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Connecting people</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>How to 'animate' museum objects and material culture</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Education and future generations</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Culture and peacebuilding</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>Ethical Issues</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>Practical constraints</b>	<b>11</b>

## Imagining the social role of museums in South Sudan

South Sudan is in the unusual position of not having a national museum. Many African countries inherited ethnographic and national museums from colonial administrations, or founded (and transformed) these institutions in the post-colonial period. However, museums in the former Sudan were located in Khartoum. Prolonged periods of war and emergency hindered the establishment of museum and heritage preservation projects in South Sudan. A key issue which we returned to throughout the discussion (and in previous workshops) was the need to think creatively and critically about what any museum in South Sudan should try to do and about the social role of these institutions. South Sudan has an opportunity to think differently about how a museum could serve the people. There was considerable enthusiasm in the workshop for envisioning some kind of national museum, so this subject became an initial focus for discussion. It immediately opened up broader and deeper questions about how material heritage can or should represent people and their history.

Many participants felt a desire to document, collect and preserve artefacts that are 'endangered' (because of changes in livelihoods, displacement etc.) All agreed there is a place for this kind of activity within the remit of culture and heritage work. However, concerns were raised that there is a danger of collecting activities reproducing the same extractive practices and imperial logics of categorisation and display that characterised European collecting in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It is important to be aware of the history of collecting activities in South Sudan, which have in the past been tied to processes of colonisation. The experience of the recent Ministry of Culture/UNESCO 'Travelling Exhibition' (which aimed to collect objects for the previously planned National Museum) showed that some communities in South Sudan viewed collecting with suspicion and found the idea of a national museum in Juba to be 'alien'.

A series of concerns about representation and inclusivity were raised and debated. Ensuring that different regions and ethnic groups feel represented in a museum context (particularly a national museum) was identified as a major issue. This is important, but there are unresolved issues. 'Encyclopaedic' attempts to represent everyone and everything are inevitably problematic: they may revive older colonial systems of categorisation; they will never be comprehensive and people will always be troubled by omissions. There needs to be serious thought put into ensuring that all South Sudanese people can 'see themselves' in displays, but equally to ensure that ethnicity is not the primary organising principle. A Pitt Rivers Museum style of display (where objects are displayed by type or function rather than place of origin) could be a useful starting point. This was used during a previous Ministry of Culture/UNESCO 'Travelling Exhibition' project in 2014. There are other regional examples: display by function has also been adopted in the 'Cycles of Life' gallery in the Nation Museum of Kenya.

Another issue was about the scale of a museum project and the process. Some participants prioritised the establishment of a large national museum, which would act as a repository of South Sudanese history and cultures and a symbol of nationhood. Others put less value on a big institution and instead stressed the importance of local engagement and process in heritage preservation. They argued that for communities, neighbourhood museums and community level documentation projects could be more effective in building connections and understanding between South Sudanese. Some participants pointed out that this kind of local level work is spontaneously happening already, as community and other groups exhibit local objects at important events as a way of drawing attention to and celebrating their community and identity.

Another concern was about how museums could effectively capture South Sudan's diverse intangible and living traditions. Several participants raised the idea that South Sudan is a 'living museum' because people are still using many traditional objects in their daily lives and because heritage is embodied in dance, ritual and body modifications and decorations. But there is also a danger of evoking the darker history of displaying human beings and the use of 'living exhibits' in colonial museums and exhibitions. As much as it's important to recognise tradition, other participants emphasised that it would be offensive to call people with scarification 'living museums' - they are human beings. Nevertheless, this discussion highlighted the important point that cultural heritage is not limited to inanimate objects but encompasses intangible or living forms of expression and practice.

## The value of heritage

On the first morning of the workshop, one participant provocatively declared that much of the South Sudanese material culture in European museums was 'just rubbish'. What he meant is that many of these are everyday objects, which in other circumstances might not be highly valued, let alone elevated to the level of display in a gallery. This comment inspired animated discussion and strong reactions throughout the day, from 'but this rubbish is part of us, and the museum should be about us' and 'these are the things [such as traditional bowls] we ate on with our mothers when we were children – this cannot be rubbish.' Someone else later commented, that 'these things have been seen as rubbish because we have not given value to them, we have not educated people about them'. However, as one speaker stressed, the point about 'rubbish' should also be well taken. The way museums display objects (as we saw in some of the presentations) often strips them of their historical and human context. Therefore, it can be very hard to connect with the value of the objects as they are shown in museums. An object without a story may well just be 'rubbish.'

There was great enthusiasm for action on heritage preservation more widely (including intangible and immovable heritage) This could include archaeological sites related to the history of slavery (e.g. Deim Zubeir), sites related to indigenous kingdoms (e.g. Fashoda) but also sites relevant to the political history and liberation heritage of South Sudan (such as the building where the 1947 Juba conference was held, or even the notorious 'White House' detention facility in Juba).

Participants acknowledged that heritage work is not always given priority by those in government or the wider public. One suggestion was beginning work on and documenting the more recent past – such as preserving the liberation heritage of South Sudan - as this might ignite greater the public and state interest in history and archaeology. On the other hand, the recent past can often be the most controversial and divisive. Any work on this would need to avoid being captured by dominant narratives.

There was also the view that (while acknowledging the great initiatives that are already happening) those working in the sector could do more to clearly articulate clearly what cultural heritage work can contribute to wider society. One speaker made the point that heritage work differs greatly from much of the humanitarian sector in South Sudan, because it celebrates the assets that communities already have, rather than trying to identify and address what they are lacking. This provides an important base from which to build confidence and pride.

## Connecting people

The South Sudan Museum Network project has been about connecting people. At one level, this entails connecting curators in European museums with people working in heritage in South Sudan. But there is a second level, which is how do we go further to connect community stakeholders to these objects and to discussions about material culture and heritage.

There was strong support for developing South Sudanese links with European museums caring for South Sudanese heritage. There was a unanimous feeling that South Sudanese expertise can and should contribute towards the interpretation and display of South Sudanese objects in overseas institutions. For example, it was clear to the group that there are significant gaps in understanding in Europe (in terms of identification, proper names and uses of objects). Participants want to have an input in improving the way South Sudanese material culture is presented abroad. One example discussed was the labelling of objects in Europe. Catalogue information and displays have been designed without South Sudanese

input. Usually, the people who made the label or inventory did not understand the significance of the objects. They may have labelled something simply an 'instrument' without understanding its spiritual significance. As a result, the information available to museum professionals to describe objects is incomplete. The research that has been done on identifying objects is only the beginning of what must necessarily be a long process of restoring context to these collections. Another incentive for exchange visits is that they could be linked to University courses and would provide valuable experience for students who can return to South Sudan with enhanced curatorial skills (see below for the importance of linking research to education).

Another significant resource is the network of heritage professionals in the region. The workshop was attended by the Director of the Uganda Museum in Kampala. She shared valuable insights from Ugandan work in heritage. The Uganda Museum has also been undertaking collecting and exhibition projects with displaced South Sudanese communities in northern Uganda, highlighting the significant synergies to explore between South Sudanese and Ugandan heritage projects.

While the participants could easily conceptualise the importance of institutional links, the equally important question of connecting heritage and museum work with communities is more complex. There were various ways in which 'connecting communities' was conceptualised in the discussion: (1) Finding creator communities and linking them with their historic objects (stored outside the country) perhaps through digital methods of reproduction; (2) bringing different communities in South Sudan into conversation through material culture and arts (3) using cultural heritage to foster a shared national heritage of South Sudan. All participants saw great value in these projects and were keen for the next stages of work to involve developing these priorities and plans for addressing them.

## How to 'animate' museum objects and material culture

Objects and materials have their own life. In a museum context, it can be hard to convey their previous uses and significance. One powerful example of this challenge came from an example in Justin Buwali's presentation about *rongo* orchestral music practiced by Ndogo and other people in Western Bahr el Ghazal. He explained that In the Ndogo language '*rongo*' means 'stop the water' because people believe that when they start playing *rongo*, everything will stop except for *rongo* itself. The orchestra of *rongo* has five instruments. These are made in the bush (far from homesteads) by experts through a special ritual that makes the music loud. They must be blessed every time *rongo* is played and they must be played regularly even if there is no event, otherwise *rongo* will start to play itself (and people will have to make sacrifices to appease it). For practitioners and audiences, *rongo* is

not just a musical instrument – it is an expression of their lives and beliefs, a link between the living and the dead and a ritual commentary. These practices and beliefs are maintained by Ndogo people in large cities like Juba. Ethnomusicologists have also found *rongo* musical traditions among descendants of formerly enslaved South Sudanese people in Cairo and Khartoum.

Seeing a *rongo* instrument in a museum (whether in Europe or South Sudan) therefore poses all kind of challenges. How should its significance be conveyed? To simply label *rongo* a ‘musical instrument’ would not adequately describe the social significance of the art form. We might even ask if the instruments would need to be played regularly, to satisfy their spiritual power and function.

To some extent, this problem is true of all museum objects, which have necessarily been recontextualised as ‘heritage’ in a museum display. Workshop participants were keen to find ways to address this discrepancy. Art and performance (including story-telling and theatre) were discussed as techniques to make the past ‘lives’ of objects come through. For example, theatre can ‘re-story’ objects, by restoring people and characters within them. As one speaker explained, the value of working with creative artists is that they open-up possibilities for what objects might be and mean. Objects in a museum can get constrained within set narratives (such as the history of collecting) but artists can generate new ways of positioning and thinking about these works. Approaching objects in this way would build on the strong experience in storytelling and social action through theatre that already exists in Juba’s creative community.

The need to reanimate objects has implications for South Sudanese objects stored in European museums. One participant who had attended a previous network meeting in the UK, said to the group, ‘our objects are in store (in European museums) because there is no information about them’. He emphasised the need to give the objects stories, and that stories connect people to heritage and to each other.

## Education and future generations

One of the most coherent priorities that emerged from the discussions was the need to tie research and heritage projects into a programme of education (either for schools or higher education). It was suggested that all programmes and research projects should embed provisions that will help to create the next generation of heritage leaders in South Sudan.

There were several practical suggestions of how to link heritage work to education. For example, a museum could be established at the University of Juba or Catholic University

which could be connected to the Department of Archaeology or Arts. Heritage studies or material culture analysis courses could be developed around the museum, giving the student opportunities to learn about cataloguing and developing exhibition. Archaeological research projects could also provide crucial training opportunities (and these could be linked to the Department of Archaeology at the University of Juba). There are local possibilities for this (if the current security situation improves), such as the nineteenth century fortifications at Gondokoro, which would be a fascinating and accessible site for students in Juba to explore South Sudan's past through material culture.

There are also possibilities for using material culture in school classrooms – either in history lessons or in general educational contexts. School children could be asked to reflect on the material culture in their lives and its relationship to traditions and social change. One participant has already experimented with discussing objects and cultural heritage with school children and had positive results.

## Culture and peacebuilding

Another important theme in discussion was the possibilities for pursuing peace, social cohesion and justice through museum and heritage projects. There is clear potential for work on material culture to bring different communities together, to explore shared histories and cultures, and act as a tangible starting point for dialogue and healing. More pragmatically, 'peacebuilding' work is an important source of funding for arts and heritage practitioners. There is likely to be money available for projects addressing peace and community reconciliation in South Sudan.

However, there are potential limitations to approaching museum and cultural work exclusively through the lens of 'peacebuilding'. One participant noted, 'we are struggling to look beyond community reconciliation as a priority. Of course, this is a key political and personal priority for all of us here, but what about questions of environmental, social, and economic history beyond this political lens?'. Focusing exclusively on peacebuilding through culture might restrict other, radical and transformative objectives from emerging. The challenge is how to tap this potential without becoming stuck in a potentially limiting peacebuilding framework for cultural heritage. One reflection captures this dilemma:

"For me, the museum is about telling the story of people. We are heavily focused on thinking about peace, because of the situation we are in. But we need to use the museum to ask some broader questions. How does the museum tell us about who we are?"

Running through all the discussions was a question about identity. Another participant put a question to the group: "We need to ask ourselves, who are we? As South Sudanese, who are

we?” There is no single answer to this question, but attention to material culture, heritage and arts provides a space for a vital and long conversation about South Sudanese identity to take shape.

Participants shared a conviction that arts and culture is a powerful vehicle for social cohesion. Many are involved in projects that seek to tap the power of heritage in this way. However, the group was also wary that an exclusive focus on peace work may stifle other valuable forms of expression and dialogue (such as more explorative questions about identity and belonging).

## Ethical Issues

Working with culture and heritage presents a complex set of ethical issues to address. At one level, there are procedures surrounding the documentation and collection of cultural heritage that must be followed to ensure that material is acquired and stored ethically.

However, there is another set of ethical issues around collaborating with communities and representation. Who has the authority to speak on behalf of the community and to represent that community? How can we promote equal partnerships and ensure equality is sustained at all levels? How do we deal with the emotional resonance of objects or heritage practices and the stories they convey? These issues are also extremely relevant for the kinds of heritage work conceived at the workshop.

## Practical constraints

Arts and heritage practitioners, like many South Sudanese, are facing constraints to their practice in Juba and ability to travel across the country.

The lack of institutional support or a shared base was discussed. This is connected to the problem that heritage work has so far not been prioritised by major public institutions. Several participants noted the need for a place to store, and display objects and artworks and discussed the possibility of this occurring either at the university or at Nyakuron Cultural Centre (although concerns were expressed that this has recently become a place for business and politics rather than culture).

There are wide ranging security concerns and the conflict has affected museum and heritage work. One participant told us about a Madi chief who had built a museum in his

home village. It was a small room where people could view objects and it was also possible to buy things. A team from the Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports had visited in 2014. When they returned in 2016, after conflict had swept through the area, the small museum was destroyed and only the sign post remained. However, the chief is now renovating and working on revitalising his museum (an indication of the resilience of this kind of initiative). Security concerns affect practice in other ways. For example, it is hard to document things in Juba now, as you cannot take photographs. It is not possible to access all parts of the country with initiatives such as travelling exhibitions.

Dr Justin Billy Buwali explains the cultural significance of *rongo* music



## Reflections

South Sudan is experiencing multiple political and humanitarian crises. Work in heritage and the creative arts does not have the same urgency as nutritional or health intervention. Nevertheless, these sectors are crucial for developing a healthy and inclusive society.

Further, the creative arts are a nexus of solidarity and collective action. They offer considerable possibility for people to work together on socially constructive projects and to explore historical experiences in open-ended ways.

There is extensive knowledge and expertise in the cultural sector in Juba which can be tapped. The participants in this workshop and the range of projects they are involved in are testament to that. The discussions have highlighted some key insights and areas of future focus for a range of museum projects.

- In a context of continual external aid interventions, work on culture, heritage and the arts differs strikingly from most initiatives in South Sudan because it celebrates the assets that communities already have, rather than trying to fill gaps in their needs.
- South Sudan is in the unique position of not inheriting a museum from the colonial state. There is an opportunity to creatively think through what social role museum(s) might play for South Sudanese people. A flagship national museum project can have a role. However, there may be advantages to thinking in terms of a range of mobile, temporary, smaller-scale, local and community based projects (some are happening spontaneously already). These may be more feasible, accessible and inclusive as a way of building connections and understanding between South Sudanese.
- The value of cultural and heritage is not always articulated well or recognised in wider society. Participants had several suggestions of how to raise public profile and interest.
- Museum-based cooperation and collaborative work would be welcomed by Juba based practitioners and scholars. In part, this would involve partnerships and knowledge exchange between European museums holding significant South Sudanese collections and practitioners in South Sudan. There are also valuable regional networks (e.g. in the National Museums of Uganda and Kenya) to tap into. It is also a priority to collaborate with communities in South Sudan.
- The creative arts are an important way of working with material culture and museum collections which will allow for objects to be 'reanimated' and their

meanings interpreted and communicated (to publics and within the museum space). There is considerable expertise in Juba to implement creative work around museum collections and heritage.

- Heritage projects and research are uniquely positioned to involve students, to contribute towards educational development and raise public awareness of history and culture. All initiatives should embed ways of creating the next generation of South Sudanese heritage leaders and reaching out to publics.
- There is potential to promote peace and dialogue through museum and heritage work. However, promoting peace should not be the only focus. Participants are also keen to address other fundamental and exploratory questions (such as identity and what it means to be South Sudanese) through material culture and arts.
- Ethical questions, particularly around community collaborations and maintaining equal partnerships, much be continually addressed.