



South Sudan Museums Network

Connecting the arts and heritage of
South Sudan in European Museums

‘South Sudanese collections and their histories’

5-6 July 2017, Durham University

Workshop report

The first workshop brought together different stakeholders to discuss the nature, history and potential of collections of South Sudanese objects held in museums in Europe and Russia. The multiple meanings of the objects and diverse ways in which to approach them were apparent in the range of presentations: from historical and archaeological perspectives on the contexts from which these objects originated and the broader histories of European collecting in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, to the very recent history of nation-building efforts and cultural revival in South Sudan; and from the detailed overviews of individual museum holdings across Europe to inspirational examples of artistic and creative work connecting communities with such objects in West Africa, London and Juba.

The positive energy and enthusiasm of the participants was palpable throughout the workshop, with a strong affirmation of the potential of these collections to do a great deal of work, whether in helping to recover lost histories and heritage, in generating dialogue between past and present creative practices, in telling stories of regional and transnational exchange and movement, and perhaps even in forging new links between European and South Sudanese communities and institutions. By the end of the workshop we were already discussing ideas not only for the next event, but also for potential publications, research projects, dissemination and outreach.

Yet this sense of excitement was balanced by the sobering and painful realities of South Sudan’s present circumstances and their connection to the deeper histories of violent predation, extraction and inequality evoked by these collections and their histories. This also confronted us with broader questions about museum histories and practices of representation. Whose stories do these objects tell? How can we open-up the range of these stories and avoid simplifying ‘South Sudanese heritage’, or indeed ‘European collecting’? How can we encourage critical readings of these objects and retain the complexity of what they might represent?

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The multiple meaning and value of objects

The ways that objects take on new meanings over time and space was an important theme of the workshop. The transport of objects from South Sudan to European museums also entailed transformations in their value and meaning. Often they became part of nation-building in Europe, contributing to the creation of national heroes and telling stories of European exploration, evangelism and imperialism. Museum policies and practices have changed hugely over time, bringing critical approaches to the stories objects tell and imperatives to forge new connections with diverse publics and creator communities. Yet such efforts may also be constrained by resource limitations and by the demands of the largest and most proximate publics. Curators are dealing with vast collections of which even the sizeable South Sudanese components may be only a small part. The great majority of these objects are not displayed and some are only catalogued and described to a minimal extent. Dealing with 'absences' and 'silences' will be a vital aspect of any work with these materials.

Yet even within these very real constraints, the objects are already telling stories not only of European or national history, but of global and transnational connections. In the Slovenian context, for example, we heard how 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. Similar stories could be told for the other collections that were profiled at the workshop.

The movement of these objects has created 'an object diaspora'. The diaspora of South Sudanese people has taken often very different routes. One of the challenges now is to try to link together these different diasporas, and to retrace the original routes of the museum objects all the way back to South Sudan – where again their meanings and values may be different, varied and contested.

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Using objects to rethink past and present circumstances and national futures

Acknowledging the multiple meanings of the objects, we also discussed their implications for mediating different pasts. Might there be important ways in which objects make us rethink the written accounts of South Sudan's history? The value of this for contemporary Sudan was emphasised by Jok Madut Jok, scholar and former under-secretary for culture in South Sudan, who said 'the objects are not just the objects: they tell the stories of the people involved in their production...South Sudan is cornered, beset by all kinds of problems...we are producing a new kind of culture, but we need to retain a sense of self'.

Jok began by talking about how the state-led process of nation building had failed in South Sudan (or in John Ryle's phrase, it has been 'interrupted'). We heard also about the Ministry of Culture's attempt to use objects to forge national unity by celebrating cultural diversity through a travelling museum exhibition in South Sudan. Many discussions came back in different ways to the pressing need for more inclusive ways of imagining the nation. The historical processes that led to the formation of these museum collections (commercial expansion, exploration, colonialism) are the same ones that ultimately produced the South Sudanese state and its boundaries. Could these objects offer a different way of thinking about nation-building in South Sudan, not as a top-down imposition but as a process of exchange and sharing of cultures, arts and histories?

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Yet, we also repeatedly returned to the complexity of these objects and the stories they might tell, and agreed that there is a need to tell an open, complicated and possibly contradictory story. This became apparent in discussing the way in which the meaning of objects in social memory can differ from what a historian might consider an 'accurate' reading. Historians might seek to use museum collections to recover the past in ways that

are very different from how these objects could be understood, interpreted and appropriated by communities in South Sudan or its diaspora today, or indeed by museum publics in Europe. Any museum display or historical account has the potential to generate tension and debate over which (or whose) story is 'right'. But such tensions are also potentially creative, if the space for debate and dialogue can be opened up rather than closed down. The challenge for us then is to think about how objects can be part of a process of recovering history and bring local memory into dialogue with other versions of history. This also entails re-engaging different generations as well as different communities. And as Annie Coombes suggested, the whole idea of what a museum might be is up for grabs: South Sudan offers a particularly exciting opportunity to think through that question.

Paul Basu suggested that Sierra Leone (where his work has focused) may be an instructive comparison to South Sudan, in terms of how 'reanimating' museum objects might contribute to reanimating a post-conflict society more widely. Activating these objects in the museum collections could be seen as a symbolic kind of 'remittance' from the object diaspora to South Sudan. And as several people emphasised, it is important to remember that the objects were rarely created for static display – they were made to be used and worn, whether in practical or performative ways. Reanimation is thus also a process of restoring these elements: seeking ways of bringing music, performance, ceremony, artistry and sociability to the interpretation and use of these objects. In other words, we need to bring and enable some of the creativity and inventiveness that produced these objects into the work that they might do now for the present and future.

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