

المعلم حسون للمقاييس  
خبرة ٢٥ عامًا

Sudan  
Field Visit

May 2015

المتاح الضائع


حسون خبرة ٢٥ عامًا  
٠٩١٤٢٤٣٥٠٥



آفاق AFAC

The Arab Fund For Arts and Culture  
الصندوق العربي للثقافة والفنون - آفاق



An aerial photograph of a city, likely Khartoum, Sudan, showing a wide river (the Nile) flowing through the urban landscape. The river is a dark, winding line that separates different parts of the city. The surrounding areas are a mix of green vegetation and grey urban structures. A white rectangular box is overlaid on the top right portion of the image, containing text in black and orange. The word 'Introduction' is written in a larger, orange font, while the rest of the text is in a smaller, black font.

The Arab Fund for Arts and Culture (AFAC) organizes field trips to several Arab countries in order to understand the local cultural scene, discover new talents, promote cooperation among them and introduce to local artists and cultural institutions AFAC's grant programs that offer financial and professional help.

In this context came AFAC's visit to Sudan, which took place between May 11th and May 17th 2015. For five days, AFAC's Executive Director Oussama Rifahi visited Khartoum, Omdurman and Khartoum North-Bahri, where he met many Sudanese artists, got introduced to the local cultural and artistic scene, and presented AFAC's grants programs to potential beneficiaries. Rifahi held around thirty cultural, artistic and social meetings, visited more than twenty sites, and met dozens of people who work in the cultural field.



# Sudan

Situated northeastern Africa, Sudan is bordered by Ethiopia and Eritrea to the east, Egypt and Libya to the north, Chad and the Central African Republic to the west and by South Sudan to the south, after the latter split from the central government in 2011 following a civil war that extended to more than 50 years. Sudan is home to many racial, ethnic and religious groups, but Islam influences the cultural background of the majority of its population.

The country was rocked by many military coups, the last of which was the one led by Omar al-Bashir in 1989, when he ousted the democratically-elected government of Sadiq Mahdi, and became the chairman of the Revolutionary Command Council for National Salvation and later president of the republic.

The International Criminal Court issued two arrest warrants against Bashir in 2009 and 2010 on counts of crimes related to the conflict in the western city of Darfur, which began in 2003 and furthered Sudan's isolation from its surroundings and the rest of the world.

The cultural and artistic activity in Sudan was very vibrant in the beginning of the twentieth century, witnessing the appearance of many poets, writers and intellectuals who have deeply influenced the Sudanese cultural movement.

Thirty years ago, the city of Khartoum alone used to have around 15 cinemas teeming with moviegoers. However, civil war and the political and economic crises, as well as the absence of a democratic rule, have all contributed to choking the country's culture.



We began our first day with a morning visit to the Taibah Press center, which specializes in organizing seminars, workshops and press conferences. The center's director, journalist Mohammad Latif, greeted us along with his

## The Taibah Press center

colleague Faisal Mohammad Saleh.

The visit developed into a wider meeting between AFAC's Executive Director and more than seventy journalists, writers, poets, playwrights and artists. During the meeting, critic and playwright Al-Serr al –Sayyed gave a general overview of the cultural and artistic scene in Sudan, focusing on three main topics.

First, the absence of an opportune atmosphere that supports art and culture, and consequently the absence of cultural accumulation and expertise, which makes cultural production solely based on individual initiatives. "Every artist works by himself and does not interact or engage with other artists; this is the case not only in Sudan, but in many other Arab countries."

Secondly, as in all countries that suffer from lack of freedom, art is not independent from politics in Sudan. Art's association with politics and the strong impact of the state's censorship renders artistic production truly difficult.

Last, the lack of openness to regional Arab or African scenes and the scarcity of participation in regional festivals, limits the communication and networking with new ideas and projects that happen beyond the country's borders.





After the overview by Al-Sayyed, Rifahi introduced AFAC's projects and goals to the participants in the meeting, who in turn had the chance to ask questions and voice concerns, for example, why so many AFAC grants focus on the Levant region and Egypt. They also raised questions related to the procedures for supporting production, the ways to receive funding, to do networking and submit artistic projects while they are still in their conceptual stage.

Rifahi pointed out that the reason behind the high number of grants in Egypt is that the latter's population vastly exceeds that of Sudan, in addition to the fact that Egyptian artists are familiar with AFAC and its projects. Rifahi stressed that grants in AFAC are not bound to any quota, but are given according to the projects' quality, innovation, budget feasibility and relevance to the Arab region. He also raised the issue of difficulty of bank transfers to Sudan due to the current embargo.

At the end of the first morning meeting, and while on our way to have a lunch break under the burning sun –"As if there is an old vendetta between the sun and people" (Tayeb Salih), we watched large groups of people of all ages gathering around a lady tea vendor, under the shade of the trees, drinking tea or coffee, chatting and gathering action and energy to continue their day. The "Mrs. Tea" phenomenon is spread on the sidewalks in Sudan; it eases the daily life of the Sudanese people and is the only get-together occasion where people can communicate, in the absence of public spaces.





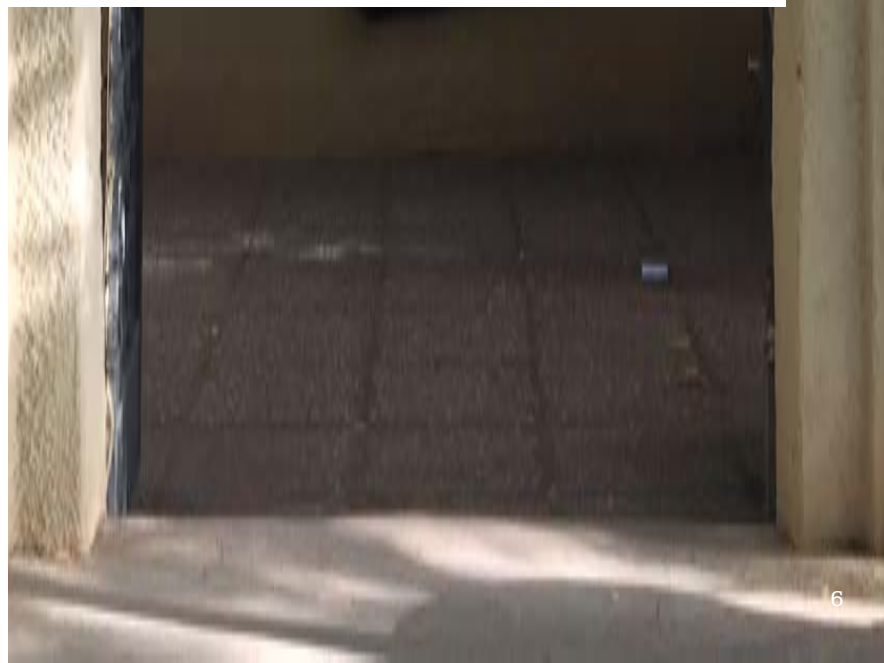


In the afternoon, we visited the Dabanga and Mojo galleries, specialized in exhibiting and selling Sudanese art works and sculptures as well as products from Sudanese folklore. In the

## The Dabanga Gallery and Mojo Galley

from South Africa and the other from Benin. This was the occasion to have a small chat with French Ambassador Bruno Aubert.

evening, we watched two contemporary dance shows at the French Institute, one





## At the French Institute

We began the day at the French Institute in Khartoum

and met one of its directors, Imane Satti, as well as a group of young artists, including Mohammad Abdel Rasul, Amal Bashir and the "Kheish" group (Jalal Youssef and friends).

The discussion revolved around the different issues they face in their work, especially the need for training and workshops, the lack of financing, and the absence of any form of communication between young and old generations of artists.





Ana Bachir



Mohamed Abdul Rasoul



The meeting at the French Institute was followed with a visit to the Goethe Institute and its director Manfred Ewel.

## At the German Goethe Institute

"When I first came to Khartoum, I was only familiar

with writer Tayeb Salih and musician Hamza El Din. In the one year I spent here, I have met so many artists from different fields and the picture looks very different now."

Ewel gave us some examples of the cultural activities that the Goethe Institute supports, including the "Mugran Foto Project," which roams the city of Khartoum and involves young talents from outside the city too, and the "Sudan Film Factory," which aims at producing independent movies and training young Sudanese to master filmmaking skills.







The third meeting of the second day was with critic Musaab al-Sawi, who talked with Rifahi about AFAC's role in supporting culture and arts in the Arab region. Rifahi said that

## At the Ray Aam newspaper

governments in  
Arab countries  
neglect arts  
and culture in

general, adding that many governmental bodies are mostly concerned with giving prizes.

"At AFAC we do not give prizes; instead, we offer grants to young creative talents. Because the impact of a prize is limited and temporary, grants provide for more efficient support to artists with longer impact, and help them realize their projects more in depth."

The conversation with Sawi was followed by a meeting with the newspaper's editor in chief, Mohammad Abdel Qader, at his office overseeing the coast of the Blue Nile. During the meeting, he raised the issues faced by cultural actors and intellectuals in Sudan. "The unstable political situation in the country had exhausted culture and despite the great potential of youth and the strong desire for creative and cultural work, intellectuals in Sudan are isolated, with a big gap between the young and old generation. Sudan needs to come closer to the Arab culture elsewhere in the region."







The fourth meeting was at the University of Khartoum's Abdallah El-Tayeb Institute, which was founded in 1999 to strengthen Arabic language and emphasize it in the country's education curriculum. The institute holds various literary

## At the University of Khartoum

seminars, where Sudanese writers elaborate on

various research topics. As an example, one of the studies was concerned with the Oud instrument, introduced in Sudan by Egyptians and Levantines in the thirties, and its influence on Sudanese music; another study dealt with the subject of Sudanese songs performed in classical Arabic, and its influence on the Sudanese identity.







Third Day: May 14, 2015

We spent the day in the city of Omdurman, and started it with a visit to the Theatre of Popular and Performing Arts.

We met with the theatre's director Abdallah Hasab al-Rasul, who gave us his take on the history of theatre in the country and the reasons for the deterioration of the genre now.

## At the Theatre of Popular and Performing Arts

"The Sudanese Culture Ministry stopped supporting theatre a long

time ago. Theater in the seventies focused on the arts and its influence on social development. After the ministry stopped its support, the theatre's management found itself obliged to rents its halls to cover operating expenses. There are many theatre ensembles in the country, but the scarcity of resources limit the number of shows, and the very small number of playwrights are unable to find jobs. This results in qualified artists quitting their job and emigrating. Few remain and organise workshops such as the one by director Yasser al-Tijani.

We try to get a special budget for theatre workshops, but this still does not allow us to organize workshops in the provinces, and this is why we have to rely on other organizations. To make things worse, the Higher Institute of Music and Theatre that used to be an independent center, affiliated to the Culture Ministry, has been annexed to a governmental university. Joining the institute became dependent on the students' marks rather than on a skill test as done previously. This has led to a generation of substandard students. This deterioration has extended to the theatre's infrastructure and technical equipment.

The management has no budget, and the theatre is suffering damage and dysfunction."





## At The National Theatre

We moved to the National Theatre, located in large

urban zone next to the Theatre of Popular and Performing Arts, the radio and television buildings and the Blue Nile TV channel. The zone is bordered to the north by a women's prison and to the east by the Nile River.

A meeting between AFAC, a group of playwrights and the managerial staff was held inside the National Theatre's hall. During the meeting Rifahi introduced AFAC and focused especially on grants that are given to projects of performing arts.

The prestigious theatre founded in the fifties had witnessed performances of Um Kalthoum in the sixties, but the building's infrastructure was never rehabilitated and its technical equipment never renovated.







The third stop was at the non-profit Abdel Karim Merghani Cultural center, the association that created the famous Al-Tayeb Salih prize for creative writing in 2002, considered the most important prize in Sudan for novel writing.

### At the Abdel Karim Merghani Cultural Center

"Writer Tayeb Salih requested on his seventieth birthday that all the money

collected for him be used to support literary works. All the writer's works were printed (12 books), but the budget allocated to prizes for creative writings shrunk by half due to inflation," said Walid Khalafallah Surkti, director of the Abdel Karim Merghani Center.

It is worth noting that a Sudanese private telecommunications company kidnaped the idea of the prize and is crediting it to itself now, gaining more publicity as a result.

The center's director also raised the handicapping role of censorship in hindering the center's activities, as permits have to be requested from several entities including police, Culture Ministry and State Ministry, with the final decision resting with the Security Apparatus.

"We have five employees, and many young volunteers. We hold weekly seminars tackling social and cultural causes, as well as exhibitions and poetry seminars. Most of the time, permission is issued the same day the event is due to be held, which obstructs our ability to effectively promote the event. Things got even worse following the September 2013 protests," Surkti added.



Despite the security forces' obstruction and intervention in cultural activity, Surkti enumerated a number of accomplishments.

"13 novels were printed (one of them was banned) and 6 collections of short stories. Several creative writing workshops were held in the past, not the case anymore due to a large number of Sudanese writers emigrating abroad. Short stories were also translated into French and English, in collaboration with the French Institute in Khartoum," he said.

The center also organized the "Majdi al-Nour" festival, with the support of local companies. The festival aims at re-staging old Sudanese plays with a new Mise-en-scène.





## An interview with the Blue Nile TV channel

After the visit to the Abdel Karim Merghani Cultural Center, Oussama Rifahi headed for the Blue Nile TV station where he was interviewed live on AFAC's visit to Sudan.







We headed next to the Sudanese Film Group's office.

## The Sudanese Film Group

SFG was founded in April 1989, and is formed of a group of people specialized in movie-making, technical production, and distribution. Filmmaker Ibrahim Shaddad spoke of the cultural situation in Sudan back in the fifties, sixties and seventies.

There used to be 16 cinemas in Khartoum alone and between three to four cinemas in every Sudanese city. Today, there are only two cinemas in Khartoum showing low-budget Indian movies. A previous statistical study has shown that the number of cinema fans in Sudan is multiple times bigger than football fans. In the past, the state was in charge of supporting cinema, but the sector was privatized and companies refused to venture in cinematic production.

Shaddad also told us that three institutions were in charge of importing and distributing American and European movies in the fifties (the State Corporation for Cinema, the Department of Culture's Cinema Section and the Administration for Cinema Production). These institutions used to produce documentaries and short movies in the fifties which participated in Arab and international festivals (Beirut, Carthage and Burkina Faso). Such productions were a promising beginning to the future of cinema in Sudan.



In 1970, the first long feature movie was made, and in the following 20 years, a collection of other long feature movies were made, such as "Al-Jamal," (The Camel) "Al-Habel" (The Rope) and "Al-Mahatta" (The Station). They all participated in a number of international festivals and won prizes.

The State Corporation for Cinema, the Department of Culture's Cinema Section, and the Administration for Cinema Production were shut down in the nineties. They were seized by the national television and their employees dismissed.

Shaddad noted that despite the absence of public support for cinema in Sudan, the Sudanese Film Group is trying to accomplish artistic works with the meager available resources.

"We have video cameras that are used by a group of youths to make movies that are shown to friends and family members at a number of cultural centers. We organize training workshops in photography and editing, a number of short movies are produced at the end of those workshops. We also help young graduates by organizing screenwriting workshops, we participate in some festivals as jury panelists and we make documentaries for a few international organizations operating in Sudan. However, our films are shown to a limited audience and not publicized."

After introducing AFAC, a short film by Ibrahim Shaddad was screened: the film tackled repression and disdain for art in Sudan.

A group of Sudanese filmmakers were present in this meeting and included Al Tayeb Mehdi, Suleiman Ibrahim, Manar al-Helou and Mohammad Mohammad Ali. Most had studied in universities in Egypt, Europe and the US and returned with great excitement to their country to unfortunately discover they could not accomplish much.







We returned to Khartoum in the evening. On the way back, we noticed a poster hung on the streets widely announcing an initiative to print one million copies of the Quran. This

## At the Work Cultural Group

was indicative of a general atmosphere prevailing in the country, with numerous religious initiatives launched and a growing number of mosques in cities, streets

and suburbs. This has been apparently made possible only through the large influx of outside financial aid, offered only for religious purposes, whereas no financial help was being given to build schools or cultural centers.

We met the Work Cultural Group at the Athenian square on Jamhuriya Street, a prestigious square that occupies an important place in the Sudanese collective memory, and a spot considered a get-together for friends, intellectuals and artists, before it was closed off by the authorities, along with other public spaces. The Work Cultural Group organizes cultural events, such as the street book fair, held on the first Tuesday of every month, where books are exhibited on the floor, sold or exchanged for other new or used books. The book fair is usually accompanied by musical concerts, fine arts exhibitions and poetry seminars. Ibrahim al-Jrifawi, an independent filmmaker, told us of a three-day event held at the National Museum in Khartoum as a "tribute to books and libraries." Several libraries participated in this event, some of which are still open with many others have been shut down.

The conversation held during the meeting tackled the type of events that AFAC can support and the plans of establishing a public library and organizing training workshops in cultural management. Among those present in the meeting were the head of the Work Cultural Group Abdallah Mohammad al-Tayeb, a fine artist, Aboudallah al-Zein, a poet, and Weiss Lepen, a playwright.



We concluded the third day with dinner at Leila Hajjar's place. Leila and her husband businessman Anis Hajjar are supporters of several philanthropic initiatives in the

## Dinner with Leila and Anis Hajjar

country, and Leila owns and operates the Dabanga Gallery. The conversation centered on the cultural scene in Sudan and the importance of investing in culture by encouraging philanthropy.





On the weekend day of Friday, we met with Sudanese artist Tareq Amin from the Hela Hop band, a former AFAC grantee. Amin is also the person behind the "Adil al-Madaris" initiative

## The Adil al-Madaris Program

that attracted the attention of several international

organizations for its diligent and innovative work rehabilitating and rebuilding schools all over Sudan. Armies of volunteers group together and visit one school every Friday to renovate it, painting walls, fixing equipment and providing free books.







The Fifth Day: May 15, 2015

The fifth day was dedicated to visiting libraries and publishing houses. At first, we visited the Medarek Publishing House, one of the largest

## At the Medarek Publishing House

Sudanese private publishing houses and met

the owner, Mr. Elias Fath al-Rahman. Elias bitterly described how the state was not only failing to support culture, but also hampering its outreach. He noted that the cultural initiatives in Sudan were solely based on the effort of individuals from the Sudanese civil society.

"The authorities have shut down the cultural centers and the Writers Union, a historic union that was independent from the state. It represented all political parties and was formed of 520 members. The authorities also shut down other centers, such venues such as the 'Al-Khatem Adlan,' 'Salima,' 'House of Arts' and the 'Sudanese Studies.' They also closed down the Eltayeb Salih Prize at the Abdel Karim Merghani Center. Only few organizations and foundations are left in the cultural field. We are grateful to the European centers and the Abdel Karim Merghani center for their efforts despite the scarcity of resources."

We introduced AFAC and mentioned a number of young Sudanese writers who have received grants from the organization, and discussed the difficulties faced by the publishing, printing and distribution sectors in the Arab region.







We met with photographers Alaa Kheireddine and Mohammad Salah over coffee, who are members of the

## The Sudanese Photography Club

Sudanese Photography Club, formed of 30 young

members all in their twenties. The young photographers displayed great enthusiasm and seemed to have a clear vision for photography in Sudan.

Alaa Kheireddine had won a grant from the Prince Claus Fund for his project "The Background Border," which participated in several festivals in and outside Sudan. As for Mohammad Salah, he planed to submit his documentary project about the "Churches of Sudan" to the AFAC's Arab documentary photography program ADPP.

Alaa Kheireddine told us of the "Mugran Foto Project" which organizes several workshops and meetings to help networking with a number of photography centers in different countries. We invited the collective members to apply for the AFAC's grants in the future.



The next stop was at the Sudan Film Factory where we reviewed the visual arts library of filmmaker Hussein Sharif (1934-2005).

## At the Sudan Film Factory

Sudan Film Factory

aims at producing an alternative independent cinema and training Sudanese youths to master filmmaking skills. <http://sudanfilmfactory.org/>

Since its creation in 2010, it has produced 33 films. The organization's director Talal Afifi said that two workshops were held every year. "Every January, we organize the Sudan Independent Cinema Festival, during which we show movies of good quality at public squares."

Afifi also noted that the project needed funding in order to rehabilitate the team, especially because those working in the project were volunteers. "We suffer from the geographical restrictions imposed on applicants for external grants from abroad. Such grants are usually given according to geography and we often miss out: Sudan is not an Eastern African country, not a Middle Eastern country and not an Arab Spring country!" he said.







### The Sixth Day: May 17, 2015

This is the last day for us in Khartoum. The day began with a visit to Sudan

#### At Sudan Café

Café, a popular café in the rural suburb of Shambat. Every Friday, the café organizes a musical concert for young bands seeking an opportunity to perform in public. The café owner told us of the difficulties he faces to obtain licenses and the inhibiting security permissions needed to hold these concerts.





<http://www.fccsudan.org/ar/>

We moved to the Al-Faisal Cultural Center, built by the "Al-Faisal Islamic Bank." The center offers comprehensive IT,

## At the Al-Faisal Cultural Center

knowledge and educational services to all, through a

traditional library, an electronic library, a children's library, an exhibition hall, a conference hall, an images gallery and training programs.

We met with the center's director, who mentioned the famous slogan that went viral in the golden days of libraries in Sudan, when it was rich with Arabic and foreign publications: "Cairo writes, Beirut prints and Khartoum reads." He also told us about the great effort that was being deployed nowadays to make the new generations read.

"This is why we, at the Al-Faisal center, pay a special attention to the children's library, and are working on reviving school libraries and are currently building a mobile library to roam all Sudanese provinces."

The traditional library comprises more than 80 thousand books and the electronic library has four databases. The center has also organized many workshops related to cinema, theatre and fine arts since its opening in 2013.

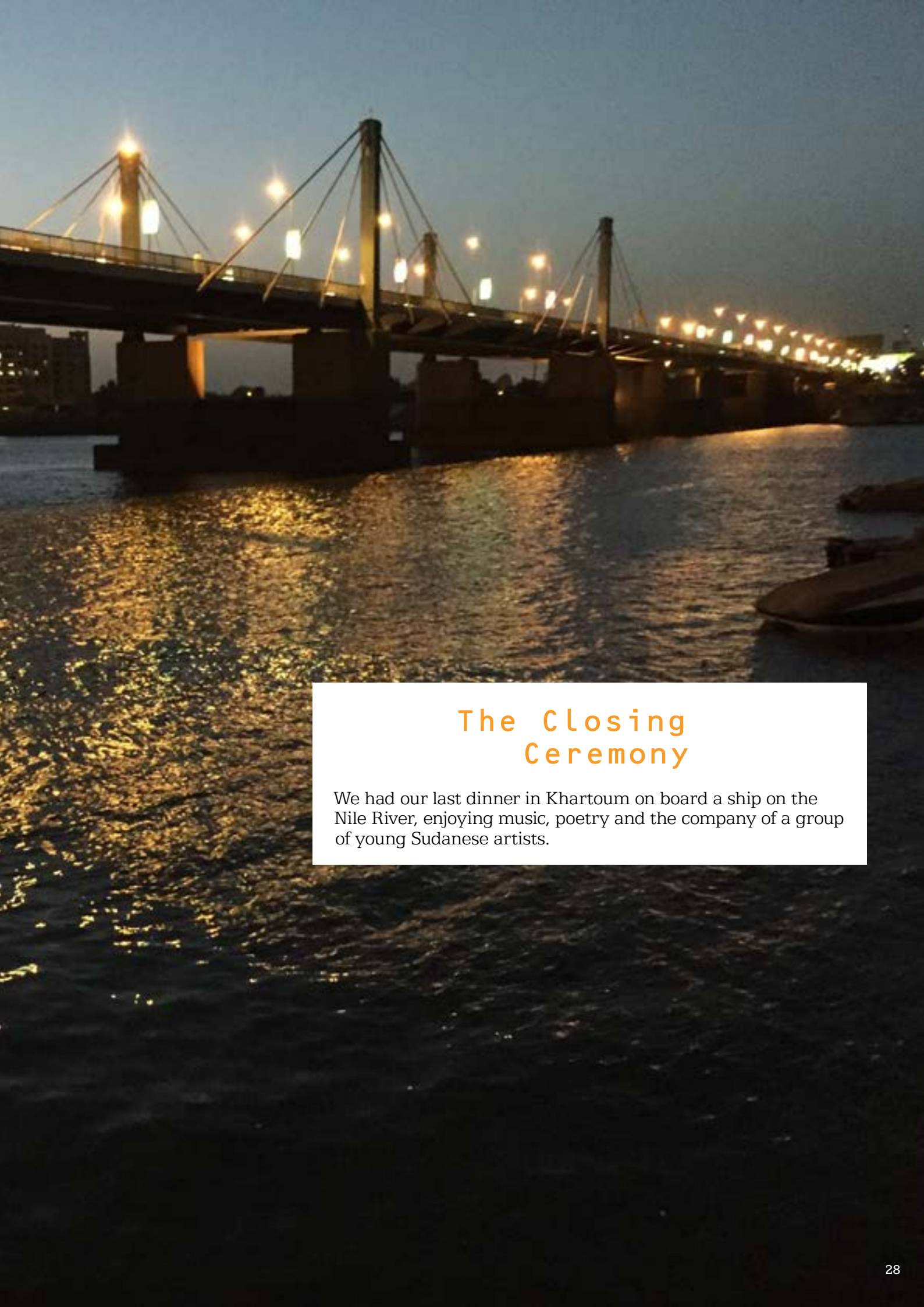
The center also helped with the establishment of the "Sudanese Union of Puppeteers," which seeks to become a member of the international union. The center also held the workshop of "Puppets Art" in Egypt.

Rifahi offered some examples of mobile libraries, such as the "Libraries without Borders", the Lebanese "As-Sabil" library and the Arab Puppet Theatre Foundation in Beirut, and offered to connect the center with them to benefit from their experiences.

AFAC ended its trip to Sudan with a visit to a fine arts exhibition entitled "Al-Ajmal Baynana" (The most Beautiful Among Us) by a group of Sudanese fine artists, including Saleh Alaj and Ahmad al-Sherif.







## The Closing Ceremony

We had our last dinner in Khartoum on board a ship on the Nile River, enjoying music, poetry and the company of a group of young Sudanese artists.



This field trip to Sudan showed us foremost the large gap that exists between the old and new generations. Artists and intellectuals from the old generation seemed discouraged,

## Conclusion

tired and disappointed.

The prevailing feeling is that their experiences and efforts were not fruitful and have not yielded much over the last thirty years.

As for young artists, they are more pragmatic and open to the cultural movement outside their own country. They believe that change is possible. Social media has made it easier for them to communicate with the outside world and learn about new and varied experiences. Through social media, they are able to network with people from different countries without having to travel or undergo censorship. But their desire for change is often faced with the bleak reality and the many obstacles, such as censorship and government's control of the cultural and artistic sector, as well as the lack of support and financing. This has created a feeling of despair that they are trying hard to overcome.

This situation is not too unfamiliar unfortunately and can be seen in many other countries living on the peripheries of the Arab region. Sudan enjoys a very rich cultural heritage, but facing the dire risk of extinction. Despite the unstable political situation, the state's neglect of cultural centers and the strict censorship on arts and cultures though, there are numerous courageous individual initiatives, a very positive energy and great determination on the part of young Sudanese artists to resist their despair through creative work, launching small projects, organizing workshops to develop their skills, even with a scarcity of funds.

At AFAC, we hope to be able to support more Sudanese artists and help them in their efforts to complete their projects, injecting resources and energy in a country that has unfortunately been unkind to its intellectuals and artists.

## Acknowledgment

We would like to express our gratitude to the team of "Khartoum Laboratory Theatre" Yasser Tijani, Hala al-Shrouni and Hussam Hilali for accompanying us throughout his visit to Sudan and helping us see the country from the "inside". We thank them also for helping put together this field visit report.