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William Carruthers, *Flooded Pasts – UNESCO, Nubia, and the Recolonization of Archaeology*. Cornell University Press, 2022. 336 pages. ISBN-10: 1501766449.

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Carruthers has delivered an epic, encyclopaedic volume that at once speaks to the discipline of archaeology and global development agendas. The volume is a tour de force of scientific research and the making, shaping, and narrating of histories. The volume is an arresting read which traverses interdisciplinary boundaries and raises many critical questions about how intellectuals conduct research that ultimately informs and influences livelihoods and futures. “Futures ... are always built on visions of the past” (p.4). It captures the complexity of archaeological practice and the political economy of empire, power, and the pervasiveness of coloniality even after independence. The continued reproduction of coloniality, through neo-colonialism and the recolonization of everyday lives, is a stark reminder of the current global geopolitics, such as the abhorrent violence against ordinary citizenry across the world. The separation of scientific archaeology from geopolitics becomes hard to postulate when reading and reviewing this against the backdrop of some of the most violent and despicable conflicts in the Sahel and the Sahara. As an archaeologist, this volume takes one out of comfort zones, especially the claim to globality and the veneer of scientific objectivity.

In the late 1990s, I took a solo journey to Luxor after a field excavation expedition in north-eastern Egypt under the leadership of eminent archaeologist Professor Fekri Hassan. I toured the area including the valley of the Kings. I remember the excited cat calls of young boys and men calling out, “Nubian Queen! Nubian Queen!” as I walked along the village roads with my long, braided hair and distinctly southern African features. I could not relate until years later, back in Botswana, when I was immersed in the poetic circles of young Rastafarians. My archaeological field experience in Egypt and interlude as a tourist left an indelible mark on my career and intellectual path in decoloniality

studies. Images of Nefertiti and the idea of beauty, identity, positionality, and belonging as a Black woman still led me to questions, I cannot immediately answer. One such question is reading this volume brought to the fore the undeniable and inextricable entanglements of archaeology and politics; specifically, this work discussed the persistence and dominance of colonial authorities over heritage practices and heritage institutions. UNESCO is a critical shaper of ideas, practice and institutional identities crosscutting the chapters of this volume.

Carruthers presents detailed narrative and critical analysis of how imperialism continues to overshadow and indeed foreshadow global heritage management in overt and covert ways. Through the lens of the study of the archive, Carruthers presents a matter of fact yet highly emotive text that lays bare the actions of multiple actors in the making of Nubia. The embodiment of Nubia, an imaginary and a spatial locality in time and space, a brutal yet romantic concept and a nostalgic forgotten being are all intertwined in this critical volume.

As the world deals with the war in Gaza, the experience of Nubians, erased and forgotten, invokes a sense of urgency to address the question – where is our humanity? Gazans have had their traumatic and horrific experiences captured in real time by the media. The Nubians have scribes like Carruthers who, with painstaking detail, compile multiple sources and archival material to re-member and reassemble what could be easily forgotten as the people who were/are/should be Nubians. At a global level, the erasure of others continues in many forms which may never receive the same level of detailed attention as that of Nubia and Gaza but the moral imperative to do something continues. Local and global inaction impacts the fate of Gaza and other crisis points like the Sudan and Libya where ordinary people are caught up in the power play of global actors.

Against the backdrop of other development crises, the volume brings to currency the global wars on water which also shed light on urgent discourses on the global climate crises and the role of international organizations in the making or unmaking of futures for global citizenry. The question of whether we are finding solutions for war and climate crises remains elusive as the world continues to convene for high level talks, conferences and in Shakespearian fashion – *Much Ado about Nothing* continues while the fate of many depend on lasting solutions being found for the current crises.

Carruthers uses beautiful metaphors as chapter titles for this book. The book includes an introduction and conclusion which provide context for the seven following chapters. The book is also a global development project through its association with UNESCO. This volume is almost cinematographic in its attention to details and its use of language and narrative brings the reader close to events on the ground. Perhaps because of my familiarity with a number of

personalities and institutions at the core of the volume, one gets a sense of intimacy akin to a film in 4-DX. The theatrics and intrigues of actors and actions throughout the book are as animated as they are revealing of personalities. Their influence on the course of things from simple archaeological field projects to the future of whole communities and nations is palpable through the pages of the book. Some of the names I recall from lectures, conferences and visits to museums always left me wondering. As a student of African Archaeology, I had to step into a different world when it came to the study of Egyptology. The book unpacks some of the ironies in the making of African archaeology and the continued pretentiousness of global archaeologies and heritage studies in respect to African studies.

The introductory chapter, aptly titled “*Flooding Nubia*”, presents a background of Nubia from the early 1900s when the earliest expeditions of *salvage archaeology* descended on Nubia. Interestingly, “salvage archaeology”, a discipline in its own right, has a long and chequered history with development practice. It has come back under the spotlight because of its origins in imperial and conquistadores practice of Europe to the rest of the world. Throughout the book, the layered nature of “salvage archaeology” is evidenced and calls for a critique of the discipline, especially as former colonies whose heritage still remains outside their provenance through illicit acquisition call for restitution.

The detailed introductory chapter presents a critique of concepts and research methodologies. The *archive* as a critical scholarship resource is essentially positioned in this book. The role of UNESCO in the making of Nubia is introduced with precision and detail; it captures the moment and mood of diverse actors who worked with a sense of urgency towards saving Nubia from impending flooding with the construction of dams along the Nile. Flooding Nubia is a pun in many senses as the advent of rescue missions led to the influx of people, experts, tourists, and others into Nubia. Also, it may refer to the many activities which ensued from the mid-1800s leading to entanglements of chronologies, geographies, cultures, and personalities which were not always in the best interest of Nubia and Nubians.

For UNESCO, the Nubian project became something of a launching pad for the rise of many personalities and the etching of UNESCO into the global discourse as the authority in world heritage. The 1972 World Heritage Convention was probably the cherry on the top for the UN agency which positioned itself as a champion for world heritage. Nubia became a global playground for scientists, adventurers, fortune seekers and looters. The author introduces a critical aspect of the making of Nubia: the quest for, and attainment of, liberation by both Sudan and Egypt. The end of imperial rule and self-determination, including cultural transformations of both Sudan and Egypt, added

interesting dimensions to the shaping and making of Nubia. The author deftly brings this element out throughout the book highlighting how this early Arabization of Egypt and Sudan probably set the tone and stage for current developments in the region which, as highlighted above, make this region a space of immense importance in global geopolitics. The lingering chokehold of coloniality is therefore not surprising.

Titled “The View from the Boat,” chapter one continues the historical reflection on the flooding of Nubia. It takes the lens back to the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century with the construction of the Suez Canal and the onset of colonial authority over Egypt and Sudan. The chapter also provides a genealogy of Nubian archaeology which was intertwined with Egyptian archaeology. Both are dominated by the personalities of Europeans, mainly white males, whose personalities left an imprint on the landscape in terms of race, class, and gender. The author draws on rich archival material and texts to highlight how the initial damming of the Nile in the 19<sup>th</sup> century set the stage for the later erasure of Nubian people from their land and their remaking in sanitized narratives.

These narratives perhaps suited the sensibilities of western consumers as tourists and travellers when Egypt became a major tourist destination (pp 31- 40). Ultimately, the gaze from the boat – whether by a colonial officer, expedition leader or tourist became the lens through which Nubia was shaped. This also included the shaping of people and livelihoods for communities who lived on the banks of the Nile where the dams were constructed. The author notes that the making invisible of Nubians was almost inevitable given the activities of the expeditions which traversed the Nile (pp 42 -52).

Chapters two and three address the archaeological project of “Documenting Nubia” and “Valuing Egyptian Nubia”. The obsession with particular styles of archaeological practice, archives, and records developing and shaping the value of Nubia through the lens of UNESCO are the highlights of these chapters. The chapters focus on the origins of UNESCO as a post-war institution which, as an agency of the UN, developed its identity, credibility and perhaps claim to global stature through the Nubian projects. The author highlights how in this process the recolonization of Nubia and global archaeological practice played out on the Nile and in the lives of Nubians.

The author navigates the events with empathy and often succeeds in “making visible” the Nubians who were constantly pushed to the background of the grand stage of archaeological practice and monumental architecture. Nubia was the theatre of “big men;” with the independence of both Egypt and Sudan, this would also usher in the emergence of local “big men” whose voices became inserted in the narrative-making of Nubia. This post-independence era heralded a new chapter for Nubia as demarcations of topographies also took on a political

texture with the demarcations of borders between Egypt and Sudan. The “scramble” for Nubia took on a new twist as multiple actors, benefactors, and financiers emerged which added to the conflicted landscapes of Nubia (pp. 96 – 115). The monetization of heritage practice changed archaeology in Nubia from a benevolent practice to one riddled with competitive personalities who sometimes sacrificed ethics in their quest for glory and visibility (pp118 -120).

Chapters four and five turn the lens towards the making of Sudan’s archaeology practice and the emergence of conflicts between the Egyptian and Sudanese states. Both countries endured military changes of government which shaped and re-shaped internal and external relations. The author cleverly highlights how both countries were able to play on the insecurities of global superpowers during the Cold War. They leveraged resources from competing sides which became part of their internal development agendas. Throughout these turbulent times, UNESCO and the making of Nubia continued alongside the global events. However, the author provides critical insights that highlight how archaeology and Nubian heritage specifically remained at the center of the global political jostling and financing (pp132 -169).

International teams brought with them their national agendas and literally staked their turf on the banks of the Nile; both Egypt and Sudan played on their identity making (Arabization) to reconfigure the identity of their newly independent states. Chapter five shifts the lens to “Peopling Nubia” to bring the conversations back to the Nubian people. Clearly, throughout the 150 years and more of the contestations on the banks of the Nile and the building of dams and flooding of Nubia, the people of Nubia never really came centre stage. This chapter gives them face and voice and highlights how even as their fate was being decided somewhere else their precarious livelihoods continued to hang in the balance. The inevitable movement of the Nubian people took place, despite them contesting their relocation and loss of livelihoods. Their re-making in new places subjected to cartographies designed by others also entrenched their erasure as a people with cultural histories along the Nile. Their “modernization” ensured they fit the scripts of others reordered in ways that spoke to new agendas of development (pp.179 – 187). In their final remaking, Nubians became as newly minted as the global narratives of Nubian and Egyptian heritage which graced the pages of glossy tourist brochures.

The last two chapters highlight the role of UNESCO in re-entrenching coloniality by endorsing imperial practice through heritage management ideals that privileged material culture over people. Citing a rich body of scholarship, the author presents a compelling case of the problematic role of UNESCO in taking

the global stage in making and shaping global heritage. The Nubia case study is not unique and mirrors other cases around the world where agencies like UNESCO and global superpowers used their resources and muscle to stamp their authority over heritage and resources belonging to others often at the expense of those who owned such resources.

The interlinkages of coloniality, empire, and power are underscored by the ease with which archaeological teams could easily access and take possession of material heritage from Nubia. Additionally, they could equally lay claim to resources and knowledge without the involvement and engagement of the Nubian people. Chapter seven which considers “Traces of Nubia” is a hard-hitting truth of how Nubia was lost. Despite the flurry of activities, significant investments made in the Nubian expeditions, and UNESCO’s leadership, the knowledge production from all these efforts remains negligible. In other words, while Nubia built careers for many, its documentation got lost in the process. To this end, the real Nubia will perhaps remain submerged in the flooded banks of the Nile with its people scattered elsewhere, divided by borders. What it means to be Nubian will recede to the imagination of all who converged on this terrain. In other words, the traces of Nubia will be consumed as disconnected bits without history or context. As the author pleads,

One way to think beyond the recolonized futures of Nubia that UNESCO’s campaign produced is to take this process of remaking seriously. More pointedly, there is an ethical obligation on behalf of the institutions and individuals who were involved in—and who continue to hold the records of—the Nubian campaign to think carefully about the Nubian agency sitting at the heart of that process: not just remaking, but repeopling, too. (p.278).

Carruthers brings great justice to this almost forgotten aspect of African archaeology and global heritage practice. Even as this book begs for a wider readership, the people of Nubia are challenged by more pressing matters, including the ongoing conflict which has devastated communities across Sudan. The fragility of lives and livelihoods in this region continues, and they are intertwined with other fragilities as highlighted by the ongoing conflicts in the region. The moral imperative towards peace not only calls for UNESCO to redefine and reshape its agenda from monumentalization of heritage towards programs and investment of resources to strengthen decent livelihoods in communities.

*Flooded Past*s –UNESCO, Nubia, and the Recolonization of Archaeology is a powerful and commendable addition to the literature on African studies, and

its rich bibliography, index and footnotes provide a great resource for researchers of Nubian studies and beyond. Its appeal goes beyond archaeological practice in Africa to a critique of global development studies. It is a resource which UNESCO and other heritage development agencies should recommend in the process of promoting decolonizing of knowledge.

It comes at a time when discourses of heritage repatriation and restitution, museum practice and cultural studies are re-interrogating the role of coloniality on global identities and restorative justice. By giving Nubians a face and a voice, Carruthers has taken a step towards humanizing archaeology. Hopefully the next generation of archaeologists will emerge as different actors from their predecessors of 150 years ago.

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