



Pre-walk interview 1

Sai, 24 February 2017 (E)

July 28, 2021

I arrived at the eastern shore of the island Sai together with Yūnis, a man in the early twenties whose family had hosted me in the village we both had travelled from. From the landing that we had reached with a small motorboat, we passed private and cooperative agricultural fields, some with ruins of doorways and buildings, and finally arrived at the house of Fa'iz who Yūnis knew from their membership in the same political party and numerous campaigns against the construction of hydropower dams in the region. We found him sitting and smoking together with Faraḥ, a friend and colleague; the Friday prayer had just finished. They were ready to show us the island and especially the areas where date palm fires had broken out but we talked for about an hour before we left.

The event

The interview went only shortly over the fire event itself and soon advanced into details of what the loss of date palms meant to them. Two major fires had affected them directly, for Fa'iz about 9 years before the interview, for Faraḥ 4 years

before. In both cases, it was a result from usage of fire for cleaning a field, with sudden gusts of wind taking up and extending the flame, until several thousand date palms had burnt down. They had tried to intervene but only when all palms had been consumed the fire stopped. Afterwards, government representatives came and, so Fa'iz, ate the meat prepared for their visit and promised to bulldoze the old palms and to provide seedlings to replant. In the end, only the bulldozer came and left a cleared stretch of about 2 km.

The estate

But renewal of the date palm orchards had both a deeper implication and strong complications, as the further discussion showed. Fa'iz highlighted early on the strong symbolic importance of the date palm and quoted, after I stressed my interest in expressions in his own language Nobíin, the singer-songwriter Mekki Ali Idris who compared Nubians to the date palm, as mark of a nobility that reaches far back into the past:

Nobíin (Nubian letters): ΝΑCΓΙΑ ΟΥΝΙ ΦΕΝΤΙΛΙΝᾹ

Nobíin (Latin letters): nasgid ūni fentilinā

English translation: We resemble the date palm in length

From the song 'Wallo Tara' that can be heard performed [here](#) (I thank Adham Nasr for the transcription and translation in Arabic, from which the English translation is derived). Mekki Ali Idris also addressed the issue of date palm fires more directly in the song '[Ali Abunaga](#)', and a whole song was devoted to it in August 2017 by the poet Abd Al-Shāfi Abd al-Majīd and singer Al-Shafi' Kīḥah (discussed on [Nubokeen](#), part of recording [here](#)).

But the relation to actual date palms underwent significant changes, the most obvious being in property, as explained by both of them in dialogue: date palms grow on land, and the owner of one is not necessarily the owner of the other. If this

is the case, then date palms on family land experience the full extent of social relations confirmed and enhanced through shared care for and harvest from the palm. Fa'iz recounted, for instance, his grandfather's date palms as place of memory, of the strong bond (*rabṭ quwwī*) among his heirs who would gather to harvest the dates, to receive their share from their grandfather's palm of the hand, even if only a cupful. Labour migration to Khartoum, to the Gulf countries and elsewhere, steadily increasing during the second half of the 20th century, made this annual gatherings even more important.

But other date palms existed as well. Since land irrigated from one source, called *sāqiyyah*, can stretch farther than what families can cultivate with their own labour, a system of sharecropping developed, which also extends to date palms: an owner cannot take care of thousands of date palms alone and includes, therefore, sharecroppers (*mushtarikīn*) who can stem from anywhere, including other countries, and who, after planting a palm, acquire ownership and the right to access the land on which the palm grows. The conventional agreement, then, is that the date palm owner gives a third or half of the date harvest as share to the land owner, also for the provision of irrigation. However, since interest in these palms will be, most of all, commercial, there will be no one 'excited' (*muthāmmas*) about them.

Fa'iz and Faraḥ gave this base structure more historical contour through a review of developments that were strongly formed land registration under the British colonial government, in this area from 1925 to 1929, following the 1925 Land Settlement and Registration Act. Fa'iz' grandfather, for instance, was lone owner of land registered in his name and from this point on, this same land was inherited by consecutive generations. Before the 1920s, land was flexibly extended and divided with inheritance, and could thus be individually owned by family members and their children. Now each generation meant a multiplication of shareholders.

This fragmentation of land also concerned date palms, although individual date palms were divided among

numerous heirs already before registration, as they are – necessarily – indivisible and non-expandable (see short discussion in Leach 1919). Decision-making got equally fragmented, so agreements were no longer possible one-on-one, hundreds of land owners dealt with hundreds of date palm owners. By way of example, Faraḥ's father planted date palms in 1958 and all of his 12 sons and one daughter, and their 4-5 children, each, have a share in them, an increase that is the nature of the world (*al-takāṭur ṭabī'at al-dunya*).

One consequence of this two-sided increase is a general inflexibility concerning land use that is enhanced by another social practice: while land owners in other areas regularly re-register land in the name of specific members of the new generation, this does not take place here, not the least since expansion onto new land is geographically not an option and culturally not a priority. In addition, the practice to go to court after somebody's death for assessment and devolution of the estate (*ḥaṣr al-tarika*) never took hold and so already Faraḥ's father, who was born in 1896, had no land registered in his own name.

In the meantime, labour arrangements around date palms changed as well. While the techniques remained mostly the same – manual labour using short sickles and climbing the trunk without equipment – the labour force shifted away from the land-owning families. Fa'iz' grandfather and father, for instance, still climbed palms, pruning and harvesting themselves, but he himself and most of his generation did not.

This had to do both with internal and external changes: improved irrigation technology, especially from the wooden waterwheel (*sāqiyyah*) to diesel-fueled engines, made it possible to water larger areas, while labour and educational migration reduced, at least for a few years, the presence of the most productive members of the family on the island itself. At the same time, crises in other regions of Sudan, especially the droughts and wars in the Sahel zone states of Kordofan and Darfur, brought many people from there into the region in search of work, and former resident self-producers became

supervisors and employers. Among Fa'iz' and Farah's own children, learning to do agriculture and horticulture was even less of a priority.

In parallel, labour in date palms shifted to these agricultural labourers as well. Renting the houses left behind by emigrating families, a few stay all year with their own families, but most of them only seasonally, a season framed by the rhythm of date palms: pollination in February/March, at the end of the cold season favourable for most crops, and harvest in August/September, at the beginning of the next cold season, a natural rhythm interlocking with economic logic: the pollinator is paid with a free choice of two of the best bunches of dates, making coming back for the new season in his own interest.

The loss

This depiction of the state of affairs is of substantial importance to their subsequent pinpointing of what loss occurred when thousands of date palms burnt down. For Fa'iz, the fire widened a gap that had already been there, a distance between himself and his extended family, especially his paternal uncles, through their common link to the grandfather: he had died but was alive because the date palm renewed [itself] (*kān bajaddid*), drawing the family close every year to find it living on the land. Now both grandfather and date palm had died, irreversibly.

Farah went into an additional direction. The loss of the harvest season as reason to come had already been undermined before by a shift to a different seasonal rhythm, the one having to do with people's work life and educational schedule. Therefore, the character of the visits had also shifted towards tourism – home tourism, so to speak – as people who lived now in Khartoum or other towns came to the island for a change of venue. Up to the 1990s, with fewer schools and universities having close to synchronous vacation periods, this had still meant a strong convergence of families: when vacations came close, in March and September, for instance,

the houses would be ‘opened’ (*yaftaḥū biyūtum*) by the more permanent residents, cleaned, provided with water and food, for the season of visits. But the proliferation of educational and professional institutions, together with more complex structures of labour and other emigration, complicated the rhythm as well, and it was rather the month Ramadan, a lunar month wandering slowly backwards through the solar year, that drew people together. Only a calendric coincidence, such as during the fieldwork period, brings harvest and vacation together, and even more so now after the fires, but also without them, as the areas where no fires have been attest.

In this way, considerations of the loss of date palms corresponded with deeper concerns about reproduction and continuity. Planting new date palms had already become rare, Faraḥ estimated about 1% of the population doing it. One major reason can be the aforementioned land usage situation where, as in the case of Faraḥ, date palm owners could take care of those they could claim as property, but were prevented by land owners to plant again, as they preferred to use their land for other crops. Fa’iz considered planting new ones but was rather afraid there would be nobody taking care of them after he died.

This underlying fear of being part of something waning pervaded this part of the conversation that revealed a specific tension between migration and residence. For Fa’iz, Saï’s particular structure of migration stems from an early exposure of its population to the educational system emerging under British colonial rule. Both his grandfathers, born during the 1890s, were university graduates, not an unusual situation among the island’s families, and so many engaged in the educational sector that Saï has been called the land of the 1000 teachers, female and male, since the 1970s. This meant that no strong tradition of men emigrating to Saudi Arabia or other Gulf countries came about, as in many other areas of the region, but the high ratio of educational and professional migration also let whole families leave, as it will be connected to longer employment elsewhere. In this way, the many

houses on Saï that have been left empty are a marker of both an exceptional status and a profound problem.

Faraḥ formulated this problem as people's 'detachment' (*ibti'ād*) from their homeland and illustrated this in the following way based on his own situation: when he came in 1986, after a time working in Khartoum and abroad, he decided to stay. People around him started to argue with him how he will secure a good education for his children and he, and others thinking like him, stated that it will be done, whatever the means. He quoted the model of their fathers who had been able to combine being educated and remaining attached to agriculture and horticulture on the island, through cooperatives that made it easy to pool resources, upscale their irrigation technology and gain profits from agriculture that financed their and their children's education. But basic requirements for staying (*muqawwamāt al-istiqrār*) have changed, they include not just good educational and health services, but electricity, also for entertainment, good sanitation in all public institutions, including mosques, amenities that were counted now under essentials. But source of income on the island provided no economic stability anymore and governmental service consisted of creating bodies (*ajsām*) with nothing inside. As a result, all improvements were financed by those with an income elsewhere, gifts coming in from other economic contexts.

In short, their economic status was not in their own hands anymore. Their own seasonal crops were subject to normal price fluctuations but also pests and post-harvest damage, and an insecure crop such as broad beans could make a profit one year, and make one a beggar the other.

It is in exactly this point that the date palms had made a difference: a stable basis of 40-50 sacks of dates every year, a basic income – and the comfort such an income provides. The lack of a governmental response that does more than removing the charred remains of their palms revealed a widening gap in responsibility to provide the basic requirements for staying, and it was in this sense of

negligence that Farah felt that there was an aim to damage their homeland (*tadmīr al-balad mustahdafa*), the shadows of the date palm.