

## Walk 3b: Difoinarti, 19 September 2017

Enrico Ille, Yāsir, ‘Abd al-Ghannī



We left the house in the morning – we had stayed over night, again – Yāsir and I on foot, ‘Abd al-Ghannī on his donkey. We arrived at the river, which first carried ‘Abd al-Ghannī’s voice, as he called for the ‘water taxi’, and then us to the other side.

## 1. Post-fire landscape



The post-fire landscape took only a short while to look at, as the response had been swift and only about a dozen palms had been reached by the fire. The fire had broken out in April after an elderly local farmer had cleaned the riverside with fire. He had extinguished it before going to prayer, but the residual heat and embers were enough, it seems, for a strong wind to reignite the fire. This time, date palm owners wanted to open a case against the farmer but other residents dissuaded them from it, and there was rather a communal agreement to prohibit the use of fire for cleaning once and for all.

## 2. Settlement history



The larger part of the walking interview was taken up by aspects of settlement history that revealed a deeper notion of loss. This part of the island, called *sāb* (the ‘tail’ of the island, as it is opposite kuny, the ‘face’ that faces the Nile in its flow), had been, according to ‘Abd al-Ghannī, the residence of a royal family under Shamintod that had arrived from Mosul, where Shamintod’s brother ruled. Shamintod, who he considered his great-great-great-grandfather, had come with slaves who had built the largest buildings on the island, which he called ‘castle’ (*qal’a*). A short exchange between ‘Abd al-Ghannī and a man at the landing site hinted at the existence of royal newcomers and pre-settlers jokingly by calling each other ‘land thief’ and ‘grass-hut dwellers’.



### 3. (Un)settlement



But 'Abd al-Ghannī's father belonged to the last generation to still live on the island until his death, in 1971, 'Abd al-Ghannī himself resided on the mainland. His siblings had remained on the island until the 1990s; they had endured the 1988 flood, but the 'big flood' of 1998 [1996?] had entered far into the island and people became afraid of buildings collapsing and left. Now it had become an agricultural land and the buildings were merely a reminder of (un)settlement history.

## 4. Paradise lost



This evacuated landscape of wealth was also manifested in a place of memory that once had been filled with thousands of sacks of dates during harvest time. Letting the eye wander challenged to hear and see this implicit commotion, letting on the notion of a paradise lost.

## 5. Childhood memories



But the empty reminders of this settlement history were still filled with 'Abd al-Ghannī's childhood memories, going back about 60 years: the houses had been full of life; the milling stones with ball-shaped pounders resounded with the work of the grandmother-generation that had faded by the 1980s...



## 6. Hooks in the wall



... and hooks in the wall hung on to those who once hang their things there.

## 7. Architecture of defence



The two storeys had divided the household in protectors, manning the arrowslits, and protected, in the ground-floor below, ...



## 8. Architecture of hospitality



... and still contrasted an architecture of defence with the architecture of hospitality on the mainland, represented by the *masid*.

## 9. Places of memory



But the island's places of memory also referred further back, mediated by practices some of which waned, some of which lingered on. On an open space, 'Abd al-Ghannī reminisced:

You see, when we were young, this was the place of slaughtering, people came from east, from west, they had like, a custom, you see, [...] they did invocations (*da'wāt*) and prayers, they came here to slaughter, and there are fishes, their colour is somehow beautiful (*samḥah*), it has, like, red, people said these are angels, and they brought clay from over there, and they made cross signs.

They said what [this means], they said when Abdallah ibn Abi Sarh came, when he entered [i.e. introduced] Islam, this was his washing (*al-wudū'*) place, and people came to do their prayers and slaughtered here. I was a small child and still remember, one old woman, she was in charge (*mutwallī*) of this. So this island has a very big history, they said it was the first base (*ma'qal*) for our Abdallah ibn Abi Sarh. Christianity is also said to have started from here, this island. [...] Do you see the part that has been burned there? Mohammed Jalal Hashim was there, I was with him.

The perceived confluence of history on this space is immense, from the transition from pre-Christianity to Christianity, from Christianity to Islam, and to the present crises of persistence, represented by Mohammed Jalal Hashim, one of its most vocal defenders.

Back at the landing site we saw a boat leaving with women who had collected tugin fenti, dates that had fallen on the ground and that charitable owners allowed to be collected, mostly, but not exclusively, by women with low income. Their situation had actually been strongly disturbed by the fires as well, but this was an aspect that appeared only in other contexts.