

Walk 1: Sai, 24 February 2017

E – Ego, Y – Yūnis, F1 – Fa'iz, F2 – Farah



1. 16:35:55, N20° 45.441' E30° 19.171'



This is in some distance from the house, Fa'iz was not present at the beginning and joined later.

E: What is this?

Y: Lentils (*adisiyyah*).

F2: Was before tomato, finished now, could have been used for tomato sauce.

Y: ((dismissive tone))

E: Why are the tomatoes [generally] left on the ground, not cultivated upwards [with sticks]?

This question refers to the general practice in the area of letting tomatoes crawl on the ground.

F2: This here were a different kind of tomatoes, not for cold, but summer. ((Pointing out garlic)). Lentils are currently exported to India, they are not expensive and without any problems. All the beans are infected, just one [field] is good, don't know what disease, not honeydew ('*asl*), [but] from the climate.

There have been increasing problems with diseases and insects, many of them unknown to the farmers. 'Climate' refers here both to general climate change and the perceived environmental effects of the Aswan High Dam and the Merowe Dam.

F2: Last year, date palms didn't produce [literally: didn't see (*mā shāfat*)], only 10%, the problem is water and its composition (*takwīn*), the pollution, more chemicals.

'Chemicals' refers both to pesticide usage and to mercury and cyanide used in gold mining on the mainland.

F2: These [i.e. the ruling Islamists] say of course wrath of God (*ḡadab min Allah*), the government is saying that, [the Ministry of] Social Affairs (*al-shu'ūn al-'ijtimā'īyyah*). ((rest unclear)) But I am against saying date palm fires come from the government. For three fires in the area, one knows exactly who responsible and there is no relation to the government and they can't be bought.

This refers to one of the circulating interpretations that see arsonists paid by the government behind the fires; this will be discussed further in walk 2. Fa'iz supported this argument later with another case further south where a farmer had cleaned his livestock pen, threw the excrements outside and burned them but lost control of the fire.

E: Has fire been used in the past to clean date palms?

This question refers to a sometimes reported (but never witnessed) practice to intentionally burn the trunk of the date palms to kill insects, especially termites.

F2: ((not answering question)) 90% of the problem is not from fire, but [general] reduction of productivity. It had been already 20% [of expected output in dates], last year even less. Date palms are now already falling down [from old age or disease]. There is a difference in knowledge between the old generation and the new. Before the [Aswan] High Dam, wind directions were known from day to day, and predictable. So between month 6 and 9 [i.e. June and September] nobody makes fire next to date palms, because of the combination of heat and strong winds.

E: Is this after *baramūdah*?

F2: No, *ba'ūnah*, *abīb* and *misrā*.

E: What about winds in *amshīr*?

F2: [They come from] just one direction. These are things unknown for people today.

This refers to Coptic months often used in conversations on agricultural cycles. While the months are practically identified by specific characteristics, there is a conventional translation into the Gregorian calendar (names based on Arabic pronunciation): Baramūdah 9 April – 8 May; Bashans [confused by E with previous] 9 May – 7 June; Ba'ūnah 8 June – 7 July, Abīb 8 July – 6 August; Misrā 7 August – 5 September. Amshīr (8 February – 9 March) has warm winds that indicate the end of the cold season. However, knowledge of names of months and their characteristics is waning, as claimed in these statements.

E: ((teasing)) Do you know about this, Yūnis?

F2: No, they don't know, the Galaxy generation (*nās jaliksī*) [all laughing].

'Galaxy generation' refers to Samsung Galaxy phones, icon of smartphones in Sudan, also due to large-scale advertisement boards in Khartoum.

During the conversation, the walk continued to the next point.

2. 16:44:18, N20° 45.672' E30° 19.116'



F2: The last house of island Sai is the house of Khalil Farah, they came here previously and made an interview with us.

The walk continued to the next point without conversation.

3. 16:47:44, N20° 45.727' E30° 19.096'



Arrival at burnt area

F2: All of this was date palms, the first fire. [conversation with farmer in Nobíín]

The statement refers to the field in the background, now full of broad bean plants.

*The farmer in the photo is wearing a piece of fabric as used in mosquito nets, here to protect face and ears from the green nimitti midge (*Cladotanytarsus lewisi*) that exists in great numbers during the transition from the cold to the hot season (see videos).*

4. 16:48:06, N20° 45.727' E30° 19.096'



F2: I told you about the culture of the wind (*ṭaqāfa bitā'at al-hawa*), the fire here left all these date palms and went like this. [greetings, introduction of Yūnis to farmer]

'These' refers to the undamaged date palms in the background that line the coast of the island, 'like this' is the north-northwestern direction.

5. 16:48:30, N20° 45.730' E30° 19.085'



F2: The [affected] date palms were even dirtier than these. From here the wind took it [in the beginning]. The boatspeople (*nās al-murkab*) know how the wind goes, going down there.

*'Dirty' denotes a state of the date palm when dry leaves have not been cut off. In addition, this can imply not cutting off new seedlings from the mother palm, which leads to groups rather than individual palms. The lack of human intervention – for productive and aesthetic reasons – is translated into the term *washān* (dirty) or 'adam naḍāfah (lack of cleaning).*

E: Okay, I will start taking photos from there so the map will be clear.

This part of the walk contained gaps in the co-walking and the conversation, as I walked around the burnt area for GPS recording via photos. This involved going through fields close to the riverbanks, while Yūnis, Faraḥ and later Fa'iz walked and talked on the main path.

The following items are thus rather highlights around waypoints when I met them in between.

6. 16:51:21, N20° 45.788' E30° 19.060'



F2: These are *sāqiyyah* 1 to 3.

As part of the land registration process (see pre-walk interview), the irrigated pieces of land were numbered, not merely distinguished by the name of owners as before.

E: From here, right?

This part describes another major fire reaching from the northern tip of the island in southwestern direction.

7. 16:54:41, N20° 45.731' E30° 19.034'



E: Did the fire go along here?

F2: The fire made a long line from the beginning over there. Then wind came and took the fire until the long palm there, then it returned here and went further in the same direction, covered all here but not on the other side, where it was clean. According to the wind.

This indicates the limits of verbal directions, even in combination with sound and photos, vs. video, 3D representations and maps. The mentioned 'landmark', the date palm, can be depicted, but the multidirectional dynamic of the wind blowing blazing fires here and there is lost.

8. 16:59:43, N20° 45.652' E30° 19.019'



E: So the wind passed these by?

F2: Just because they were a little bit far from the fire.

This touches an aspect that will be highlighted more during walk 3, namely the different extent to which date palms were affected and the subsequent difference in ability to regrow. These date palms at the edge of the fire were burnt at the trunk (or even just parts of it) but not inside (see below considerations of the date palm's heart), so they could regrow leaves and procreate. The photo also indicates the height of palms after several decades of unhindered growth, with Farah seen standing at the left lower corner.

9. 17:01:58, N20° 45.640' E30° 19.026'



F2: All of this was date palms.

E: But I saw bagging over there.

This seemingly non-sequitur statement (that was not followed up, as well) refers to a practice to protect palm seedlings that were still growing at the mother palm's trunk with a bag, documented on another image. It implied an active interest in cutting off the seedling once its roots have developed enough, either for sale or for planting. The statement thus referred to ongoing date palm cultivation, in spite of the loss and complications detailed in the pre-walk interview.

This also indicates two limits of this form of documentation, namely the complex, context-heavy implications of single statements and the asynchronous character that is not depicted in a simple listing – perception, reference, photo, discussion occur at different places and at different times, necessitating a 'rejoining' through a narrative commentary.

10. 17:09:12, N20° 45.531' E30° 19.016'



Different instance of practice referred to in previous comment.

11. 17:14:01, N20° 45.482' E30° 18.996'



F2: The wind was changing directions all the time, burns here, burns there; didn't enter houses. [walk and longer pause] [sāqiyyah] 4 over there, 5 up there next to our house, nothing happened there. [walk and longer pause]

E: So from here the houses are in the middle between the *sawāqī*, for instance 5 and 6.

F2: All date palms of *sāqiyyah* 3 are finished, this here is 4, 2 and 5 are over there, on the other side. The fire still continued for 2 *sāqiyyah*.

The wind appears here not just as driver of the fire but as active agent of burning. These statements show the elements structuring spatial orientation through a combination of land ownership of agricultural land and settlement: the houses are surrounded by agricultural fields and thus, together with the irrigation channels, one of the structuring elements by which one sāqiyyah can be distinguished from the next. The houses, built from fermented clay bricks, withstood the firestorm.

12. 17:19:10, N20° 45.389' E30° 18.958'



This indicated the position of houses related to former date palm orchard (now bean field) and date palms that survived.

The soundscape, recorded during one of the conversational gaps, indicates the background of the walk, birds, diesel engines pumping water for irrigation – and the clicking of the camera.

13. 17:25:04, N20° 45.304' E30° 18.943'



E: So here is the end.

F2: Over there.

E: With the channel.

F2: On the day of the fire, the whole government came here with cameras, but didn't do anything, the fire was still working.

E: How long did the fire go?

F2: From 11:30 until the evening, about this time [late afternoon].

E: For me to get the story right - they heard about the fire and found the time and means to come with cars and ferry here, in frame of 6-7 hours, but did not find a way to bring a pump or anything to stop the fire?

F2: If they would be ready, they could arrive in half an hour, but there is no car [i.e. fire engine], they tell us to use the engine that was just burnt, in the end you go from engine to engine, open them, to extinguish the fire.

F1: Everybody came, Minister of Agriculture, Minister of Education, other ministers, director of zakat, made speeches. I told them only one thing: there are no safety equipment in this country, and there should be, it is not expensive, but you as state should provide it, and this ugly one (*al-qabīh da*) answered it would not even cost 1 million [SDG], the Director of Zakat. [...] Up to today there is no car in Dalgo or Abri; they brought now an officer, three stripes, he came and promised he will bring all the equipment and train people, he said so, but still we didn't see something new.

F2: Until the ferry comes etc. Sai is finished, it is an island, we need boats, doesn't need 10 million.

E: I saw on Artigasha they made a water line just for that [i.e. fire extinguishing], maybe you look it that.

F2: There is nothing anymore after that (*tānī mā fih hājah*), if this would only have been done earlier.

This constituted the most southern extent of the fire that started close to the northern tip of the island. The image also shows the kind of pipes used in irrigation.

The walk ended with a highly critical review of the performance of the government of the Northern State (see further discussion in the following section), and on a note of resignation.

After the walk, Yūnis and I rode on Fa'iz' donkey cart to visit another site (additional aspects on the date palm fires from this ride-along and subsequent conversations are integrated into the following section).