

Survey of Historical Photography Collections in Sudan

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Introduction

When we originally planned this project in 2017, a survey of historical photography collections targeting studio owners and photographers was the top priority. Unfortunately, as the project began, the country of Sudan and University of Khartoum faced a series of serious challenges. These challenges slowed down the project and forced the Department of History to adjust the research project and focus exclusively on Khartoum.

Researchers in the Sudan Historical Photography Archive contacted and met with photographers and artists across Khartoum as part of a survey. In the process, they not only determined the availability of private photography collections in Khartoum, but also gained a sense of how best to pursue further digitization projects going forward. This survey indicates that while studio photographers often retain collections of their work, other collections stored in the houses of families, also bear potential for further digitization and preservation work.

Survey Methodology

Overseen by Dr. Amel Albaddi, then then chair of the Department of History and Director of the Sudan Historical Photography Archive and in coordination with Rebecca Glade, two researchers contacted studio photographers and artists across Khartoum in order to ascertain the extent of their private photography collections and their willingness to work with the History Department at University of Khartoum on future digitization projects.

Identification and outreach to photographers relied on contacts through the History Department at University of Khartoum as well as the snowball method. After meeting with them, the researchers discussed the Sudan Historical Photography Archive with them and asked them about their private collection of photographs. In the process, they were able to determine the subject matter of photographers' photographs and assessed their willingness to participate in digitization projects in the future. The bulk of research for this survey took place from 2017 until 2018, with follow up interviews in 2019 and 2022.

Challenges

Sudan and the University of Khartoum have witnessed serious challenges in the past years, which made undertaking this project significantly more difficult than originally planned. Soon after the project's beginning, a gas crisis hit Sudan during which time it was very difficult for researchers to travel across town, much less outside of Khartoum due to the lack of availability of fuel. As a result of this crisis, the survey's field of research was necessarily reduced from its original scope of four cities in Sudan to Khartoum alone.

Following the gas crisis, Sudan found itself in the midst of revolution, during which time research was necessarily halted, as the University of Khartoum was closed. Following the university's reopening in late 2019, the world faced the global coronavirus pandemic. All of

these factors slowed pursuit of the survey, as did the passage of time itself, since researchers moved on to other projects.

Results

Over the course of survey, researchers spoke with the following individuals who voiced an interest in supporting the Sudan Historical Photography Archive and participating in future digitization efforts:

- Jamal Muhammad Ibrahim
- ‘Alim Abbas Muhammad Nur
- ‘Izzeldin al Amin and Mai ‘Izzeldin al Amin
- Ali Muhammad Osman
- Sa’ad Abdel Hamid
- Muhammad Ibrahim Abu Salim
- Musa Abdallah Hamid
- Abu ‘Araki al Bakheit
- Gasim Bedri
- Fakhir al Din Muhammad Ahmed
- Ahmed Muhammad Shibreen
- Ibrahim al Salhi

Many of these individuals were artists—whether photographers, painters, or musicians. Others were academics or members of prominent families. Most of their photography collections covered the expanse of their or their father’s lives and would give insight into Sudanese society and its history in the 1950s, 60s and 70s, though some of these collections extend to earlier periods of Sudanese history.

In addition to these individuals, the team also spoke with other photographers who voiced general support but noted that their older photographs and negatives had been destroyed—either by colleagues and relatives who did not know their historic (and often personal) significance, or due to poor circumstances or conditions for the photographs themselves. These accounts underscore the importance of preservation work among private collections, as well as the unique risks.

Lessons Learned

While participants reached out to by researchers for this survey were generally supportive and excited about the project, there was a reluctance to show the photographs themselves to researchers. This was in part due to the logistical challenges that the survey itself faced; since travel even across Khartoum was challenging during the bulk of the research period, scheduling adequate time in photographers’ houses with the collections themselves was difficult.

In addition, however, this reluctance underscores the need for trust building. Many of those who expressed willingness to participate in digitization efforts planned to do so incrementally—showing and allowing a certain section of photographs to be scanned first. After that, if they

were happy with the progress and results of these efforts, they would mention and suggest further photographs to be scanned. This meant in practice that while photographers mentioned collections, their estimations of how many photographs they had were often unclear, since they were still assessing the extent of their future participation.

In addition, researchers found in their outreach that many photographers and other artists were familiar with digitization technology and sought to preserve their own collections through photographs taken on their mobile phones and stored on their laptops, often sharing them online in Facebook groups that are very popular—demonstrating the real popularity of digital resources on Sudanese history. There is real potential to work with these individuals to compile more comprehensive collections in a single location where they can be used by researchers and students in their work.

Future Steps

This survey was preliminary and meant to drive future digitization and preservation efforts. Due to constraints in Sudan, it examined private collections based in Khartoum, primarily among photographers and artists. There exists serious potential to expand research on available private photography collections beyond Khartoum to other cities and towns. In addition to Atbara and northern Sudan, this would best include places like Eastern Sudan, Darfur, Blue Nile, and Kordofan.

It is also worth expanding research and further digitization efforts to look at the private collections of families, particularly families who played a role in Sudanese political and social history. These families have stored large collections of photographs that document their own families' histories as well as the society in which they operated. Individually, families have made it known to the University of Khartoum that they would like to work with the Sudan Historical Photography Archive to digitize their collections, and further research can best document the avenues for best pursuing this going forward. These will be important collections for the Sudan Historical Photography Archive to assist in preserving and making accessible to researchers and students in Sudan. Such resources will be especially important in the coming years since the Department of History is establishing a new master's program with a focus on audiovisual source material who will be able to make use of these photographs in their coursework and research.