

Book Overview

1.1 Introduction

Gebel El-Barkal and Napatan region Archaeological sites are two of Sudan's largest and most important archaeological sites. *Gebel El-Barkal* occupies over one square kilometre of concentrated ancient remains. Historically, *Gebel El-Barkal* as a "Holy Mountain" was associated with the coronation of kings. Within this "Holy Mountain", many temples are situated, dating from the New Kingdom (ca. 1550–1070 B.C.) and the Napatan Period (900 to 270 BC) until the Meroitic Period (270 BC to 350 AD) (Török, 2015). In addition to its religious importance, *Gebel El-Barkal* represents a political centre, evidenced by the presence of remains of palaces, statues of kings and victory panels, and a range of significant burial sites including pyramids whose original form and size has occasionally been preserved. In addition to the ancient archaeological remains, *Gebel El-Barkal* is also known as the cemetery and shrine (*gubba*) of the Muslim sheikh *Wad El-Karsani*, who lived in the later nineteenth century and is remembered locally as a holy man with distinguished social standing. This adds a considerable associated value for the local communities around *Gebel El-Barkal*, and the *gubba* is still visited for blessings.

In 2003, *Gebel El-Barkal* was inscribed on the World Heritage List as "Gebel Barkal and the Sites of the Napatan Region" (UNESCO, "*Gebel Barkal* and the Sites of the Napatan Region" no date). The World Heritage Site (WHS) contains five archaeological sites distributed over more than sixty kilometres in the Nile valley. They are testimony to the Napatan (900 to 270 BC) and Meroitic (270 BC to 350 AD) cultures. The association of the archaeological remains with Napatan and Meroitic civilization, the presence of *Wad El-Karsani*, and the recognition of the place as a World Heritage site have given the site significance to local, national, and international communities. The listing of *Gebel El-Barkal* as a World Heritage Site based on archaeological values implies that the site has Outstanding Universal Value (OUV) to all of humanity – a central premise of the World Heritage list. However, this understanding of the site provides an international and academic outlook on *Gebel El-Barkal* which does not fully capture its lived reality and meaning as a place, and this, in turn, has implications for how the site is understood and used by different stakeholders. Understanding the living intangible cultural heritage of *Gebel El-Barkal* and Napatan archaeological sites is key to this book, which demonstrates how to comprehend local ways of making meaning of *Gebel El-Barkal*.

To understand the significance of *Gebel El-Barkal* and Napatan region archaeological sites for local communities,

the aim of this book is to investigate their conceptualization of and way of engagement with the site and what values they assign to it, as well as the interrelation between the varied local, national, and international communities. The approach chosen to answer these research questions proceeds through investigating and analysing local communities' intangible cultural heritage associated with the site. The reason for applying this approach is that firstly, the intangibility of all heritage is interlinked with the way heritage is constructed. Secondly, intangible cultural heritage is a store of social knowledge and social memory for communities. Therefore, analysing the intangible heritage associated with the tangible heritage is a productive way of understanding local communities' conceptualization of the site/place as a key component of my book.

The purpose of this book overview is to outline the background of the research presented in this book, introduce the aims and purposes of the project, establish the significance of the research, identify research problems, discuss the overall research methodology, and finally present the structure of the book.

1.2 Research Focus and Justification of Research Problems

The aim of this book is to present the first in-depth study of the intangible cultural heritage of the local communities of the Merowe province surrounding the *Gebel El-Barkal* WHS, particularly their oral history, oral literature, traditions, customs, and the ways in which they perceive the archaeological sites of the region and construct their value. These are practices that are not written down but are passed orally from generation to generation and maintained in the present. Furthermore, given that identity, self-identity formation, and social reality always are embodied by and within a discourse that controls and is produced by cultural and social structures presented through intangible culture, the research of this book intends to understand how the intangible culture of *Gebel El-Barkal's* local communities provides local communities with a sense of identity. Through analysing the intangible cultural heritage of the local communities around *Gebel El-Barkal*, this research book will deepen our understanding of how such aspects of identity as ethnicity, gender, class, and age influence local communities' conceptualization of the *Gebel El-Barkal* and Napatan region archaeological sites and shape their sense of place. Finally, the research of this book addresses the conflicting claims over heritage ownership among local and national communities on the one hand, and between local communities and national heritage authorities on the other.

In this book I intend to contribute to the following theoretical problems:

- To critically examine relevant academic literature focusing on communities' engagements with heritage, the values associated with heritage, and debates surrounding the ownership of heritage in different social, cultural, and economic contexts.
- The attention that focuses on the historical values of the archaeological sites by the AHD and Westernised perspectives rather than considering the associated values assigned by the local communities.
- To address existing research gaps in the field of heritage studies by focusing on the links between tangible and intangible cultural heritage in Sudan through the case of *Gebel El-Barkal*, as well as between local communities, archaeological sites, and archaeologists.

Problems/issues specific to heritage management practice that this book aims to address are as follows:

- The absence of giving the local communities the opportunity to participate in archaeological practices in Sudan.
- The lack of considering local communities as also stakeholders and giving them a role in safeguarding and protecting the archaeological sites in Sudan.
- To address conflicting claims on ownership that threaten the *Gebel El-Barkal* and Napatan region archaeological sites.

1.3 Objective and Significance of the Research

The importance of this book stems from the fact that it is the first scholarly study that investigates the engagement of local communities with, and their interpretation of, the tangible cultural heritage in *Gebel El-Barkal* and Napatan region archaeological sites. Taking advantage of my intimate knowledge of the local cultural context as a male, "Arabic", and a researcher coming from the same geographical, social, and cultural background, I will offer an in-depth understanding of the interrelation between local communities and their heritage.

local communities' relationship to the archaeological sites ends with many open questions. Therefore, analysing the implications of official and unofficial discourses will highlight the impact of these discourses and will suggest avenues for further study in order to assist in creating and sharing new knowledge related to the site that can improve its management, and assist archaeologists working on this site to gain a better understanding of local complexities given that most of these archaeologists originate outside of this particular social and cultural context.

This book thus contributes to existing scholarly literature related to community engagement, heritage-associated values, and heritage ownership claims through examining these issues in a new context. The lack of scholarly attention to the crucial relationship between local communities and

archaeological sites in Sudan raises the importance of understanding more about how local communities interact with their heritage and how inhabitants of a given area interpret their heritage. This gap in scholarly literature weakens the concrete foundation through which decision-makers design cultural heritage strategies and determine the practice of heritage assets preservation.

In conclusion, the significance of this book comes from the fact that it is first an in-depth scholarly account investigating the engagement of local communities with tangible cultural heritage in *Gebel El-Barkal* and Napatan region archaeological sites. This is of paramount importance given that archaeological sites in Sudan in general, and *Gebel El-Barkal* and Napatan region as one of the country's most iconic sites, currently face major management problems and challenges.

This book investigates the intangible cultural heritage of local communities surrounding Gebel El-Barkal and the Napatan region archaeological sites in Sudan, examining how these communities engage with, value, and claim ownership of their heritage. Through ethnographic and phenomenological approaches, the study reveals significant disconnections between local community perspectives and the Authorized Heritage Discourse (AHD), demonstrating how identity dimensions—ethnicity, gender, class, religion, and age—shape community engagement modes. The research identifies local communities' intangible cultural heritage as an alternative discourse that competes with official heritage narratives, while ownership conflicts emerge at multiple scales between local, national, and international stakeholders. The findings reveal that local communities engage with Gebel El-Barkal through both direct physical presence and social imaginaries embedded in oral traditions, myths, and cultural practices. Their associated values emphasize social, spiritual, and cultural significance over archaeological importance, creating tensions with heritage authorities who prioritize historical and scientific values. The study contributes to heritage studies by proposing intangible cultural heritage as a crucial lens for understanding community-heritage relationships and advocates for bottom-up approaches that recognize local knowledge systems alongside professional archaeological practice.

This research builds upon and extends comparative heritage studies from diverse global contexts, creating meaningful dialogue with established scholarship while offering unique insights from the Sudanese context. Like Smith's (2006) analysis of competing discourses in Castleford, West Yorkshire, this work demonstrates how local communities resist marginalization through alternative heritage narratives, though this study adds the dimension of post-colonial identity politics that shapes these resistances in distinctly different ways. Similarly, the findings parallel Hussain's (2019) research in Northern Pakistan, where intangible cultural heritage serves as a protective mechanism for archaeological sites, but this research extends this understanding by showing how such protection mechanisms can simultaneously create ownership conflicts between

different community groups. The Community Archaeology Project at Quseir, Egypt (Moser et al., 2002) provides a contrasting example of successful community engagement, highlighting the importance of this study's emphasis on local knowledge systems while revealing how different political and social contexts require adapted approaches. The identification of gender dynamics in heritage narratives resonates with Porter's (1998) and Machin's (2010) work on heritage representation but advances this scholarship by demonstrating how women use oral traditions as sites of resistance within patriarchal societies. The analysis of identity-based ownership conflicts connects to broader postcolonial heritage studies examining power relations between local communities and state institutions across Africa and Asia, while offering specific insights into how Islamization and Arabization processes shape contemporary heritage relationships in ways that distinguish the Sudanese experience from other postcolonial contexts.

This book makes several significant theoretical contributions to heritage studies that advance both conceptual understanding and methodological practice. First, it advances understanding of the tangible-intangible heritage relationship by demonstrating how intangible cultural heritage functions as both a knowledge system and an alternative discourse that competes with AHD, moving beyond UNESCO's categorical separation to show their inseparable interconnection in lived community experience. Second, it develops a nuanced framework for analysing identity's multidimensional influence on heritage engagement, moving beyond simple demographic categories to examine how ethnicity, gender, class, religion, and age intersect to shape community relationships with archaeological sites in ways that challenge both essentialist notions of community and top-down heritage management approaches. The book contributes to theoretical debates about heritage values by proposing a tripartite analytical framework examining significance, meaning, and uses that captures the complexity of local heritage relationships while remaining applicable across different cultural contexts. Methodologically, the research demonstrates the effectiveness of combining ethnographic and phenomenological approaches for understanding community perspectives in post-colonial contexts, particularly in societies with strong oral traditions where conventional survey methods may be inadequate or culturally inappropriate. The study's application of discourse analysis to intangible cultural heritage provides a replicable framework for examining competing heritage narratives, while its attention to power relations within local communities' challenges assumptions about community homogeneity common in heritage literature. The book also contributes methodologically by showing how insider positionality can enhance data collection quality while requiring careful attention to reflexivity and power dynamics between researcher and participants.

This book offers critical insights for international heritage management that challenge current practices and suggest necessary reforms in how global heritage institutions operate. The disconnect between Outstanding Universal

Value criteria and local community values at Gebel El-Barkal highlights broader structural problems in the World Heritage system's universalist approach, suggesting that UNESCO's framework inadequately addresses the plurality of heritage meanings and the cultural specificity of value systems. The study demonstrates that heritage management policies must move beyond superficial consultation toward genuine co-management structures that recognize local knowledge systems and alternative value frameworks as equally valid to expert knowledge, requiring fundamental shifts in how heritage professionals are trained and how management decisions are made. For international heritage organizations, the research demonstrates the urgent need for more nuanced understanding of "community," recognizing internal diversity and power dynamics rather than treating local populations as homogeneous entities whose interests can be represented through single spokespersons or simplified consultation processes. The findings indicate that sustainable heritage management requires addressing broader socio-political contexts, including post-colonial dynamics, identity politics, and economic inequalities that shape community-heritage relationships, suggesting that heritage interventions cannot be separated from broader development and social justice concerns. The research reveals how international heritage designation can inadvertently exacerbate local conflicts by introducing new forms of value and control that interact unpredictably with existing power structures, highlighting the need for impact assessments that consider social and political effects alongside conservation outcomes. Finally, the research advocates for expanding heritage value frameworks beyond scientific and aesthetic criteria to include social, spiritual, and cultural values that local communities prioritize, suggesting a fundamental reconsideration of how heritage significance is defined and assessed in international contexts that would require revising core UNESCO documents and training programs to incorporate more pluralistic approaches to heritage evaluation and management.

1.4 Research Questions

My core research questions are as follows:

How/which/why local communities from Merowe province engage with *Gebel El-Barkal* site/place and Napatan region archaeological sites?

What are the values assigned by local communities to Gebel El-Barkal and Napatan region archaeological sites, and how do they differ from values associated on national and international scale?

How does ethnic, gender, class, and age identities shape the local communities' mode of engagement and values associated with *Gebel El-Barkal* and Napatan region?

What are the causes for, and forms of ownership claim conflict among the local, national, and international communities concerning the *Gebel El-Barkal* and Napatan region archaeological sites?

1.5 Overall Research Methodology and Key Concepts

A research strategy is a plan of action that lays out a specific research logic to determine and address the research problem and realise the study's objectives (Denscombe, 2014). It refers to the big picture of research, which encompasses everything from formulating a research question to writing up and disseminating the findings (Punch, 2005). The qualitative research presented in this book will combine ethnography and phenomenology as a mixed approach to examine the local communities of *Gebel El-Barkal* and Napatan region archaeological sites and their beliefs, attitudes, material culture, customs, and social interactions towards these archaeological sites. An essential source of research data was participant observation of people's actions and accounts in everyday contexts, as opposed to conditions created by the researcher, to answer and test research questions regarding the relationship between tangible and intangible cultural heritage. Other essential primary data were gathered through in-depth interviews to comprehend the relationship between cultural heritage values, the identities of local communities, and the communities' engagement with and perceptions of *Gebel El-Barkal's* cultural heritage. The six-month-long fieldwork focused on the relationship between the local communities and the archaeological site. This included investigations of differences in ethnic, gender, national, and religious identities, and their expression in relation to the site, as well as social interactions between the different local communities and the impact (if any) these interactions had on the engagement and interpretation of the site by the local communities. Participants in the data collection process include members of the local communities, local community leaders, and archaeologists with a family history in the area under investigation.

Intangible and tangible cultural heritage, community engagement, heritage values, identity, ownership claims, a sense of place, and social memory are among the various key concepts that will serve as the theoretical foundation for the research associated with this book. Having an overview of the definitions of each of these concepts is provided here as it will improve the comprehension of my position as a researcher within the academic discourse surrounding the related debate. In addition, observing how I apply and utilise the concepts will reduce the inherent ambiguity of such terms and produce a precise description of how I will apply them in my research.

The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) defines tangible cultural heritage in the 1972 Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage (WHC) as monuments, buildings, and other physical objects (UNESCO, 1972). Meanwhile, the intangible cultural heritage as defined in the 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (hereafter referred to as the 2003 Convention) relates to the non-physical aspects of heritage, for example, rituals, practices, skills, and representations (UNESCO, 2003). Academic research on communities

generally assumes a connection between the concept of communities and geographically based factors. Since the concept of community is not fixed and may be contested, its complexities must be considered (Waterson & Smith, 2010). In the case of *Gebel El-Barkal*, local communities are those who reside in the Merowe province surrounding the five archaeological sites of the Napatan region: *Gebel El-Barkal*, *Nuri*, *Sanam*, *El-Kurru*, and *El-Zooma*, which will be described in greater later in this book.

Heritage values are a social and cultural construction resulting from social interaction, generation, and transmission of knowledge, as well as spatial and sequential frameworks that facilitate these processes. In contrast, identity refers to how markers such as ethnicity, gender, class, age, and religion contribute to shared interpretations of the past and are used to construct narratives of inclusion and exclusion that define communities (Graham & Howard, 2003, p.5). These narratives generate a set of symbols or lifestyle options from which people make decisions (Macdonald, 2013, p.167). Through social memories and social knowledge, there is a multidimensional connection between a place and an individual's identity formation and the values assigned by the local community.

1.6 Structure of the Book

The book comprises nine Sections with the following contents:

Book overview section outlines the focus research area and a justification of the research problems. Subsequently, the objective and significance of studying and investigating the intangible cultural heritage around *Gebel El-Barkal* and Napatan archaeological sites, and the research questions. Finally, this section provides a brief statement of the overall research methodology and a definition of essential and related key concepts.

Section two, the theoretical Framework and Conceptual Foundations, critically evaluates the ongoing intellectual discussions associated with key concepts for examining the research questions and delivering direction in planning the data collection and interpreting the data. The focus is on assessing, in more theoretical depth, the interrelation of intangible and intangible cultural heritage, as well as the relationship between local communities and archaeological sites, which the introduction briefly set out as central concerns of the book. The section discusses the concepts of intangible and tangible cultural heritage in terms of the varied perspectives and definitions, the interrelation between the two of them, and how this discussion contributes to understanding the interplay between the intangible and the tangible components. Furthermore, the section introduces the theoretical approaches to the community definition and how communities in varied ways engage with and celebrate their heritage. Besides, a summary background of the interrelation between local communities both in global and Sudan contexts. The role of this summary background is to highlight the significant

historical, cultural, social, and political factors related to the interrelation between local communities and heritage. Followed by providing a critical discussion of the debate of associated values and how they produce and enhance the community engagement mode with cultural heritage. The final two sections explore the link between heritage and identity and offer an overview of ownership claim concepts and their influence on community engagement with archaeological sites.

Section three is an overview of the historical, geographical, social, and cultural context of both Sudan and the Merowe province, and a description of *Gebel El-Barkal* and Napatan region archaeological sites. The content of this section is divided into three parts: the national context, the local context, and the archaeological site context. The national context of the research provides a perspective on the interrelation between ethnic, class, and gender identities of Sudan, and politics of identity in the process of national and local community engagement modes with their history. In the local context, the section introduces Merowe province as the research area. The discussion focuses on providing an overview of the local communities of Merowe province in terms of their worldview, lifestyles, perception, and interactions with each other and outsiders. The third and final part is a description of the *Gebel El-Barkal* and Napatan region archaeological site's locations, features, and the historical significance of the sites.

Section four serves as a map and conceptual framework for the data collection by discussing the theoretical foundation underlining the methodological approaches applied to investigate the intangible cultural heritage around *Gebel El-Barkal* and Napatan archaeological sites. The section covers the utility of the qualitative research design and qualitative data as a mode of inquiry applied within the research of this book, and the strengths and limitations of the ethnographic and phenomenological approaches. Also, the section provides an evaluation of the fieldwork and primary data collection along with the ethical concerns and reflections.

Section five investigates the varied social groups that engage with *Gebel El-Barkal* and Napatan archaeological sites. The structure and the contents of this section are divided into the key concept's definitions and uses of the notions of community and communities' engagement from different angles. This is followed by an analysis of the local communities' modes of engagement with *Gebel El-Barkal* and Napatan archaeological sites. The subsequent sections present the barriers and challenges facing the heritage management authorities and experts including archaeologists when attempting to enhance local community engagement with the site, and a discussion on the national and international communities' engagements mode.

Section six discusses, analyses, and compares local community values associated with *Gebel El-Barkal* and Napatan archaeological sites with the Outstanding Universal Values claimed for the site on a global scale.

This section discusses local communities' social, historical, aesthetic, and economic values. Moreover, the importance of the site/place in local communities' cultural context and the spirituality and continuity of the sacred conceptualization for *Gebel El-Barkal* site/place and Napatan region archaeological sites are also considered. Following this, I discuss the local community sense of place based on the claim that the local community sense of place has shaped their associated values toward the *Gebel El-Barkal* and Napatan region archaeological sites. In the final section of this section, I highlight recent developments that have influenced local communities' modes of engagement with the *Gebel El-Barkal* and Napatan region archaeological sites.

Section seven explores the ownership claim conflicts between the various communities around *Gebel El-Barkal*, the influence of identity on community modes of engagement with the site, and finally how *Gebel El-Barkal* site/place and Napatan region archaeological sites provides local communities with a sense of identity. The content of this section discusses the interaction between varied identity dimensions in terms of local, national, and international levels. Moreover, the ownership claims conflicts among the varied communities that engage with *Gebel El-Barkal* site/place and the Napatan region archaeological sites and the results of this conflict on the community modes of engagement with *Gebel El-Barkal* site/place, the associated values, and the management practice are discussed. The importance of bringing these two issues together to be discussed in one section stems from the fact that identity and identity creation have an essential role in ownership claim conflicts, and that the ownership claim conflict has shaped individuals' choices and options to be a part of social groups and identify themselves accordingly.

Section eight is focused on bringing together the core discussion of the book themes by linking the academic contributions with the findings based on my fieldwork to analyse the intangible cultural heritage creation, circulation, use, and reuse by the local communities around *Gebel El-Barkal* archaeological sites to understand their conceptualization of the site/place. Further, I discuss the power of the intangible cultural heritage on the local communities and the social memory and intangible heritage transmissions of intangible cultural heritage to examine firstly, how *Gebel El-Barkal* provides the local community with a sense of identity, and secondly, what is the influence of identity on the local community engagement, ownership claim conflict, and associated values towards the *Gebel El-Barkal* and Napatan region archaeological sites. The final section of this section makes a comparison between the local values, AHD discourses, and OUV as global discourse.

Finally, Section nine concludes the overall research findings. The discussions include a research evaluation of the theoretical contributions of this book, implications for research, and implications for practice.

1.7 Conclusion

In conclusion, the purpose of this book is to investigate the intangible cultural heritage of the Merowe province's inhabitants, specifically their oral history, oral literature, traditions, customs, storytelling, and cultural practises associated with the *Gebel El-Barkal* archaeological site. Significance at a global scale is likewise indicated by the fact that in 2003 *Gebel El-Barkal* was the first Sudanese site that was inscribed on the World Heritage Sites list. It remains one of only two cultural WHS in the country, the archaeological sites of Meroe having been inscribed on the World Heritage list in 2011, and a natural site, Sanganeb Marine National Park and Dungenab Bay – Mukkawar Island Marine National Park, being added to the list in 2016. Notably, as a living heritage site, *Gebel El-Barkal* has gained a crucial role in the daily lives of local communities. The objective of this book research is to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the diverse communities and their modes of engagement with these sites. In addition, the book intends to evaluate the values assigned by local communities and compare them with those of other communities on a national and international scale. I also acknowledge that the local communities surrounding *Gebel El-Barkal* are multi-cultural societies; therefore, there is a need to investigate the influences of identity differences in terms of ethnicity, gender, class, and age on the local communities' mode of engagement and values associated with the archaeological sites of *Gebel El-Barkal* and the Napatan region. Similarly, this book seeks to comprehend the causes and manifestations of ownership dispute among the local, national, and international communities regarding the sites.

The methodological framework applied within this qualitative research is an ethnographical and phenomenological approach. The involvement of direct

contact with the relevant people and places provides in-depth and detailed information, which allows a real insight into the local community's lifestyle and beliefs and wider social and cultural contexts. Therefore, the ethnographic method can be a useful tool for answering research questions concerning the experiences, emotions, and knowledge of social groups. Similarly, a phenomenological approach is a valuable tool for identifying the cultural values and perspectives of the local communities regarding the archaeological sites of the region. Observation, interviews, and focus groups were indispensable techniques for gathering primary data. Given the oral nature of the primary data, discourse analysis was chosen as the method for data analysis and interpretation. As discourse is a form of knowledge produced through social interaction processes to construct reality, be accountable for identity formation, rationalise attitudes, and inspire values, this reveals competing claims and realities. The significance of this book stems from the fact that I intend, through investigating the intangible cultural heritage around the *Gebel El-Barkal* and Napatan region archaeological sites, to contribute to and examine, for first time, the relevant academic literature in *Gebel El-Barkal's* different social, cultural, and economic contexts. Further, it assists in filling a research gap in the field of cultural heritage, namely, the interrelation of local communities and archaeological sites as well as the impact of social and cultural identity construction towards community modes of engagement with archaeological sites and assessing the associated values assigned by the local communities towards the archaeological sites. The significance of this theoretical contribution is based on the claim that tackling this theoretical aspect will assist in resolving the varied challenges related to the management practice at these sites, which include the lack of involving local communities as a stakeholder with the opportunities to express their voice, practice their identity, and being part of the sites' future planning.