Shrine visiting as heritage

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Abstract: Shrine visiting is a prevalent phenomenon throughout Sudan and the Islamic world and deeply entrenched in local traditions. Based on ethnographic research, this paper aims to gain an insight into the intangible aspects of shrine visiting. The article explores the paradoxical popularity of shrine visiting and the tension between popular Islam and orthodox Islam, and examines the continued significance of shrines. The research illustrates shrine visiting is an integral aspect of Suakin’s holistic heritage values. Yet, shrines are not protected under Sudanese law. The case study demonstrates the value of what is considered mundane heritage on the maintenance and transmission of cultural heritage and argues that the living religious heritage of shrine visiting needs to be considered as heritage. Furthermore, it suggests that shrines and rituals are central for peoples’ religious and cultural identity. Nevertheless, the intangible association with the shrines has been neglected by conservation practices in Sudan and in most of the Islamic world.

Keywords: Sudan; Suakin; shrines; Ziyara; rituals; practices; cultural heritage; intangible heritage; diversity; multiplicity of values; religious communities; popular Islam.

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Biographical notes: Shadia Taha obtained her BA in Archaeology from the University of Khartoum, Sudan, and both MPhil as well as a PhD from the Department of Archaeology, University of Cambridge. Her doctoral dissertation, published by Archaeopress in 2013, investigates attachment to abandoned heritage, using ethnographic research methods. In 2011, she co-edited ‘Historic Cities’, proceedings for the 10th Heritage Seminar with Chatzoglou, Polyzoudi and Sørensen. In 2004, she co-edited. ‘Fifty years in the Archaeology of Africa: Themes in archaeological theory and practice’, in Papers in Honour of John Alexander, with Wahida, Smith and Rose. Her research interests include ethnography, oral traditions, intangible cultural heritage and communities. Currently, she is an Affiliated Research scholar at McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research, University of Cambridge; College Research Associate, Wolfson College Cambridge; Affiliated Research Fellow with the African Studies Centre, University of Cambridge; and a Researcher with the Civilization in Contact Project.

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1 Introduction: the practice of shrine visiting

Shrines of holy men and women are a distinguishing feature of the religious landscape in most Muslim countries and shrine visiting is a common and widespread phenomenon in much of the Muslim world. Indeed, popular Islam has overlapped and coexisted for centuries alongside orthodox Islam, with shrine visitation being profoundly important (Titus, 1922; Trimingham, 1949, 1952, 1959, 1964; Eickelman, 1976; Tyson, 1997; Bhardwaj, 1998; Sadiq, 2008; Taha, 2011; Rehman, 2012; Werbner, 2012; Boivin, 2012). Although popular Islam and orthodox Islam have coexisted in the Sudan without major confrontation, recently, some Islamic countries have started to look unfavourably at these rituals, and in some cases are trying to discourage them.

Using ethnographic research, this paper examines the meaning and association of shrine visitation by exploring some examples of the sacred landscape in Suakin, Sudan. The article aims to give a better understanding of the interconnection between religious practices and cultural heritage and highlights the inseparable nature of tangible and intangible heritage. The research explores cultural heritage and the religious landscape and how people engage and connect with them. A particular focus will be on the continued significance of the non-material role of the shrines. The intangible meaning of shrines is often overlooked by mainstream heritage organisations in Sudan, and, consequently, these types of ordinary, everyday heritage are not legally protected.

This paper is organised in three main parts: First, I will begin by giving the background about popular Islam and contextualise present day heritage practices. Second, I will explore shrine visiting in Suakin focusing on the rituals, practices, performances and the meaning of such practices that persist to be holistic and relevant in the present. Finally, I will discuss the significance of these places and the non-material values of meaning, memory, experiences and attachment in relation to peoples association with shrines. In turn, I will examine the importance of shrines for social memory, community, identity and cultural preservation and consider the role of shrine visiting as an important element of Suakin’s holistic heritage values.

2 The different types of religious journeys in Islam

Although pilgrimage is performed by all religions, Islam is perhaps the only main religion in which it is obligatory; all able-bodied Muslims are obligated to undertake the hajj as one of the five pillars of Islam (Bhardwaj, 1998; Armstrong, 2012; Tritton, 2013). There are two types of religious journeys performed by Muslims: obligatory and voluntary. As one of the five pillars of Islam in the Koran, the hajj is binding for all Muslims and follows the lunar calendar. Muslims who are healthy, physically and financially able are required to perform the hajj at least once in their lifetime. In addition, hajj is strictly for Muslims.

However, voluntary religious journeys to the shrines of holy men and women are carried out by Muslims and non-Muslims alike and it is common for Christians, Muslims and Jews to visit each other’s shrines (Eickelman, 1976; Meri, 2002, 2012). Voluntary journeys include the visit to Jerusalem’s ‘The Dome of the Rock’ (Bhardwaj, 1998). The second type of non-obligatory journeys is the Ziyara to the shrines of holy men and
women. Shia Shrines in the Middle East have a special place in Shia Islam. According to Nasr (1987, p.269), the “tombs of all the imams are considered extensions of the supreme centers of Mecca and Medina, and, thus, pilgrimage to these sites . . . are strongly encouraged by the jurists and the official religious hierarchy and play a very important role in the Shia religious life”.

The Sufi order of Islam has also established a large number of shrines throughout the Middle East, North Africa, parts of sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, Southeast Asia, western China, and the Central Asian countries. Most of these shrines are of regional importance, though some saints have international followers (Chaudhry, 2012; Voll, 1995; Eaton, 1978; Tyson, 1997; Trimingham, 1998).

The shrines of holy men and women are a characteristic feature of the landscape in most Muslim countries, whether associated with mosques or standing on their own, and are popular centres of visitation (Jeffery, 1958; Goldziher, 1971; Vrijhof and Waardenburg, 1979; Tyson, 1997). Some of these shrines are of great antiquity and devotees will travel great distances to participate in the festivities despite the voluntary nature of the Ziyara. Shrine visiting forms a dynamic tradition in North, East and West Africa (Trimingham, 1949, 1952, 1959, 1962; Eickelman, 1976; Vrijhof and Waardenburg, 1979), Western, Central and South Asia (Vrijhof and Waardenburg, 1979; Tyson, 1997; Schimmel, 1980; Bhardwaj, 1998). It is worth noting that the Ziyara is not regarded as an alternative for the hajj to Mecca.

3 Popular Islam and Orthodox Islam: an uneasy relationship

The significance of shrines within the Islamic landscape has been noted by many scholars (Trimingham, 1949; Vrijhof and Waardenburg, 1979; Sadiq, 2008; Rehman, 2012; Werbner, 2012; Boivin, 2012). While in the contemporary era shrines remain popular places of visitation, the rituals performed there have been a contentious issue and the subject of much debate and condemnation. Controversy arises over the divergence of opinion and interpretation of Islamic theology concerning conventional beliefs and what denotes acceptable Islamic practices. Orthodox theologians have spoken frequently and vigorously against this practice of visitation, but popular consensus of the community has frequently proved stronger than the condemnation of the theologians [Jeffery, (1951), p.226].

Theologian Ibn Taimiya insisted that popular Islam should be repressed by state authorities [Vrijhof and Waardenburg, (1979), pp.340–341]. Although Ibn Taimiya was not the first theologian to oppose popular Islam, he was the first to try to declare that popular Islam is irreconcilable with the Quran and the Sunna (Vrijhof and Waardenburg, 1979; Caplan, 1987; Amselle, 1987; Commins, 2006). Shrine visitation is heavily criticised by Orthodox theologians and the Wahhabis of Saudi Arabia (an ideology founded by Mohammed Ibn Abd Al Wahab in the 18th century) as a practice that does not conform to pure, conventional Islam. Ibn Abd Al Wahab was in fact, notably influenced by the views of Ibn Hanbal and Ibn Taimiya. Developing a doctrine focused on the oneness of God, he strongly condemned the practices of popular Islam, Sufism and non-Sunni sects within Islam (Amselle, 1987; Vrijhof and Waardenburg, 1979). Ibn Abd Al Wahab and his followers believe that they have a religious responsibility to restore a pure monotheistic form of Islam.
Wahhabis (followers of Ibn Abd Al Wahab) deem the visitation, beliefs and practices to be superstition and a continuity of primitive rituals performed in pre-Islamic times and call for their abolition. Needless to say, Saudi Arabia’s role as the guardian of the holy shrines in Mecca and Medina gives them the opportunity to have economic, social and spiritual control over pilgrimage. Most recently, in some Islamic countries, shrines became contested spaces and there is an apparent tension between theoretical and popular forms of Islam. This hardline stand led to the destruction of religious heritage in different parts of the Muslim world. Saudi Arabia has authorised the demolition of a great number of significant Islamic cultural heritage in the holiest Islamic cities of Mecca and Medina in the last two decades alone. This has been done in the name of modernisation and extension of pilgrimage facilities. Some of the buildings destroyed dating back to the beginning of Islam have been lost. Many senior Wahhabi clerks are strongly against the preservation of historic Islamic sites that are linked to the prophet because of fear of encouraging idol worshipping (Taylor, 2013; Shahin, 2013). Shahin (2013) argues that

“by radically denying the complexity and diversity of Islamic history, over time and vast areas of the world, and rejecting diverse, pluralistic interpretations of Islam, Wahhabism has stripped the faith of all its ethical and moral content and reduced it to an arid list of do’s and don’ts. To insist that anything that cannot be found in a literal reading of the sources and lore of early Muslims is Kufr...outside the domain of Islam...and to enforce this comprehensive vision with brute force and/or severe social pressure for complete conformity and spells totalitarianism.”

Furthermore, some Muslim informants of mine resent the destruction of Islamic cultural heritage. They consider Islamic heritage to belong to all Muslims and not to Saudi Arabia alone – rather seeing Saudi Arabia as only the custodian of that heritage (personal communication 2014).

The last decade or so witnessed the growth of the Taliban in Afghanistan and Pakistan, Boko Haram in Nigeria, Ansar al Din in Mali and the Islamic state in Syria and Iraq, all of whom caused great damage to cultural heritage. Buddhist heritage and Muslim shrines were targeted and destroyed in Afghanistan (Khan, 2013). Timbuktu in the present day Republic of Mali, saw the destruction of numerous World Heritage-listed Sufi shrines by the group Ansar al Din (Johnston, 2013; Welsh, 2013; Bozonnet, 2014). More recently groups such as Boko Haram in Nigeria (BBC News, 2014) and ISIS (Islamic State in Iraq and Syria) have caused great destruction to Islamic heritage in Nigeria, Iraq and Syria (BBC News, 2014). As this paper was going to press, the author received word that popular religious sites and holy shrines in Sudan were being destroyed [Personal communication December 2014; also see: Ali (2012) and Al Sharif (2012)].

The latest escalation of events has caused unprecedented tension. Many Muslims deeming the behaviour of these groups as un-Islamic – their actions are more political than religious – many Islamic countries, communities, theologians and institutions, as well as individuals, have condemned the actions of these groups, and publically asserted their actions are unrepresentative of Islam as a whole. For example, in August 2014, The Grand Mufti, Egypt’s head of Dar al Ifta al Misriyyah (top religious and educational institution), advised Muslims to stop calling the group ‘Islamic State’ and alternatively to refer to them as ‘QSIS’ because of the militant group’s ‘un-Islamic character’ (Shounaz, 2014).
4 Changing vision: broadening conception of heritage practices

During the last few decades, there has been a significant development in heritage values and ideology that reflects a shift in philosophical debates and practices. It is now generally accepted that heritage refers not only to the physical ‘things’ but is also comprehensive of intangible elements. It comprises processes and cultural activities that transmit ideas, beliefs, values and emotions. It is about what we do and what we experience. As a result, cultural heritage has come to be understood not only as places, landscapes, monuments and objects, but also meanings, associations, values, worldviews and ways of life. It has been acknowledged that what people do and feel may be far more significant than a place itself (Byrne, 2001; Clarke and Johnson, 2003; Smith, 2006; Gibson and Pendlebury, 2009; Harrington, 2009). Moreover, there has been a focus on community heritage, embedded in the understanding that the intangible aspects of heritage found in attachments, world views and ways of life are intertwined with local expressions, experiences and practices (Jackson, 1994; Truscott, 2003a, 2003b; Munjeri, 2001, 2003, 2004; Smith, 2006; Harrington, 2009). Cultural heritage comes to be understood as a cultural and social process, actively used, reused, negotiated and transmitted (Avrami et al., 2000; de la Torre and Randall, 2002; Smith, 2006).

This move is represented by several international conventions as well as national charters within many countries around the world (UNESCO, 2001, 2003, 2005; ICOMOS-Australia 1999—also known as the Burra Charter 1999). It is now well recognised that our perception of heritage has changed from monument, sites and group of buildings (UNESCO, 1972). A more holistic concept of place is the starting point of the Burra Charter (1999). To understand the cultural significance of a place entails understanding of familiar elements such as the fabric and its setting and use. The significance also stems from people’s memory and association with place. Therefore, judging significance includes understanding people’s experiences and how they value place (Burra Charter last revised 1999; Gibson and Pendlebury, 2009). The protection of diversity became a primary focus of The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (hereafter, UNESCO) in the 1990s, and to a great extent this was due to worries about the threats of globalisation and its effect on the survival of the world’s cultural diversity. In October 2000, UNESCO prepared a declaration aimed at promoting cultural diversity in the context of globalisation. The resulting instrument was the universal declaration on cultural diversity adopted in 2001. The 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Heritage also acknowledges cultural diversity. The International Convention on the Protection of the Diversity of Cultural Contents and Artistic Expressions of 2005 is a binding legal instrument representing a commitment to cultural diversity (Logan, 2009; UNESCO, 2001, 2003, 2005). The influential conception of diversity, which focuses on intercultural interaction, was realised not only in UNESCO’s 2005 Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions, but also in the 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage. The intangible heritage convention states that intangible cultural heritage is “transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history, and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity” [UNESCO, (2003), Art. 2.1]. Similarly, it includes a set of contemporary manifestations and evolving representations, such as oral traditions, performing arts, rituals and traditional craftsmanship. Article 2 of the UNESCO Convention defines intangible cultural heritage
as “The practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills—as well as the instruments, objects, and cultural spaces associated therewith—that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage” [UNESCO, (2003), art. 2.1]. To understand living religious heritage, there must first be the recognition of the intangible significance of tangible religious objects, structures and places. As Stovel (2005, p. 9) states, “understanding living religious heritage requires recognising that intangible significance of tangible … is the key to their meaning”.

The above section provides a review of recent developments in heritage philosophy and practices. One of the most important developments in the subject has been the move away from the idea of heritage as an object. Additionally, heritage became more inclusive and comprehensive; it involves communities and diversity in heritage. This should be reflected in the heritage selection, conservation and management. With this understanding, I will discuss my study area and how heritage is valued in Sudan in the next section.

4.1 Popular Islam in Sudan

Before contextualising the case study, I will begin by giving a brief background about popular Islam in Sudan. The mosque is usually not the only holy place that symbolises Sudanese religion; shrines of saints are very significant. As acknowledged by Tringham (1965), mosques may be considered as a symbol of the state, whilst shrines are symbols of a relevant and functional faith. Ziyara to tombs or shrines of awliyya (male and female spiritual leaders; singular waliy) – both living and dead – who are thought to possess Baraka (‘supernatural power’) is a common practice throughout Sudan and the Islamic world. Ziyara (visit) to shrines is performed individually, or in groups, or both. The ziyara could be regular or occasional, performed at a time of need or thanksgiving, or for blessing. Within the society visiting shrines is a focal point for spiritual guidance, and it also fulfils other roles in the devotee’s life.6

Communal and collective visitation is performed during main occasions such as: Eid al Fitr (The festival at the end of Ramadan), Eid al Aldha (the festival of sacrifice), Ashura (10th day of Muharram, the day of mourning in Shi’a Islam), al Moulid al Nabauiy (the Prophet’s birthday), the Hijrey New Year and the Holiyya (anniversary of the birth or death of the holy man or woman). These celebrations are performed to show respect and devotion to the Prophet and the waliy. Individual and family visits to the shrines, apart from those during the occasions referred to above, are also made to pay reverence to a waliy, or to present gifts which are usually made at various stages of life, occasions that represent the most important events in the whole of the human life cycle. These types of visit could take place at any time during the week, month or year. Custom and religious practices are fused together in the life cycle of the individuals concerned.

Shrines offer a sense of blessedness and purity that touches people more directly and subconsciously than mosques or theoretical Islamic rituals do (Tringham, 1965). Shrines are visited for a wide range of reasons: as an expression of fidelity and loyalty to a waliy, to plead for the intervention of the holy woman or man for a worldly favour, as a safe sanctuary, and so on and so forth. Shrine visiting is a popular custom that appeals to a broad sector of the population. Tombs or shrines do not necessarily have grand architectural value; nonetheless, they continue to enhance the tangible and intangible cultural heritage of these communities.7
4.2 Shrines’ attributes

On the whole, shrines are to be found near a stream, river, well, water outlet, the sea or ports (Taha, 2011; Sadiq, 2008). Shrines and their surrounding area have a vibe of blessedness; devoutness and safety. The inner chamber of the shrine (typically) has an aura of peacefulness and piouness, whilst the surroundings are often cultivated to give the feeling of joyfulfulness and togetherness.

Shrines are erected at the believed burial place of a waliy or located at places where important events took place such as where a waliy prayed, rested, visited, went into retreat, died or performed a miracle. Shrines fall into different categories that include shrines with gubba (domed shrines), tombs and byannat. The gubba – tomb of a distinguished waliy – may be a square building with a round, conical or egg-shaped roof (Figure 1). Ordinarily gubbas are white-washed with green at the summit and erected over the waliy’s grave. The Sheikh’s baraka (religious leader’s blessing) is thought to be most effective at the place where he lived, died or spent a great deal of his time (Taha, 2009, 2011; Trimingham, 1949). Some shrines are built adjacent to a mosque and a khalwa (Figure 2), others stand on their own (Figure 3). However, not every gubba signifies a place of burial, occasionally it may symbolise a memorial shrine, or it may be the place where the placenta of the waliy was buried. Other types of shrines could simply be mud buildings with a flat roof or with no roof at all. Most numerous are shrines called bayan (manifestation) which mark the places where a saint has been seen in a dream. There are shrines marked by no building and merely marked by a circle of stones and flags to indicate the burial of a waliy. Building material is usually that which is available locally; for instance, in coastal city of Suakin the shrines are built of coral, bricks, stones and mud bricks are used in other areas. Qubbas are usually looked after by a descendant of the deceased sheikh or occasionally by a guardian appointed by the khalifa. Shrines and their custodians are maintained by the community and the gifts of pilgrims and visitors; the job of looking after the mosque or tomb is hereditary.

Figure 1 Showing a shrine with an egg shaped dome (see online version for colours)
5 Case study: contextualising Suakin

5.1 Suakin’s environment

The renowned medieval port of Suakin, on the Red Sea Coast of Eastern Sudan (Figure 4), is remarkable for its mansions built of coral. Suakin is commonly referred to in official reports and literature as the ‘abandoned port of Suakin’ [see, for example, Al Shamiy, (1961), p.164; “a letter to the Minister of Education, the chairman of the Museums Board” cited in Hansen, (1972), p.1]. The story often told is that of grand, monumental heritage. Suakin was one of the most well-known international maritime trade centres on the Red Sea, which connected the Mediterranean Sea and the Gulf of
Shrine visiting as heritage

Aden. What makes Suakin unique is that it remained intact, continuously inhabited by multi-generational families, and a fully functioning port, until the beginning of the twentieth-century, when the British colonial power determined to relocate the port to present day Port Sudan. After the spread of Islam in Central and West Africa in the seventh century, Suakin became a major port for pilgrims travelling to Mecca and from the beginning of the 16th-century, became the most famous port on the Red Sea coast. However, this was not the first time that Suakin was used as a port. Although the documented history of Suakin goes back to 750 AD, several scholars suggest that its location is one of the oldest to serve as a port on the Red Sea (Al Shamiy, 1961; Dirar, 1981). Folklore takes Suakin back to the time of King Solomon and stories about the Queen of Sheba (as the legends have it) travelling from Suakin to Jerusalem. Furthermore, Suakin also served as a port for the Christian kingdoms in the Nile valley and Ethiopian pilgrims travelling to the Holy Land. Suakin was one of the longest-serving ports and it has been a historical bridge between Africa, Arabia, Asia, the Mediterranean and Europe, encouraging trade as well as social and cultural contact, and playing a major role in the world of international trade and commercial exchange between the surrounding countries (Dirar, 1981; Abu Aisha, 2002; Taha, 2013).

Figure 4  Showing Suakin’s location (see online version for colours)

Note: Author added Red Sea district.  
Source:  Google map
5.2 Suakin’s cultural heritage

Suakin has a rich collection of tangible and intangible heritage, distinctive architecture and a character of its own. It is characterised by its compactness with narrow, meandering streets, and minarets penetrating the skyline. Houses in Gezira (the largest of the three islands, further subdivided into several neighbourhoods) were three or four stories high, white-washed, with outwardly-projecting windows (Roshan), and built of local coral. Gezira consists of several neighbourhoods, two main mosques, Zawias (mosques without minarets), Khalwas (Quranic schools), Souqs (market), the harbor, and the commercial area. Similarly, the Gyef (coastal area) is subdivided into neighbourhoods, a main street and Souq, three main mosques, a number of Zawias, Khalwas, shrines, Caravanserais (travel lodge), school, prison, ginning factory, a wall which surrounds the Gyef and a main gate. Outside the wall lie the quarantine station, cemetery, residential neighbourhoods, shrines, mosques and the wells that supply the town with fresh water. In particular, Suakin is rich in intangible heritage expressed through religious festivals, rituals, ceremonies, beliefs, practices, and way of life, including traditional knowledge, skills, crafts and so forth, which is indivisible from the tangible heritage. Suakin has been on UNESCO’s Tentative List of World Heritage since 1994.

5.3 Suakin’s religious landscape

One of Suakin’s characteristics is the large number of mosques, shrines, Zawias and Khalwas. Suakin’s landscape is penetrated by minarets; in the historic centre, mosques in Suakin represent all four of Islam’s main religious doctrines (Al Shafi’i, Al Hanafi, Al Malik and Al Hanbily). It is also known for its many theology teachers, Sufi groups, religious sheiks and khala teachers. Suakinese lives revolved around religion and the religious establishment provided shared religious, social and cultural identities. My interviewees related to me that they have 99 holy men or women protecting Suakin and Sayyid Taj al Sir (number hundred) and the last one (Sayyid, is a title given to a religious person whose lineage goes back to the Prophet). Some of my interviewees confirmed that they could recount up to 40 holy awliyya, and confirmed that they visit a number of shrines. I visited 25 shrines during my field work.

This study is based on ethnographic research undertaken in 2007, 2008–2009 and 2010–2011. I lived in Suakin and carried out informal interviews, attended and observed performances, rituals and the uses of heritage in present day Suakin. I observed what people did before, during and after Eid al Adha (festival of the sacrifice) and that became part of my interview questions in my second visit. During the first year of my field work, when I asked interviewees ‘What is important to them?’ they never mentioned the shrines or the rituals. The second year of my fieldwork in Suakin happened at the same time of the celebration of the religious festival of Eid al Adha (Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca). I observed and attended the rituals, celebrations and performances during the festival time, and also the regular weekly visits by people from other regions and the daily visits by locals. The area was so busy, crowded and full of activity. Yet, this same area is neither included in the archaeological management programme, nor regarded as heritage. This is the area I will be describing in this paper.
6 Observations and interviewee’s comments during the Eid Festival

6.1 Spiritual practices

Communal and collective visiting is performed during main occasions such as: Eid al Fitr (The festival at the end of Ramadan), Eid al Aldha, Ashura (10th day of Muharram, the day of mourning in Shi’a Islam), al Moulid al Nabawi (the Prophet’s birthday), the Hijrey New Year and the Holiyya (anniversary of the birth or death of the holy man or woman). These celebrations are performed to show respect and devoutness to the Prophet and the waliy. During Eid I was undertaking my fieldwork in Suakin and saw groups of around 500 locals on the first day, on the second day a large group of around 400 came from the district and on the 11th day of Eid a group of 300 nomads came from further afield. My interviewees stated that during Sayyid Taj al Sir Holiyya, visitors numbers could reach over 3,000 thousand; whereas Sitty Meriam Holiyya – which lasts for two or three days - would attract 30–40,000 visitors (including locals and national visitors). For some shrines in Suakin, devotees used to come from as far as Ethiopia and Eritrea). There are also group visits of people from the nearby towns, who visit every week and spend the whole day in the vicinity of the shrine. Individual and family visits to the shrines, apart from those during the occasions referred to above, are also made to pay reverence to a waliy, or to present gifts which are usually made at various stages of life, occasions that represent the most important events in the whole of the human life cycle. These types of visit could take place at any time during the week, month or year. Custom and religious practices are fused together in the life cycle of the individuals concerned.

Shrines are visited by fishermen and mariners, particularly in the Red Sea area, as it is a very difficult sea, with high winds, storms, coral reefs and sharks. It is not unusual for mariners to change their route to visit a shrine to ask for a safe journey. On their return, they stop at the shrine with gifts for thanksgiving. My interviewees declared that they visit several shrines. Shriners are visited by men and women asking for a blessing, seeking a wife or a husband, to get advice before marriage, before a wedding ceremony, or seeking to become pregnant, after a child birth, on the occasions of shaving a baby’s first hair, circumcision, death or to secure protection, passing exams, or tracing a thief, to get advice before starting a business venture. They may also visit if they are going through a tough time, or are in search of healing from psychological problems, breaking of spells or cure from the evil eye or blessing the harvest. Different holy men or women have different specialisation, awilyyia provide spiritual and moral guidance as well. The shrine and surrounding area are sanctified; people leave things there for safe-keeping or stay there for protection from vengeance. Some of the visitors do not belong to any religious tariqua (sect) and are not followers of any of the sayyids, yet they visit shrines when they visit Suakin. Some people wear charms with religious verses called Hijjab that are prepared by a sheik to protect against illness, the evil eye and evil spirits, particularly for babies and young children (Taha Interviews, 2009; Taha, 2011).
6.2 Spiritual practices and rituals

On arrival at a shrine, people will wash (*wadoua*) before entering and pray two *rakaas* (prayers). Upon entering the chamber, they will greet the sheikh and recite verses from the Quran. Visitors will kiss the Sheikh’s hands if he is alive or touch his tomb if not and rub their hands on their faces for *Baraka*. There are two types of visits: one type is for the benefit of the sheikh, and the one to benefit the visitor. The former type of visit was exemplified by the groups I observed who visited during Eid time. They came in chanting, prayed, completed the rituals and rites and chanted on their way out. The nomads came on their camels, also chanting. After the ritual, their day ended with a camel race (Figures 5 and 6). The other type of visit is for the benefit of the visitor.

During weekly visits, after the rituals, people will bring food and drink, and will picnic outside the shrine. Stalls selling food and drinks are set up as well. Visits made for the benefit of the visitor are typically made individually or with friends. Visitors appeal to the sheikh for assistance, for closeness to the sheikh, and as a reminder of the appeal. Visitors leave something behind, commonly, a piece of rag attached to the door, tomb or tied to sticks. Visitors might make a vow to sacrifice an animal and distribute the meat or some other food to the shrine visitors and the poor, or to whitewash the tomb, give money to the poor and so forth, if their prayers are answered *zikir* (chanting of the greatness of God) may be performed.

During big occasions, collective celebrations take place (Figures 7 and 8). According to custom, there is much activity, with a great festival atmosphere. A mini market is commonly set up. Devotees arrive carrying offerings and gifts, and upon arrival they carry out the traditional rites, prayers, chanting, and usually *Zkir*. It is a time of general celebration and joy, of meeting family and friends, of social networking and making new friends, as well as performing customary practices and religious rites.

*Figure 5* On the way to the shrine on Eid day (see online version for colours)
Figure 6  Showing collective celebration at the shrine of Sayyid Taj Al Sir (see online version for colours)

Source: Author

Figure 7  Getting ready for celebrations and a camel race after the rituals (see online version for colours)

Source: Author
7 Suakin as depicted by the Suakinese and the religious community

I asked people ‘what were their fondest memories of the Ziyara?’ Extracts from interviewees reflect frequently expressed views:

“Muazen hymns for a week before the start of the month and ten days before the end of the month. I enjoyed the Eid celebrations, when we were children we used to be so excited and look forward to the celebrations. Before the Eid prayers, adults and children used to walk in a procession made of several lines called al Safina (Ship), to the praying square, after the prayers we used to walk back in the same order but through a different route, chanting all the way. The Moulid (prophet’s birthday) celebration was equally huge, it had a certain flavor and zing to it. Celebrations continued for ten days before the large finale on the last day. There used to be decorations, different color flags, the celebrations took place at the same location, food, drinks, and sweets for sale. Sufi songs, drums, Ziker, slides and wings for the children, it was so crowded you could hardly walk, people used to come from all over the region (MPo 80s).”11
Shrine visiting as heritage

“When we visit Suakin we visit Sayyid Taj al Sir shrine even though we are not Khatimys; we also visit the shrines of Abu al Fatah, Al Ansari, Faraj Allha and Al Gabarty (FPo 50s).”

“Suakin is the town of mosques, the four doctrines of Islam are to be found in Suakin, you do not see this in any other town in Sudan except in Suakin, Sufi sects, Khatimya, we have a religious culture and religious heritage not to be found anywhere else (MKh 50s).”

“Suakin is the town of Khalwas, boarding schools for learning the Quran, we are surrounded by holy women and men, and pilgrims travel from Suakin, our religious culture is not matched by any other town in Sudan (MSu 40s).”

“We visit Taj al Sir Shrine whenever we visit Suakin; our ties to the shrine are symbolic and spiritual, sometimes we visit Abu al Fatah too (MKh 70s).”

Poetry was also composed commending the Holy men and women. Below some verses from poems recited by interviewees:

“Suakin was pleasant, Suakin was enjoyable”

“Suakin was clean and virtuous, a pure land. This was the land inhabited by our holy lady.”

“Suakin was the land of radiance.”

“Where are the people who inhabited you now!”

“In your land resides Taj al Sir”

“You were a paradise and the land of brightness”

“Al Gabartiy has a banner and Sheik Gareib was the pillar of the region”

“Al Ansari resides in Suakin and Taj al Sir is the grandson of the prophet”

(Extract from a poem recited by FSu 60s).

And another

“I want to talk to the world about you and tell”

“Of the pious folk of noble birth who in you made their abode”

“Tag Elsir descends from the greatest prophet of all”

“Of Fatma the chaste he is a worthy grandchild”

(Poem recited by MPo, 50)

One can notice, through these poems, interviewees devotion and pride.

8 The function of the shrine

Religious beliefs serve a variety of functions (Haviland, 2002). The religious value assigned to the shrines is still a surviving living tradition. Shrines continue to retain their primary function as sites of living spirituality and blessedness. They give people a feeling of safety, security, and protection, and continue to play a social, religious, political, cultural, economic and psychological role. At these sites people not only learn, take part in, and pass ritual practices down each generation but also learn about morals, values, virtue, conduct, guidance for acceptable and proper behaviour, along with other Islamic
values and teachings. Rituals have a key role in the maintenance of social group solidarit
and in bringing individuals together with common shared memories and traditions. In addition, frequent partaking in collective rituals and in an environment filled with emotions serves to bind people together and strengthen their unity (Sadiq, 2008; Taha, 2011).

Shrines which that continue to be actively used for religious and social purposes, with regular prayers, functions, festivals and bazaars organised in their surroundings, provide an economic benefit for individuals. Additionally, gifts given by the pilgrims provide a fiscal source for the maintenance of the shrines and their custodians. Moreover, shrine complexes have a social value, as food is cooked in their kitchens and poor people can receive free food and shelter. The tombs play a key role in the social life of the local society. Collective celebrations and activities provide entertainment for children and adults alike, and serve to cement social relations, togetherness and friendship ties. Shrines throughout the Islamic world give people a feeling of comfort and safety. Interviewees declared that shrine visiting was an important customary activity, spiritually and for their well-being. In this respect, the visits have an important psychological value. Some of the religious leaders are involved in political life and represent a political party, their devotees vote for them (Sadiq, 2008; Taha Observation, 2008).

Shrine visiting is a popular ritual, it transcends gender, ethnicity and class and includes people of all ages, the educated and the illiterate, and people from different social strata encompassing a wide range of the population (Taha Interviews, 2009).

9 Heritage valuation in Sudan

The institution which is accountable for the heritage selection and protection is called ‘the National Corporation for Antiquities and Museums’ (NCAM). The institution’s title gives an idea of what heritage is being protected. Heritage management in Sudan is embedded in an old-fashioned conceptualisation of cultural heritage, which views archaeological antiquities as the main object of heritage and museum collections. The management continues to focus on the tangible monuments from the past and the legislation’s main responsibility is to protect only physical heritage. Notwithstanding current developments in cultural heritage practices, heritage remains to be selected, protected and managed using archaic methods and practices (Antiquities law, 1999; Interviews, 2009).

The legislation does not cover living religious cultural heritage, intangible heritage, maritime heritage or everyday heritage. Although the law was revised in 1999, it failed to embrace current intangible values of heritage. These forms of heritage do not have any legal protection or financial support. As a result, they are under great threat caused by development and modernisation projects. Traditional concerns with historic, aesthetic and scientific values prevail and heritage management continues to emphasise professional authority and a top-down approach. This has led to religious traditions and associations being neglected and professional values, not the values held by the community, have continued to dominate heritage practices.

As discussed above, Suakin has been valued for its past history, commercial achievements and architectural heritage, and viewed as existing in an ancient past. This arises from the fact that the legislation protection extends only to cover grand and impressive physical heritage and follows a single value approach. As a result the cultural
distinctiveness of the religious community, the diversity of expressions and practices associated with the place and the cultural heritage has been overlooked. Sullivan (2003, p.50) reminds us that “in the past, emphasis on grandeur and splendor has led to the neglect of ‘places of the spirit’, and the low-key and the subtle signs of the past which can be of great emotional value to ordinary people”; this attitude carries on in the present.

10 Discussion: understanding shrines landscape

This study shows that popular Islam continues to have a special place in the religious community. The landscape of shrines is a storied landscape; narratives about the awliyya’s origin and the miracles they performed are frequently told and retold. Suakinese are very proud of Suakin as the land of mosques and minarets, of its piety and blessedness. Religion is central to their lives and their lives revolve around religion. Shrines continue to be actively used, they are managed, maintained and valued, they represent heritage from the fringes. Well known and famous awliyya and their shrines are visited by hundreds of devotees. The practices and celebrations (as described in the previous section) give the place meaning and vigor. Annual gatherings and celebrations continue the spiritual and spatial affiliations and give the feeling of historical, spatial, religious and cultural continuity both in time and space (Low, 1992; Jacobi and Stokols, 1983).

Living religious heritage is associated with rituals, celebrations, spiritual activities and a religious community who find it significant. The recent understanding of heritage practices and UNESCO’s adoption of the 2003 Intangible Heritage Convention, as well as the Convention for the Protection of Cultural Diversity in 2005 gave more emphasis to intangible heritage, the importance of cultural diversity and community inclusion (UNESCO, 2001, 2003, 2005). It is therefore most important to define the heritage values attributed to such places. Although Wijesuriya (2005, p.31) distinguishes between religious heritage and other forms of heritage, he emphasises that “religious heritage has been born with its values in place”. To appreciate the living religious heritage necessitates the acknowledgment of the tangible and intangible heritage as a complete whole. The case study illustrates that the tangible and intangible heritage associated with the shrines in Suakin (and elsewhere) is indivisible. Heritage is deeply rooted in collective traditions, rituals and practices, but thus far the heritage institutions have largely disregarded the continuing spiritual practices. Moreover, the present focus on tangible and monumental heritage protection does not acknowledge the mundane or the intangible heritage related to it. Not only has the model failed to recognise the significance of these buildings and traditions, but it may also endanger and threaten their continuity and the transmission of practices and rituals, which could be considered the best, reliable option for the survival of Suakin’s significant values.

Emphasis on the tangibility of heritage has led to the failure to recognise the rich intangible heritage associated with the shrines in Suakin. The restrictive definition of heritage continues to cause problems for its safeguarding and preservation. Shrines and the religiosity of the place are of great value to the local and religious community. What official heritage organisations have failed to realise is that these places are more than just tombs or mausoleums, they are part and parcel of the social cultural life, they represent continuity of use and function and a living heritage of local cultures and traditions, and they are associated with strong attachment and feeling of belonging.
The ethnographic research demonstrates that Suakin has values other than the architectural value assigned to it. To understand Suakin’s historical significance, we need to look beyond the physical landscape. Religious heritage includes not only the tangible objects, but also the deeper sense of the non-material heritage and associations. These places are also social spaces and contribute to the creation of individual and collective memory, as suggested by Di Giovine (2009, p.119) that “places are also social. They are spaces imbued with meaning that extend from the material world and into the ephemeral realms of individual and collective memories. Socially agreed upon connotations, ideas, symbols, titles and meanings permeate places”. Despite Suakin’s economic decline at the beginning of the twentieth century, it has continually remained an important destination for the religious community. Shrines continue to be used and loved and frequented, which has preserved its meaning for centuries. Notwithstanding the richness and continuity of traditions, what is lacking in Sudan is the absence of dialogue with religious communities. Therefore, when assessing living religious heritage, heritage professionals and specialists need to take notice of the values that are already recognised by the religious community. Equally important for good practice and to bring together the needs of the religious community and the professional and conservation practice, is to encourage participation and dialogue (Stovel, 2005).

There has been a shift in the heritage philosophy to acknowledge that heritage includes not only tangible objects, but also rituals, customs, practices, festivals, oral traditions, beliefs and values and how they pass this to the other member of the community and to the next generations. Shrine visiting contributes to more holistic and comprehensive heritage values. I suggest that Suakin is not a past heritage, but rather a place of a living heritage and shrine visiting is a fundamental element of its heritage values. Stories, memories and histories of the religious communities need to be acknowledged in the heritage values that make Suakin significant. As Johnston (1992) suggests, social value is attachment to places where major events take place, places of tradition, ritual and ceremony which are essential reference points for community identity. Suakin’s social value includes the religious and symbolic value of the shrines and their meaning to the local community, the surrounding areas, to the Sudan in general and other similar places.

11 Conclusions

The research suggests that Suakin has multiplicity of values. Thus, to fully comprehend Suakin’s meaning, necessitates recognising the diversity of values. Religious heritage comprise the deeper sense of intangible heritage and is indivisible from tangible heritage. Shrines continue to be used, loved and visited, which has maintained its meaning for centuries. Current Islamic practices coupled with religious behaviour in Suakin indicate that shrines continue to be, meaningful and a focal point of Islam in the area. Holy shrines are an important element of daily life, accessible by all members of the community.

The case of Suakin shows that shrine visitation is one of the processes that are at the heart of popular Islam in eastern Sudan. Shrine visitation and the beliefs underlying it have played essential roles not only in shaping Islam in this area, but also in creating and sustaining senses of pride, religious identity and belonging and an absolute devotion and commitment to the holy men and women up to the present day. Furthermore, the case of
Suakin exemplifies that the emotional, psychological, social, and cultural aspects of heritage are not independent parts, but rather parts of a conceptual whole. Shrines will remain significant as long as they continue to be used and reinvested with meaning and value through practices, rituals and performances.

Traditional concerns with historic, aesthetic and scientific values prevail and heritage management continues to emphasise professional authority and a top-down approach. This has led to religious traditions and associations being neglected and professional values, not the values held by the community, have continued to dominate heritage practices.

Spiritual associations are transmitted from generation to generation and provide communities with a sense of individual, collective, spiritual and spatial identities; a sense of historical continuity that serves to maintain the link between the past and the present, between the individual, the group and the place. Shrine visitation and rituals are indispensable for the cultural, religious, personal and collective memory, identity and sense of belonging for the local population and religious community. Mainstream heritage institutions need to integrate contemporary social values into their management plans. Religious beliefs have over the centuries played a role in enriching the cultural heritage in its totality (both tangible and intangible) and made an invaluable contribution to its sustainability, but cultural and religious practices also strengthen Suakin’s heritage significance. It is because of this consistency with traditional practices that a sense of history and association is maintained and transmitted, and it is an important method for strengthening identity, belonging and a sense of place and community. The research suggests that Suakin is not something that exists in an ancient past, but a place of living heritage, where religious communities provide an important lived experiences and regular element of its comprehensive heritage values.

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References


Shrine visiting as heritage


Personal Communication December (2014)

Personal Communication with Muslims in countries I visited (2014)


Shrine visiting as heritage


Notes
1 As the Sudanese are predominantly Sunni Muslims, I generally focus on the traditions of the Sunni Muslims in a particular geographical region in Sudan. I am not describing mainstream Islam, but the living religious and performances of a particular region – how its inhabitants shaped the form of their Islam and how Islam shaped their culture.
2 By popular Islam, I do not suggest a dichotomy between low (popular) culture and high (elite) culture, but rather everyday religious practices as opposed to formal, institutionalised religion.
3 Some scholars use the word ‘pilgrimage’ for the journeys undertaken by devotees to visit holy men or women shrines. In Sudan there is a clear distinction between the Hajj or pilgrimage to Mecca and ‘Ziyara’ a visit or a journey to a religious shrine. For that reason, I will use the term Ziyara rather than pilgrimage.
4 Although no group claimed responsibility; the Sufi groups accused Ansar al-Sunnah group of the recent events in which Sufi domes were destroyed.
5 The Salafi movement – represented by Ansar al-Sunnah – a group that originates in the Wahhabi movement in Saudi Arabia. Salafi ideas were brought to Sudan from the Hijaz (Saudi Arabia) through the hajj pilgrimage (Ali, 2012; Al Sharif, 2012). One of the latest conflicts between the Sufi and Salafi groups took place in 2012. Fighting broke out as people belonging to Sufi groups were celebrating ‘Al Malid Al Nabawy’ (Prophet Muhammad’s birthday) on 5 February 2012, which is considered heretical by Ansar al-Sunnah group. Dozens of people were injured before the Sudanese police arrived at the scene to stop the fighting.
6 Holy men and women are very popular in Sudan. Some towns are named after well liked holy men. Just to mention a few: Marsa Sheik Bargoth (inlet or harbour) present day Port Sudan, the name was changed by the British in 1910. Mohammed Goul in Eastern Sudan is named after a Holy man. Similarly, the towns of Walid Madeniy, Abu Hammad, Wald Al Fadiniy, Al Massied, Oumm Raawaba, Walad Banaga, Abu Rouff, Al FAshir and many more.
7 By community I mean a religious community made up of followers of a religious tariqa, sect or spiritual leader.
8 All the shrine images are taken by the author in Suakin Sudan.
9 By Suakin I mean the area which comprises three islands, a walled old coastal neighbourhood and five neighbourhoods outside the old town wall. The largest island is known as Gezira - is most densely built-up and the most populous of the islands. The walled coastal area known as al Gyef and the neighbourhoods outside the city wall have distinct different social composition, with Gezira being the elite area and the neighbourhoods outside the wall largely being inhabited by labourers.
Suakinese women are allowed and accepted to become Khalwa teachers and they taught both girls and boys although male Khalwa teachers taught only boys.

Abbreviations used: MSu: Male Suakin, FSu: Female Suakin, Po: Port Sudan, Kh: Khartoum.

The holy woman is Merriam al Marghania (not the holy Mary, but the Sudanese holy Merriam, wife of Sayyid Taj al Sir). People refer to her as Sitty Merriam or our holy lady. She has a large number of devotees, who visit her shrine in Sinakat. She used to reside in Suakin and requested that if she died in Suakin she wished to be buried there, but if she died in Port Sudan she was to be buried in Sinakat. She has a large Holyya, people come in their thousands from several regions and towns in Sudan using all methods of transport.

Poetry and songs are composed in praise of the holy women and men. This and other poems were recalled by numerous interviewees. This poem represents several holy people in the same verse. The poetry recited is composed by relatives or friends. I have not met the poets during my fieldwork.