Appendices

Table of Contents

Pre-walk interview 1: Sai, 24 February 2017............................................................................................. iii
  The event............................................................................................................................................................ iii
  The estate.......................................................................................................................................................... iv
  The loss............................................................................................................................................................. vi
Walk 1: Sai, 24 February 2017 ....................................................................................................................... ix
  1. 16:35:55, N20° 45.441’ E30° 19.171’........................................................................................................... x
  2. 16:44:18, N20° 45.672’ E30° 19.116’........................................................................................................ xiii
  3. 16:47:44, N20° 45.727’ E30° 19.096’......................................................................................................... xiv
  4. 16:48:06, N20° 45.727’ E30° 19.096’......................................................................................................... xv
  5. 16:48:30, N20° 45.730’ E30° 19.085’......................................................................................................... xvi
  6. 16:51:21, N20° 45.788’ E30° 19.060’......................................................................................................... xvii
  7. 16:54:41, N20° 45.731’ E30° 19.034’......................................................................................................... xviii
  8. 16:59:43, N20° 45.652’ E30° 19.019’......................................................................................................... xix
  9. 17:01:58, N20° 45.640’ E30° 19.016’......................................................................................................... xx
 10. 17:09:12, N20° 45.531’ E30° 19.016’....................................................................................................... xxi
 11. 17:14:01, N20° 45.482’ E30° 18.996’....................................................................................................... xxii
 12. 17:19:10, N20° 45.389’ E30° 18.958’....................................................................................................... xxiii
 13. 17:25:04, N20° 45.304’ E30° 18.943’....................................................................................................... xxiv
Pre-walk interview 2: Kajbar, 3 March 2017.............................................................................................. xxvi
Walk 2: Kajbar, 3 March 2017........................................................................................................................ xxxi
  1. 17:32:00, N19° 56.882’ E30° 32.553’....................................................................................................... xxxii
  2. 17:32:16, N19° 56.881’ E30° 32.551’....................................................................................................... xxxiii
  3. 17:33:06, N19° 56.873’ E30° 32.537’....................................................................................................... xxxiv
  4. 17:33:32, N19° 56.869’ E30° 32.531’....................................................................................................... xxxv
  5. 17:36:36, N19° 56.844’ E30° 32.516’....................................................................................................... xxxvi
  6. 17:38:12, N19° 56.832’ E30° 32.501’....................................................................................................... xxxvii
  7. 17:41:26, N19° 56.806’ E30° 32.465’....................................................................................................... xxxviii
  8. 17:42:50, N19° 56.777’ E30° 32.443’....................................................................................................... xxxix
Walk 3a: Difoinarti, 4 March 2017.................................................................xlvii

Starting fire (1).................................................................................................xlviii

Starting fire (2).................................................................................................xlix

Spreading fire ....................................................................................................l

Stopping the fire: cutting trees ..........................................................................li

Stopping the fire: bringing water..........................................................................lii

Aftermath: landscape of destruction .....................................................................liii

Aftermath: bodily harm ........................................................................................liiv

Other losses: erosion ............................................................................................lv

Other losses: disinterest ........................................................................................livi

Past: productivity ................................................................................................lvii

Past: strength .......................................................................................................lviii

Resilience .............................................................................................................lx

Walk 3b: Difoinarti, 19 September 2017..............................................................lxii

1. Post-fire landscape .........................................................................................lxii

2. Settlement history ...........................................................................................lxiii

3. (Un)settlement ................................................................................................lxiv

4. Paradise lost .....................................................................................................lxv

5. Childhood memories .......................................................................................lxvi

6. Hooks in the wall ...........................................................................................lxvii

7. Architecture of defence ...................................................................................lxviii

8. Architecture of hospitality ...............................................................................lxix

9. Places of memory ...........................................................................................lxx
I arrived at the eastern shore of the island Sai together with Yūnis, a man in the early twenties whose family had hosted me in the village we both had travelled from. From the landing that we had reached with a small motorboat, we passed private and cooperative agricultural fields, some with ruins of doorways and buildings, and finally arrived at the house of Fa’iz who Yūnis knew from their membership in the same political party and numerous campaigns against the construction of hydropower dams in the region. We found him sitting and smoking together with Faraḥ, a friend and colleague; the Friday prayer had just finished. They were ready to show us the island and especially the areas where date palm fires had broken out but we talked for about an hour before we left.

The event

The interview went only shortly over the fire event itself and soon advanced into details of what the loss of date palms meant to them. Two major fires had affected them directly, for Fa’iz about 9 years before the interview, for Faraḥ 4 years before. In both cases, it was a result from usage of fire for cleaning a field, with sudden gusts of wind taking up and extending the flame, until
several thousand date palms had burnt down. They had tried to intervene but only when all palms had been consumed the fire stopped. Afterwards, government representatives came and, so Fa’iz, ate the meat prepared for their visit and promised to bulldoze the old palms and to provide seedlings to replant. In the end, only the bulldozer came and left a cleared stretch of about 2 km.

The estate

But renewal of the date palm orchards had both a deeper implication and strong complications, as the further discussion showed. Fa’iz highlighted early on the strong symbolic importance of the date palm and quoted, after I stressed my interest in expressions in his own language Nobiin, the singer-songwriter Mekki Ali Idris who compared Nubians to the date palm, as mark of a nobility that reaches far back into the past:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Nobiin (Nubian letters):} & \quad \text{Tawadun fiyin fentilin\text{\text{"a}}} \\
\text{Nobiin (Latin letters):} & \quad \text{nasgid \text{"u}ni fentilin\text{\text{"a}}} \\
\text{English translation:} & \quad \text{We resemble the date palm in length}
\end{align*}
\]

From the song ‘Wal’o Tara’ that can be heard performed here (I thank Adham Nasr for the transcription and translation in Arabic, from which the English translation is derived). Mekki Ali Idris also addressed the issue of date palm fires more directly in the song ‘Ali Abunaga’, and a whole song was devoted to it in August 2017 by the poet Abd Al-Shaфи Abd al-Majid and singer Al-Shafi’ Kiha (discussed on Nubokeen, part of recording here).

But the relation to actual data palms underwent significant changes, the most obvious being in property, as explained by both of them in dialogue: date palms grow on land, and the owner of one is not necessarily the owner of the other. If this is the case, then date palms on family land experience the full extent of social relations confirmed and enhanced through shared care for and harvest from the palm. Fa’iz recounted, for instance, his grandfather’s date palms as place of memory, of the strong bond (rabṭ quwwi) among his heirs who would gather to harvest the dates, to receive their share from their grandfather’s palm of the hand, even if only a cupful. Labour migration to Khartoum, to the Gulf countries and elsewhere, steadily
increasing during the second half of the 20th century, made this annual gatherings even more important.

But other date palms existed as well. Since land irrigated from one source, called sāqiyyah, can stretch farther than what families can cultivate with their own labour, a system of sharecropping developed, which also extends to date palms: an owner cannot take care of thousands of date palms alone and includes, therefore, sharecroppers (mushtarikin) who can stem from anywhere, including other countries, and who, after planting a palm, acquire ownership and the right to access the land on which the palm grows. The conventional agreement, then, is that the date palm owner gives a third or half of the date harvest as share to the land owner, also for the provision of irrigation. However, since interest in these palms will be, most of all, commercial, there will be no one ‘excited’ (mutḥammās) about them.

Fa’iz and Faraḥ gave this base structure more historical contour through a review of developments that were strongly formed land registration under the British colonial government, in this area from 1925 to 1929, following the 1925 Land Settlement and Registration Act. Fa’iz’ grandfather, for instance, was lone owner of land registered in his name and from this point on, this same land was inherited by consecutive generations. Before the 1920s, land was flexibly extended and divided with inheritance, and could thus be individually owned by family members and their children. Now each generation meant a multiplication of shareholders.

This fragmentation of land also concerned date palms, although individual date palms were divided among numerous heirs already before registration, as they are – necessarily – indivisible and non-expandable (see short discussion in Leach 1919). Decision-making got equally fragmented, so agreements were no longer possible one-on-one, hundreds of land owners dealt with hundreds of date palm owners. By way of example, Faraḥ’s father planted date palms in 1958 and all of his 12 sons and one daughter, and their 4-5 children, each, have a share in them, an increase that is the nature of the world (al-takāṯur ṭabi’at al-dunya).

One consequence of this two-sided increase is a general inflexibility concerning land use that is enhanced by another social practice: while land owners in other areas regularly re-register land in the name of specific members of the new generation, this does not take place here, not the least since expansion onto new land is geographically not an option and culturally not a priority. In addition, the practice to go to court after somebody’s death for assessment and devolution of the
estate (ḥaṣr al-tarika) never took hold and so already Farah’s father, who was born in 1896, had no land registered in his own name.

In the meantime, labour arrangements around date palms changed as well. While the techniques remained mostly the same – manual labour using short sickles and climbing the trunk without equipment – the labour force shifted away from the land-owning families. Fa’iz’s grandfather and father, for instance, still climbed palms, pruning and harvesting themselves, but he himself and most of his generation did not.

This had to do both with internal and external changes: improved irrigation technology, especially from the wooden waterwheel (sāqiyyah) to diesel-fueled engines, made it possible to water larger areas, while labour and educational migration reduced, at least for a few years, the presence of the most productive members of the family on the island itself. At the same time, crises in other regions of Sudan, especially the droughts and wars in the Sahel zone states of Kordofan and Darfur, brought many people from there into the region in search of work, and former resident self-producers became supervisors and employers. Among Fa’iz’ and Farah’s own children, learning to do agriculture and horticulture was even less of a priority.

In parallel, labour in date palms shifted to these agricultural labourers as well. Renting the houses left behind by emigrating families, a few stay all year with their own families, but most of them only seasonally, a season framed by the rhythm of date palms: pollination in February/March, at the end of the cold season favourable for most crops, and harvest in August/September, at the beginning of the next cold season, a natural rhythm interlocking with economic logic: the pollinator is paid with a free choice of two of the best bunches of dates, making coming back for the new season in his own interest.

The loss

This depiction of the state of affairs is of substantial importance to their subsequent pinpointing of what loss occurred when thousands of date palms burnt down. For Fa’iz, the fire widened a gap that had already been there, a distance between himself and his extended family, especially his paternal uncles, through their common link to the grandfather: he had died but was alive because the date palm renewed [itself] (kān bajaddid), drawing the family close every year to find it living on the land. Now both grandfather and date palm had died, irreversibly.
Faraḥ went into an additional direction. The loss of the harvest season as reason to come had already been undermined before by a shift to a different seasonal rhythm, the one having to do with people’s work life and educational schedule. Therefore, the character of the visits had also shifted towards tourism – home tourism, so to speak – as people who lived now in Khartoum or other towns came to the island for a change of venue. Up to the 1990s, with fewer schools and universities having close to synchronous vacation periods, this had still meant a strong convergence of families: when vacations came close, in March and September, for instance, the houses would be ‘opened’ (yaftahū biyūtum) by the more permanent residents, cleaned, provided with water and food, for the season of visits. But the proliferation of educational and professional institutions, together with more complex structures of labour and other emigration, complicated the rhythm as well, and it was rather the month Ramadan, a lunar month wandering slowly backwards through the solar year, that drew people together. Only a calendric coincidence, such as during the fieldwork period, brings harvest and vacation together, and even more so now after the fires, but also without them, as the areas where no fires have been attest.

In this way, considerations of the loss of date palms corresponded with deeper concerns about reproduction and continuity. Planting new date palms had already become rare, Faraḥ estimated about 1% of the population doing it. One major reason can be the aforementioned land usage situation where, as in the case of Faraḥ, date palm owners could take care of those they could claim as property, but were prevented by land owners to plant again, as they preferred to use their land for other crops. Fa’iz considered planting new ones but was rather afraid there would be nobody taking care of them after he died.

This underlying fear of being part of something waning pervaded this part of the conversation that revealed a specific tension between migration and residence. For Fa’iz, Sai’s particular structure of migration stems from an early exposure of its population to the educational system emerging under British colonial rule. Both his grandfathers, born during the 1890s, were university graduates, not an unusual situation among the island’s families, and so many engaged in the educational sector that Sai has been called the land of the 1000 teachers, female and male, since the 1970s. This meant that no strong tradition of men emigrating to Saudi Arabia or other Gulf countries came about, as in many other areas of the region, but the high ratio of educational and professional migration also let whole families leave, as it will be connected to longer
employment elsewhere. In this way, the many houses on Saï that have been left empty are a marker of both an exceptional status and a profound problem.

Farah formulated this problem as people’s ‘detachment’ (ibti’ād) from their homeland and illustrated this in the following way based on his own situation: when he came in 1986, after a time working in Khartoum and abroad, he decided to stay. People around him started to argue with him how he will secure a good education for his children and he, and others thinking like him, stated that it will be done, whatever the means. He quoted the model of their fathers who had been able to combine being educated and remaining attached to agriculture and horticulture on the island, through cooperatives that made it easy to pool resources, upscale their irrigation technology and gain profits from agriculture that financed their and their children’s education. But basic requirements for staying (muqawwamāt al-istiqrār) have changed, they include not just good educational and health services, but electricity, also for entertainment, good sanitation in all public institutions, including mosques, amenities that were counted now under essentials. But source of income on the island provided no economic stability anymore and governmental service consisted of creating bodies (ajsām) with nothing inside. As a result, all improvements were financed by those with an income elsewhere, gifts coming in from other economic contexts.

In short, their economic status was not in their own hands anymore. Their own seasonal crops were subject to normal price fluctuations but also pests and post-harvest damage, and an insecure crop such as broad beans could make a profit one year, and make one a beggar the other.

It is in exactly this point that the date palms had made a difference: a stable basis of 40-50 sacks of dates every year, a basic income – and the comfort such an income provides. The lack of a governmental response that does more than removing the charred remains of their palms revealed a widening gap in responsibility to provide the basic requirements for staying, and it was in this sense of negligence that Farah felt that there was an aim to damage their homeland (tadmīr al-balad mustahdafa), the shadows of the date palm.
Walk 1: Sai, 24 February 2017


E – Ego, Y – Yūnis, F1 – Fa’iz, F2 – Farḥ
1. 16:35:55, N20° 45.441’ E30° 19.171’

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

E: What is this?
Y: Lentils (adisiyyah).
F2: Was before tomato, finished now, could have been used for tomato sauce.
Y: ((dismissive tone))
E: Why are the tomatoes [generally] left on the ground, not cultivated upwards [with sticks]?

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

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

There have been increasing problems with diseases and insects, many of them unknown to the farmers. ‘Climate’ refers here both to general climate change and the perceived environmental effects of the Aswan High Dam and the Merowe Dam.
F2: Last year, date palms didn’t produce [literally: didn’t see (mā shāfat)], only 10%, the problem is water and its composition (takwīn), the pollution, more chemicals.

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

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

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

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

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

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

E: Is this after baramūdah?

F2: No, baʿūnah, abīb and misrā.

E: What about winds in amshīr?

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

This refers to Coptic months often used in conversations on agricultural cycles. While the months are practically identified by specific characteristics, there is a conventional translation into the Gregorian calendar (names based on Arabic pronunciation):

Baramūdah 9 April – 8 May; Bashans [confused by E with previous] 9 May – 7 June; Baʿūnah 8 June – 7 July, Abīb 8 July – 6 August; Misrā 7 August – 5 September. Amshīr (8 February – 9 March) has warm winds that indicate the end of the cold season.

However, knowledge of names of months and their characteristics is waning, as claimed in these statements.
E: ((teasing)) Do you know about this, Yūnis?
F2: No, they don’t know, the Galaxy generation (nāṣ jalikṣī) [all laughing].

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

During the conversation, the walk continued to the next point.
2. 16:44:18, N20° 45.672’ E30° 19.116’

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

*The walk continued to the next point without conversation.*
Arrival at burnt area

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

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

*The farmer in the photo is wearing a piece of fabric as used in mosquito nets, here to protect face and ears from the green nimitti midge (Cladotanytarsus lewisi) that exists in great numbers during the transition from the cold to the hot season (see videos).*
F2: I told you about the culture of the wind (taqāfa biṭā`at al-hawa), the fire here left all
these date palms and went like this. [greetings, introduction of Yūnis to farmer]

'These’ refers to the undamaged date palms in the background that line the coast of the
island, ‘like this’ is the north-northwestern direction.
F2: The [affected] date palms were even dirtier than these. From here the wind took it [in the beginning]. The boatspeople (nās al-murkab) know how the wind goes, going down there.

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

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

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

The following items are thus rather highlights around waypoints when I met them in between.
6. 16:51:21, N20° 45.788’ E30° 19.060’

F2: These are sāqiyah 1 to 3.

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

E: From here, right?

This part describes another major fire reaching from the northern tip of the island in southwestern direction.
E: Did the fire go along here?

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

This indicates the limits of verbal directions, even in combination with sound and photos, vs. video, 3D representations and maps. The mentioned 'landmark', the date palm, can be depicted, but the multidirectional dynamic of the wind blowing blazing fires here and there is lost.
Appendix 02. Walk 1: Sai, 24 February 2017
Enrico Ille

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

E: So the wind passed these by?
F2: Just because they were a little bit far from the fire.

This touches an aspect that will be highlighted more during walk 3, namely the different extent to which date palms were affected and the subsequent difference in ability to regrow. These date palms at the edge of the fire were burnt at the trunk (or even just parts of it) but not inside (see below considerations of the date palm’s heart), so they could regrow leaves and procreate. The photo also indicates the height of palms after several decades of unhindered growth, with Faraḥ seen standing at the left lower corner.
F2: All of this was date palms.
E: But I saw bagging over there.

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

This also indicates two limits of this form of documentation, namely the complex, context-heavy implications of single statements and the asynchronous character that is not depicted in a simple listing – perception, reference, photo, discussion occur at different places and at different times, necessitating a ‘rejoining’ through a narrative commentary.
10. 17:09:12, N20° 45.531’ E30° 19.016’

Different instance of practice referred to in previous comment.
11. 17:14:01, N20° 45.482’ E30° 18.996’

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

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

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

The wind appears here not just as driver of the fire but as active agent of burning. These statements show the elements structuring spatial orientation through a combination of land ownership of agricultural land and settlement: the houses are surrounded by agricultural fields and thus, together with the irrigation channels, one of the structuring elements by which one sāqiyyah can be distinguished from the next. The houses, built from fermented clay bricks, withstood the firestorm.
12. 17:19:10, N20° 45.389’ E30° 18.958’

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

The soundscape, recorded during one of the conversational gaps, indicates the background of the walk, birds, diesel engines pumping water for irrigation – and the clicking of the camera.
13. 17:25:04, N20° 45.304’ E30° 18.943’

E: So here is the end.
F2: Over there.
E: With the channel.
F2: On the day of the fire, the whole government came here with cameras, but didn’t do anything, the fire was still working.
E: How long did the fire go?
F2: From 11:30 until the evening, about this time [late afternoon].
E: For me to get the story right - they heard about the fire and found the time and means to come with cars and ferry here, in frame of 6-7 hours, but did not find a way to bring a pump or anything to stop the fire?
F2: If they would be ready, they could arrive in half an hour, but there is no car [i.e. fire engine], they tell us to use the engine that was just burnt, in the end you go from engine to engine, open them, to extinguish the fire.
F1: Everybody came, Minister of Agriculture, Minister of Education, other ministers, director of zakat, made speeches. I told them only one thing: there are no safety equipment in this country, and there should be, it is not expensive, but you as state should provide it, and this ugly one (al-qabīh da) answered it would not even cost 1 million [SDG], the Director of Zakat. […] Up to today there is no car in Dalgo or Abri; they brought now an officer, three stripes, he came and promised he will bring all the equipment and train people, he said so, but still we didn’t see something new.
F2: Until the ferry comes etc. Sai is finished, it is an island, we need boats, doesn’t need 10 million.

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

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

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

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

After the walk, Yūnis and I rode on Fa ‘iz’ donkey cart to visit another site (additional aspects on the date palm fires from this ride-along and subsequent conversations are integrated into the following section).
I had been in Jeddi with Yāsir, a teacher from one of the islands in Mahas in his mid-thirties, and we crossed over to Kajbar with a small motorboat, called, slightly euphemistic, lānsh. When we reached the house of Fāris, our contact, our serendipitous way of travelling was one of the first issues, followed by banter on the locally produced lime paint. The talk jumped rather suddenly to the issue at hand with the question ‘What do you know about the fires in Kajbar?’ Different to the other interviews, however, this was followed here by a counterquestion and a debate on the nature of research and what it is and should be about:

E – Ego, F – Fāris

F: This question of yours [pause], why is it restricted (muḥtasir) to date palms? I want you to ask about the area with all its problems.
E: Well (ma khalâṣ), research doesn’t work like this, one cannot make research about all the topics, it is necessary to have a focus.
F: Don’t you want the situation of the area, or what do you want?
E: Now, at the moment, in this place, in frame of my research, my question is like I asked you.
F: By God, I respect your question, and I respect your research, but our causes are [pause] enormous, this means, these date palm fires are part (juzu‘i) of the instruments
(ʿāliyyāt) applied against us (musalaṭaʿalayna) so we leave this area, they try to push us out. It is a small part of all the instruments.

*In spite of his objection to a question that doesn’t seem to grasp the relevant big picture, he shortly accepted my approach reach the larger frame through a specific issue but the mutual challenge remained whether to start with descriptive, specific pieces of evidence, or with the conclusion, the belligerent message he would like to get across:*

F: So, if you limit my talking about the date palms, there have been more than 4, 5 large fires that ate more than 20,000 date palms in Kajbar, in these four times.

E: Good, can we speak about them one by one?

F: Of course they were at different times, I don’t remember exactly the date.

E: Ah, okay.

F: So, the last fire was some months ago, the one before was a year ago, the one before was 3, 4 years ago, and the first one was probably by now 6 years. These fires, we are certain that they were caused intentionally (bi-fiʿil fāʿil), commissioned (mukallaf), against payment (madāfūʿal-ʿajr), they commission people so they burn these date palms. And the reason is clear. We are strongly bound (mutmāskin) to our date palms, our primary wealth (ṯarwa). If we lost them, the authorities think we will migrate out of this area. The date palm fires are connected to the emptying (khilāʾ) of the place. And this is of course impossible, it will not happen.

E: Okay, is it known, if we start at this point, is it known what money was paid to whom to start the fire?

F: These are of course things, which are not known, so I cannot tell you this or that person (fulān). I accuse, but I can’t announce him by name, because I have no clear-cut proof that this person did it. But, the clues indicate (al-qarāʿintuʿshīr), the situations [of the fires] give indications that it was intentional, as they had specific timing. They will always be either at sunset, or the time of prayers when everybody is in the mosque, so they exploit times when the area will be empty.

The dynamic resulting from diametrically opposed starting points betrayed different reasoning underlying our participation in this interview. I attempted to collect partial data that, together with others, would be the basis of my analysis, an analysis generally interested in the changing fate of date palms in their co-existence with humans. For Faris, the only relevant frame would be amassing further proof of the political violence threatening their survival in their ancestral homeland. But the mutual attempts to move towards a point of convergence gave a meandering flow to this exchange:

E: Now the fire next to you [i.e. your house]...

F: Yes, all of it down there is burnt.

E: Okay. This, for instance, which hour did it start?
F: [hesitantly speaking] This started exactly on a Friday, and people were on their way to the prayer. [pause] No, it was Thursday, and it was before the midday prayer, people were preparing for the prayer. And they exploited the weather, there was a strong wind, this was the last fire, a big fire, which took about 12 to 13,000 date palms.

E: This was the last one, so some months ago?

F: No, this was two years ago.

E: Do you remember the month?

F: I don’t remember, don’t remember.

E: Or the season?

F: The season, you had in front of you (ʿala wajhak) the harvest, meaning, the dates came close to be mature (yasannū).

E: So about month 7.

F: ʿadamūhu lēna (they made it not there for us).

E: You said the number of burned date palms was how many?

F: This one time? Between 12,000 and 13,000 date palms. But all times together was more than 20,000 date palms.

After his interesting distinction between direct evidence and circumstantial evidence, the specifics of the event do not make it easily into the conversation. Reacting to this reluctance of memory, I conceded now the successive move towards a conclusion and shifted the frame to what Fāris had initially demanded. However, I immediately challenged it by questioning the basis of his narrative, the fundamental economic importance of the date palm:

E: Sorry, as a first step I had to had a picture of how the fire went. After this background, we can enter, as you said, the context to the fires in the area here, meaning, the cause of the fire is connected to other things. What are these, according to you?

F: This is the emptying of the area from people, as the date palms are the essential economy of the people. They think if we lose these date palms, we will get out, we migrate. Because they have the dam project here, and we refuse the dam. So they want to empty the area by any means, one of them are the date palm fires.

E: Okay. Now, when I visited other areas, there was the phenomenon of neglecting the date palms, and this was connected to a decrease of harvest, meaning, there is less harvest. Did this not happen here in the area?

F: It happened, the last year, until now. We don’t have [enough] dates to eat them [ourselves]. For Ramadan, we don’t have them. Our basic income finished. We plant [new palms] from the beginning.

E: Meaning, now before the fire, all work, like pruning (naḍḍāfah), pollination, was continuing, like...
F: The pruning, in the past it was there, but during the last years, the last 15 years, there is absence of pruning, it helped in the fast spread of the fire. But it is not the reason for fire. The reason is intention and command (*mutaʿammid*), and what helped in the implementation was lack of pruning, yes.

At this point, a circular principle had established itself. In place of a direct observation, the direct cause of specific fire events remained elusive. While my reasoning bathed in this elusiveness, he captured the cause by a conviction grown over many years, an underlying pattern of political plans towards forced migration that had been founded with the flooding of settlements during the heightening of the Aswan Dam and confirmed with the building of the Merowe Dam and plans for additional dams at Dal and Kajbar. After a section more broadly on economic activities in the area, Fāris therefore returned to the observation that a limited study could not grasp the core of the issue, while I felt it necessary to defend the confines (and expertise) of doing research, albeit not with much eloquence and coherence:

F: This guy, if his study was broad, in all topics, one could give him talk about what is happening here, but he is fixed (*maḥṣūr*) on ...

E: You can say what you want to say (*kalāmak*). Look, research becomes just small-talk, if one is not focussed in it, one cannot discuss the whole world all the time. F: Right, yes, yes.

E: The topic of date palms is an entry point (*madḥal*), therefore I have to cover the basics about the date palm, but via the date palm, especially since in the past the date palm was essential for the societies here, this changed a little bit and even the way this changed says something about migration, changes in the way people live and so on. Like this the date palm opens many doors. So the other issues you mention will appear, but I cannot say they are [all] the [research] topic, meaning they appear via the date palm. So, what did you want to say?

Another, more detailed outlook on the pattern of political struggles he unfolded led, indeed, to another fundamental issue, namely voluntary migration from the area and how it relates to the political programme he perceived to exist:

F: Well, I say, like I mentioned before, that the fire is one of the instruments to empty the area. This means [pause], the foundation of this area’s problem is that the government tries to bring people to migrate, so they build a dam here. The people refuse. They used force. There are young people who died, they killed them here, in Kidintakkar. They couldn’t get them out by force. They used things to diminish the economy of the area. The date palm fires. The people remained enduring with these things, and protest, with patience, they remained strong. Now they [i.e. the government] came and used the chemical cyanide, the administration of companies for gold extraction, so
people that stay die at home, poisoned. And there is grabbing (nahb) of the area’s resources, the Nubian area, an area full, full of wealth, precious resources, of clean, tasty (naqiyah) surface water, of gold, of natural gas, according to the experts we heard from, who did studies. So the basic purpose (garad) of these date palm fires is emptying the area by damaging the economy.

E: But isn’t it the case that emigration out of the area has a longer history than, for instance, now what happened with the dams? I mean, the migration abroad, emigration (iġtirāb), and so on, started from early on, I don’t know here in Kajbar from when, but I mean...

F: Yes. There is a difference between temporary (mu’aqqata) migration and permanent migration, if you leave your homeland (waṭanak). If they extrude me from here because of the dam, I will not see this area with my eyes again, over (ḥalās), I lost the homeland. But the migration, it was there, to Egypt, one goes to work one, two years, comes again, goes to Beirut, now to the Gulf countries, the emigration (iġtirāb) is there, not the final migration (hijra nihā’iyah). We don’t call it migration (hijra). Our folks (ahalna) in the Old Halfa, they made them migrate by force (hajjarūhum qisran) to Khashim Girba. Until today they suffer (yaʿānū). They brought them in a different environment, they brought them means (mudḥalāt) of, for the life, I mean, [but] the ways of life were different, and here they lived like us, in the same environment, their economy was the date palm, their environment was clean (naqiyah), and Old Halfa was among the most beautiful towns in Africa. The change started with Halfa. And we see this policy (siyāsah) is planned (marsūmah) and organized (munmanhajjah) internationally, not just from the authorities. Because this area, as I told you, is rich, if they don’t get the people out, they will not be able to take this wealth, because all of them steal, they steal, they don’t take it legally (muqannanah), there is no law. Now these factories are working. There is not one kilo gold that enters the state treasury. All directly from here to Abu Dhabi, smuggling. There are markets in Abu Dhabi, in the name of the areas here, and in the name of persons (ashḥāṣ) present here, present in Dubai. So the story of date palm fires is one of the instruments for forced migration of the citizens, emptying (tafrīģ), among them dams, fires, poison factories, cyanide and mercury.
Walk 2: Kajbar, 3 March 2017

Georeference: 19°56'52.9" N 30°32'33.2" E (geo:19.948033,30.542550)

E – Enrico Ille

I had left the house of Fāris and descended with Yāsir and Fāris’s brother Abd al-Ṣamad to the agricultural area between the settlement and the Nile. The interview had left me ponderous and I lagged behind the other two, took photos and reflected on what had been said. The following is a reflection on this reflection, triggered by photos and the memories they elicit.
1. 17:32:00, N19° 56.882’ E30° 32.553’

From the first images, an impression crept up on me that there was something regained and something confirmed here. The blossoming ‘ushar (*Calotropis procera*), for instance, had become for me a symbol of abandoned land, a sign how I had adopted the farmers’ notion of ‘uncultivated’ as ‘uncleaned’, ‘dirty’, a notion that rubbed against the plant’s beauty – or other beautifully arranged blossoms sitting on jumbled branches – but also against the breach of dichotomies – nature/culture, for instance – that I nurtured. The ‘wild’ tomato, growing opportunistically rather than planted next to it, seemed to correspond. And finally, the dry, uncut leaves hanging over the slight signs of burns at the date palm’s trunk behind both gave the arrangement an almost programmatic, pre-arranged character: a result of humans’ ‘negligence’, fuel to the fires.
There was a profound question at hand here: whatever the specific cause of the fires, what was actually lost? As we had dealt with circumstantial arguments, there was interpretative room on both ends of the chain of causality: if there was a political intention behind it, was it in any way ‘useful’ in the sense of the damage it was purported to cause? I was fixed on the issue of numbers already then: the statistical arguments were all about absolute numbers, with date palms as binary unit – damaged/undamaged. But I found date palms in numerous different states, some slightly burnt, some halfly burnt, some burnt along the whole trunk but regrowing their leaves, some carrying new dates already in the season after the fires.

[see next walk for more details on these variations]
3. 17:33:06, N19° 56.873’ E30° 32.537

But not just that, there was a lively though slightly bent landscape here, fresh green sprouting next to the ribbed rods.
4. 17:33:32, N19° 56.869’ E30° 32.531’

New palms had been planted inside walled-off basins that channeled water in their direction.
5. 17:36:36, N19° 56.844’ E30° 32.516’

Others grew stubbornly out of seeds where they had fallen, unconcerned by human intentions of placement and displacement.
Was this co-presence of the intended and the unintended, the deceased and the growing, the arranged and the opportune, was it the mark of a scarred landscape or a natural state or an instance of both in tension?
What meandered through the grass was, after all, an instrument of continuing diversion of water from the Nile to the fields. But Fāris had pointed out that the dams had interrupted a natural rhythm of seasonal flooding by permanent flooding, turning easiness of watering plants into a constant effort of pumping.
8. 17:42:50, N19° 56.777’ E30° 32.443’

And weren’t the empty spaces between the palms – on plantations a sign of proper spacing – here also a reminder of what wasn’t there anymore?
What kind of socializing had thus remained on this coastal strip – where old trunks were still converted into ashes by fire to heat food and water, to make and drink tea.
Overall, my relativism was soothed: there were so many different responses to what had happened, some turning to rebirth and recreation, …
11. 17:50:50, N19° 56.659’ E30° 32.309’

... others leaving the empty holes of uprooted palms like a battlefield *lieu de mémoire*, a desperate reminder where destruction had struck. In a sense, the phases of a phoenix’ life were inscribed here across different spaces.
12. 17:54:24, N19° 56.624’ E30° 32.238’

So traces of disappearance – especially from other forms of destruction, as termite damage here – also implicitly invite to ask what had sustained that which then appeared to have been lost.
13. 18:01:28, N19° 56.529’ E30° 32.121’

And whose presence sustained – or ceased to do so?

Moving away from the heart of the firestorm, the landscape thickens, drawing life and death, the standing and the fallen, ever closer together.
The fire thinned something out, whether fuelling or causing, contradicting or following an ongoing process. In any case, it laid bare a line, or actually the blurriness of a line, between the coastal strip's identity as (ultimately man-co-constructed) forest and its agri-/horticultural function. It can easily be felt how this corresponds to other lines, many of which are existential: the protruding line of the desert, the receding line of the river, the offensive line of resource exploitation. A constriction of the fate of both, the forest and the dweller, becomes conceivable.
Walk 3a: Difoinarti, 4 March 2017

Georeference: 19°56'46.8" N 30°30'01.8"E [geo:19.9462,30.4973]

E – Enrico Ille; A - 'Abd al-Ghanni; Y – Yásir

On 4 March 2017, Yásir accompanied me after Kajbar immediately to Dafoi, a settlement that had shifted from the eponymous island to the mainland. We were hosted by ‘Abd al-Ghanni’s family, and he accompanied us in the morning to the island where a large fire had broken out as well. The co-movement had started thus in the house, continued across the river and between the island’s landing site and the site of the fire.
Starting fire (1)

A: Fire started by itself (qām barāhu). […] The first level (marhala) started here, one palm was ignited (itwalla’) here. […] This was the place around the livestock pen (mahall zaribah), from here it extended. […] Look, […] the built zaribah, the whole floor was full of excrements.

A: Fire started by itself (qām barāhu). […] The first level (marhala) started here, one palm was ignited (itwalla’) here. […] This was the place around the livestock pen (mahall zaribah), from here it extended. […] Look, […] the built zaribah, the whole floor was full of excrements.

E: So, it is still a zaribah?

A: Yes, they made it a zaribah. This is my father’s brother’s house.
Starting fire (2)

The second fire started about 7 a.m., during the eid al-adha prayer, probably due to a cigarette. It started on grass on the mainland and was carried by strong winds to the island.

A: Beginning is over there, not much was burned there. But there was there a big fire in dry grass (‘awīsha), and it immediately came over, burned about 100, 200 m and stopped.

E: Wasn’t this last year, because here there is nothing that was burned?

A: Well, it went immediately at the tree tops, with the dates.

Y: You see the dry leaves (al-jarīd)?

A: Fire spreads there in a strange way (bi-tarīqa ‘ajibah), flying (tā’ir).

Y: Lack of pruning became the main reason for these fires.
Spreading fire

A: This is the wind, it changed. […] It burned here, right? Before this burned, it reached the houses, turned over here, most of the wind went over there. We were standing here, and found it burning over there. The wind kept on changing. We were chopping, and found the fire had gone over there. We went according to the wind (‘ala mu’jib al-hawa). Well, it came from above. By God, [dry] leaves like this, burning, were flying, going a distance, it was like this. We were afraid, we took the children and women from here.

E: Therefore, if you look at something like this, the fire reached the top, but didn’t touch the ground.

A: Or even just reaches the middle [from below], the direction was not clear.
Stopping the fire: cutting trees

A: It reached up to here, we stopped it, chopped these [trees] and stopped it (haṣarnāhā).
A: Our people (awlādnā, ḥamlatnā) were all standing here, in a queue, extinguishing the fire, with water hoses, the engine didn’t work, they brought about 200, 300 containers (ṣafāyah), the people standing in a queue (ṣaff) here, all the way straight to the place I showed you before, at the fire. I take it, give it to Yāsir and so on, and they pour it out over there. Because the engine didn’t work. In this way, the people did it.
Aftermath: landscape of destruction

A: See, these dates [on the ground]. It was a good yield (*balah kān naḍif*). Probably not less than 1000 sacks that got burned. […] 1000 sacks, and the palms, you see, also not less than 1000 palms. Look, this mother, it has one, two, three, four, five, six, seven seedlings. How many will it be? Thousands!
Aftermath: bodily harm

A: 6 or 7 months ago, after the second fire, there was a relative of mine, about 13 years old, she went here and fell in a hole where trunks of a palm group meet, and she got burnt, for four to five months she had to be treated. She had walked around with us. Only recently she became better, maybe 5-6 months we run behind her treatment.
Other losses: erosion

Y: Is this erosion (*haddām*)?
A: Yes, it’s all from erosion, they gave it as compensation (*ta’wīd*). When we were young, we cultivated here, then there was erosion, the island formed (*raqqadat*) and they got it as compensation for this.

Y: Well, many date palms were lost, therefore. A: Many palms fell down, fell into the water.
Other losses: disinterest

E: But here the pollination and the harvest still takes place normally?
A: Yes, yes, the harvest, takes place normally.
E: I just mean, now the people saw with the fires what happens if there is no pruning/cleaning, and so on. Now I don’t see that people immediately started cleaning and so on.
A: They don’t care (mā bihtimmū). They don’t, they can’t, they don’t know these youth of today, cleaning or anything, they don’t care.

This was confirmed later that year during a visit of about 450 youths during the previous holiday who could not be excited for the idea to collectively clean the palms, (pre-walk conversation, 18 September 2017).
Past: productivity

A: It's [long pause], ah yes, island Saab, this is Saab, and this is island Saab. This is the place of production, this island. […] There was a sāqiyyah here, when we were young, the saqiyya of our grandfather was here. […] This was the sāqiyyah here, this was the channel, irrigating all the way up there. Look, how those people were strong, strange strength. The sāqiyyah they made here, I remember, when we were young we came here to ride the sāqiyyah. It went and irrigated like this. The island was very big, by the way, it became now small, look the island there, all cultivate there now, this seasonal agriculture. All of this extended [more] in the past.
Past: strength

A: I show you the strength of our people. This was exactly [19]62, 55 years ago, I am 61 years old, my age was then five or six years, I remember it, our grandfather, the boy we greeted earlier, of [public] transport, we greeted next to the cows, his grandfather al-kabīr, his name was Muḥammad 'Uthmān, was a strong man, he was the owner of this saqiyya, the cattle and saqiyya fell with him, he was riding the sāqiyyah, was guiding them, the cattle and all of it was in the water below him, in the big hole, they were making big holes, and it was high. One saw him, he walked westwards, this man fell with his cattle and with the whole sāqiyyah, called out, all those people came, the people of Kajbar, the people of Fireig, it took maybe a whole or half day, took all these things out, he was half-dead. Our people came, dug a hole, they didn't know doctors (ṭabīb walla diktōr), they dug a tight hole, like the one in a graveyard, three months this guy stayed in this hole. And they lit a fire, a small one (khafīfa), I don't know, they brought some specific herbs, put them, and in this way the man was healed, he became maybe more than 61 years old, he died [19]74, and he was a man living normally, 3 months in a tight hole, fitting his size, and in this way they healed him. [names of herbs not clear, see next question] And in this way they healed this man normally.

E: Do you know which herbs they used?

A: By God, I think what they call talunda and harjal, the dry one, the uncooked, this they put there, and at some places they put fire with garad and these things. And oil, the whole body they made with oil, and put him in this hole. You see the strength of these people and how they healed? And they didn't know a doctor. Now our bodies, if
something like this hit us, we cannot bear it. […] Well, those ate turmus and these things, and dates they didn’t sell. […]

Y: When there was this winter, they said these dates makes one feel warm (yaddāfī’ zōl), after the dinner it is [just] necessary to take one and go to sleep.
Resilience

A: Why will the trees be so clean afterwards? Look, how many leaves it already carries.
E: Because the 'heart' was not burned.
A: The 'heart' didn't burn, right.
Y: You see, it is strange, when I came after a few months, the date palms had brought out new leaves.
A: They are strangely resistant (qawwi 'ajīb).
We left the house in the morning – we had stayed over night, again – Yāsir and I on foot, ‘Abd al-Ghannī on his donkey. We arrived at the river, which first carried ‘Abd al-Ghannī’s voice, as he called for the ‘water taxi’, and then us to the other side.
1. Post-fire landscape

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The perceived confluence of history on this space is immense, from the transition from pre-Christianity to Christianity, from Christianity to Islam, and to the present crises of persistence, represented by Mohammed Jalal Hashim, one of its most vocal defenders.
Back at the landing site we saw a boat leaving with women who had collected tugin fenti, dates that had fallen on the ground and that charitable owners allowed to be collected, mostly, but not exclusively, by women with low income. Their situation had actually been strongly disturbed by the fires as well, but this was an aspect that appeared only in other contexts.