

Gad's Studio

In summer 2005, I went to the French Cultural Centre in Khartoum to watch a film by Gadalla Gubara entitled 'Barakat el Cheikh' (1998). After the film I stuck around to meet the filmmaker who is now in his nineties and blind. He was very happy to talk and his daughter, Sara, joined in the conversation. They invited me to come and visit their studio. Two weeks later, I visited Sara Gubara at her home where she and her husband – a psychiatrist named Bella – told the history of Sudanese cinema. They recounted how the British colonial film unit started a tradition of film caravans – outdoor screenings around the country – in which her father's documentary on agricultural development was featured alongside entertaining features for mass audiences.

Gadalla Gubara began his career as an encryption specialist in the Sudanese military before becoming a photographer and filmmaker. He founded the film department in the Sudanese Ministry of Information before he decided to launch his own studio, the first independent film studio in Sudan. Working also as a freelance journalist, he participated in production of 300 documentaries in these various roles. Bella and Sara explained that there are only eight feature films ever made in the Sudan, including three by the Gubara family.

In 1998, the Sudanese government issued a decree of eminent domain that allowed it to take the land that Gadalla's film studio occupied. According to Sara, the day this information was relayed to Gadalla was the day that he fell blind. For a period of time, the military used his studio as a dormitory. His equipment and film reels were haphazardly stacked in corners, all stored improperly and some destroyed. To this day, Sara is fighting for the family's right to the land taken by the government; a portion of the land, including the studio and its concession, was returned to the family in early 2005. Sara and Bella told me that Gadalla has lived by himself since his wife died; his house is on the other side of Khartoum and he only visits the studio occasionally. The last time he was there, he asked that they clean up the place.

I had just heard from a friend that there was an acting troupe in need of practice and performance space. I suggested to Sara that we make a deal with the acting troupe to help clean up the space and build an outdoor WC in exchange for usage of the space. She asked who was in charge of the troupe and it turned out that she already knew Stephen Ochalla, its founder. Stephen is from southern Sudan while the Gubaras are from Khartoum. During the course of the project (in Summer 2005) the Vice-President from southern Sudan, John Garang, died in a helicopter crash. Khartoum erupted in violence. I worried that the first public performance we had enjoyed in the concession behind the studio would be the last. It took some time for all the diverse members of the troupe to put the events of that summer behind them. However, just before my time in Sudan ended in early Fall, there was a second performance in the lot behind Gad's Studio (at which Sara and Gadalla are pictured dancing). It was this example of how community arts space can be used to bridge ideas and emotions that give me hope for northern and southern Sudan's Peace Accord, a 6-year process that seeks to end over 20-year civil war.