A Life Shaped by the Sea: Maritime Heritage in Suakin

Shadia Taha

1 Introduction

Until recently, historical and archaeological enquiry of maritime cultural landscapes – that is, of coastal settlements, networks, interactions and communication of cultures – have been understudied. In order to examine the culture of maritime people, maritime archaeologists need to explore the cultural landscapes and seascapes, including the ports, harbours, shipyards and all aspects of maritime features. There is now, in the early twenty-first century, a growing body of research concerning the maritime cultural landscapes, including those of the Red Sea region. In Sudan, however, the tangible and intangible heritage related to the sea is relatively under researched. It is important to enhance our


understanding of Sudanese maritime heritage and the continued existence of maritime traditions and practices. It is more urgent to give consideration to values that relate to the attachments, traditional practices and wealth of knowledge and skills that are transmitted through the generations. Traditional practices provide communities with a sense of identity, belonging, history and continuity. They rely on the transmission of skills and practices that have been gained over a long time. These processes are central to the continuation of skills and heritage that are used, lived and experienced (and necessary) in a globalised world. This includes gaining an insight into the maritime histories and experiences, and particularly gaining a greater appreciation of maritime culture, including the seafaring traditions, folklore, rituals, practices and traditional knowledge of maritime aspects, including environmental knowledge.

In this case study, I explore the relationship of a particular community, the Suakinese, with the sea. Using ethnographic research, the study seeks to examine the present-day maritime community, their seafaring history and their understanding of heritage, which incorporates traditional practices and transmits ideas, beliefs, values and emotions. Through this, the study reveals the wealth of knowledge and the manifestations of maritime traits in present-day Suakin. The significance of traditions, rituals, ceremonies, skills and practices highlighted, as is that of mundane expressions and social values. In addition, attention is drawn to the dynamic relationship between people and their environment. Contemporary community uses of heritage in terms of Suakinese relationships with the sea are also explored. Specifically, this study investigates maritime heritage as a relationship with past and present maritime beliefs and practices and demonstrates the richness and resilience of traditional knowledge of the community.

2 Case Study Overview: Suakin in Context

The Red Sea and the ports along its coast have played a major role in the history of navigation, communications and trade between the Mediterranean Sea and the Gulf of Aden. Moreover, the Red Sea been a historical bridge between Africa, Arabia, Asia and Europe, encouraging trade, as well as social