EXHIBITING CULTURES OF CONTACT:
A Museum for Benishangul-Gumuz, Ethiopia

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ABSTRACT

A group of archaeologists from the Complutense University of Madrid has been carrying out archaeological and ethnoarchaeological research in the autonomous region of Benishangul-Gumuz, in western Ethiopia since 2001. Since 2005, the project includes the cooperation with the local authorities in the creation of a regional museum. However, this is not at all an easy task: Benishangul-Gumuz is a region traditionally occupied by a complex mosaic of different Nilo-Saharan cultures, which have suffered for centuries the encroachment of the Abyssinian and Sudanese states. The Nilo-Saharan populations have been dispossessed of their lands and enslaved by Sudanese slave traders and Ethiopian Highlanders. With the creation of the Federal Republic of Ethiopia in 1991, the former slaves have been granted power: they have regained autonomy and they are eager to rewrite the history of the region. As part of the reinforcement of their new political identity, they have planned to build an ethnographic and archaeological museum in the near future. But, which is the narrative to be displayed there? Some of the former dominated cultures helped to enslave people from neighbouring communities; other groups, previously belonging to the politically dominant population, are now completely disempowered and will not be represented in the museum, because they are considered foreigners. Archaeology, oral history and material culture, on the other hand, proves the scant time-depth of the occupation of some "real" indigenous populations. As European archaeologists, our presence is neither free from—maybe surprising—political implications. The situation, thus, is highly controversial and it is surrounded with political difficulties. Yet this is an ideal place to reflect on the intersection between archaeology, material culture, ethnicity, identity and politics in a complex post-colonial world.

INTRODUCTION

In this paper, we would like to describe some of our post-colonial dilemmas in relation to the construction of a local museum in the region of Benishangul-Gumuz in western Ethiopia. Rather than propose solutions—that we hardly have at this moment, we will show the problems that we face in this particular context.

It is increasingly obvious that Third World nations are not only concerned with their economic and technological development. African, Latin American and Asian countries are more and more interested in preserving and enhancing their symbolic capital in the form of cultural heritage, both as an essential means of nation-building and as a way of facing the West on equal terms (Diagne 2000, 87). The aggressive, destructive and humiliating behavior of Europe towards Africa since the late 15th century has, on the one hand, actively contributed to the present chasm of poverty and war (Rodney 1981) and, on the other, it has deprived Africans of their history. European philosophers, historians and art historians, such as Hegel, Trevor-Roper or Gombrich, to mention but a few, have utterly dismissed African history and culture, which are conceived as the shallow and dark reverse of Western achievements. Africa is the land of the ethnographer: there is surface, not depth. The Other does not change and is fossilized in another time (Fabian 1983).

Until recently, then, only those "civilizations" that could be compared to Euro-Asiatic developments were deemed worthy of attention (Connah 2001). This usually meant—and for many still mean—societies that have been in contact with "core civilizations", such as the Swahili in the Eastern African coast, strongly influenced by Arabian merchants (Horton 2000), or those that have developed powerful state polities, such as the Meroitic kingdom in Sudan (Török 1997). In any case, those cultures that are considered worth studying are those that have produced large monuments and have historically suffered dramatic changes. Many Africans now feel that the West has not only a political and economic debt with the continent, but also a symbolic (or cultural) one. They want their history back, all their history, not just the one that Westerners find remarkable—"great civilizations" or the origins of humankind. This implies restoring cultural heritage to their moral owners but also rewriting history together under a new, post-colonial light.

The way to a post-colonial, ethically-conscious history and archaeology, which collaborates with Africans in the restoration of their past and their historical agency, may seem deceivingly straightforward. We only have to work with local communities for recovering their voices and listen to their way of telling things, instead of imposing a Western scholarly view. After that, we ought to inscribe the subaltern as the main character in African history and depict Europeans as evil (which they were), though not

Fig 1

as powerful and secure as colonial historians wanted (Bhabha 1994), thus enabling resistance and local creativity. As many post-colonial thinkers, historians and archaeologists have found out, however, both in Africa and in the West, things are not so easy.

Firstly, we have the problem of how to recover subaltern voices. Spivak's (1988) pessimistic insight is well known and very pertinent in the African case. Here we do not only have to face the problem of overwhelmingly Eurocentric and androcentric stories, like in India and everywhere else, but also the fact that the native history is fundamentally based on ephemeral oral sources.

Secondly, modern Western scholars are not pure beings untouched by the filth of colonialism, irrespective of the hatred and shame that it may awaken in them. We—the authors of this paper—are Europeans and our mere presence in Africa is always entangled in a series of ambiguous political meanings and conflicting moral values. Our research is also shadowed by an original sin, perpetuated in a current situation of injustice and domination. Acknowledging this unbridgeable asymmetry between foreign researchers and local hosts is essential in any cooperative work, be it related to heritage or any other field.

Thirdly, post-colonial nations are very complex realities. Recovering multiple voices (multiple ethnic voices usually) is a practice fraught with difficulties and privileging one voice or another, no matter how sound and ethically correct our intentions are, can turn out to have very sinister outcomes. It suffices to remember Rwanda and the blind support of a subaltern majority called the Hutus by certain Europeans (Gourevitch 1999, 64-70).

A team from the University of Madrid, sponsored by the Spanish Ministry of Culture, has been working in the region of Benishangul-Gumuz since 2001. We have conducted several archaeological surveys and excavations, we have gathered a certain amount of ethnographic data and we have been able to elaborate a culture-historical framework for the area (Fernández 2004; González-Ruibal 2006a). Our intention now is to contribute to the construction of a local museum, which will be located in the town of Asosa, the regional capital. Our collaboration will include the gathering of ethnographic and archaeological materials to be displayed in the museum, the elaboration of a digital catalogue of the collections and the setting up of a store, a library, a laboratory and a permanent exhibition.

In 2004 a project for the regional museum was finished by the local authorities (FIGURE 1). The plot of land where the museum will stand has now been acquired by the regional government; the budget for the building (around US$ 350,000) has already been calculated (although not obtained), and a model has been prepared. The

Fig 2

idea is to show ethnographic, historical and archaeological collections that portray the cultural diversity of the area, as well as its historical vicissitudes. With regard to the historical materials, they include the belongings of important local sheikhs of the late 19th and early 20th century. All archaeological remains will come from our surveys and excavations, since there has been no previous archaeological work in Benishangul-Gumuz. Ethnographic artifacts will be the bulk of the exhibition, given the enormous richness of the region: the museum will display pottery, gourds, adornments, agricultural implements, musical instruments and other artifacts belonging to the five official ethnic groups of Benishangul-Gumuz: Bertha, Gumuz, Komo, Mao and Shinasha. Some of the artifacts have already been collected by the staff of the Ministry of Culture and are now in storage (FIGURE 2). The exhibition will be complemented with photographs, information signage and documents.

FEDERALISM AND HERITAGE IN ETHIOPIA

Fig 3

Why does a predominantly rural region and an off-the-beaten-track capital want to build a museum in the first place? The creation of regional museums and cultural institutions in Ethiopia is being fostered by the federal policies of the present government. After the fall of the communist regime in 1991 Ethiopia has been reorganized as a federal republic, thus putting an end to several centuries of real or theoretical centralism (Young 1996; Marcus 2001). Autonomous regions are now endowed with significant power, including—at least in theory—the right to secession. This has led to a reaffirmation of those local ethnic identities that had been traditionally subdued by the central state, represented by the Amhara and Tigrean ethnic groups of northern Ethiopia.

Some historical monuments, such as the Axumite stelae in Tigray (AD 4th c.), the royal palaces of Gondar (AD 17th-18th c.) or the medieval churches of Lalibela (AD 13th-14th c.), all in northern Ethiopia (FIGURE 3), are still presented as essential landmarks in Ethiopia's history as a unified, proudly independent and long-lived nation (the "Ethiopia of the 3,000 years" that nationalists advocate), and they are the object of most tourist advertising undertaken by the central government (FIGURE 4). The practice of nation-building by means of specific local elements was very characteristic of many African nations in the 1960s and 1970s and it has not yet disappeared. As Cooper (2002, 89) says "this entailed a blending of symbols that were not national at all

Fig 4

and separating them from their local logic, to dilute the power embodied in forms of dress or music or art that were 'Igbo' or 'Kongo' into something that could be considered 'Nigerian' or 'Zairois'". The great celebrations and extensive media coverage that accompanied the recent return to Ethiopia of an Axumite obelisk stolen by Mussolini is good proof of this kind of centripetal nationalist practices—the same, by the way, that have been taking place in Europe since the 18th century (FIGURE 5).

Nevertheless, the monumental heritage only appeals to a small percentage of Ethiopians, the northern Highlanders and the educated urban elites (irrespective of their ethnic origins); other major groups, such as the Oromo, that number around 30 million people, feel completely alienated from this past that is not theirs (Asafa Jalata 1998). Their kingdoms and chiefdoms were mostly conquered by the Ethiopian state in the 19th century (Bahru Zewde 2002, 60-72). The incorporation of other areas of Ethiopia, such as Benishangul-Gumuz, only became effective during the early 20th century. They all lie outside the national historical routes and the tourist landmarks considered by the central authorities.

Fig 5

Thus, not only the central state and the old rulers, but also the regional governments have now understood the relevance of culture and history for revaluing local identities. Local languages are taught in the school with Amharic—the official language of Ethiopia; local issues are being introduced in primary and secondary school syllabi; there are radio and television spaces for each of the major languages spoken in the country, and programs showing different local customs and music are regularly broadcasted. There is a renewed interest in local history and culture, a fact which is especially clear among the Oromo, who have set out to rewrite their history challenging the centripetal state accounts (Mohammed Hassen 1994; Asafa Jalata 1996). As Negaso Gidada (2001, xi), an Oromo historian and former President of Ethiopia, notes "the writing of a history of a people can be an important contribution to its liberation and emancipation". In this case, however, the emancipation is not from a European power, as it is usually the case, but from an African one. The new pluralism is unleashing an array of repressed memories and competing visions of the past and is questioning the "centralized archive of memory", that characterized the hegemonic idea of nation for centuries (Triulzi 2001). The setting up of a museum in Asosa is part of these trends of more respect and sensitivity toward local groups.

Fig 6

WRITING THE HISTORY OF BENISHANGUL-GUMUZ

Benishangul-Gumuz is a vast region (50,000 sq. km) in the western frontier of Ethiopia (FIGURE 6). As other frontier regions (see Andrew Gardner this volume), this is a fluid zone of contact and interaction—both peaceful and violent—between different groups and large cultural traditions. Most of the territory, which is crossed by the Blue Nile, is an unhealthy and warm lowland, called the Corridor of Death by anthropologist Evans-Pritchard (1970). This fact, as well as its seclusion from the central Abyssinian state, has turned the area into a refuge for different groups of Nilo-Saharan populations escaping from the encroachment of the Sudanese and Abyssinian kingdoms and their slave raids. As a cul-de-sac and frontier area, Benishangul hosts all kinds of cultures, including half a dozen Nilo-Saharan groups (Berta or Bertha, Gumuz, Mao, Kwama, Gwama, Shita, etc.), once called "pre-Nilotes", by their so-called archaic cultural features as compared to other Nilotic groups (Grottanelli 1948). In addition, there are Semitic Amhara, Cushitic Oromo and Agaw, and Omotic Shinasha. These latter groups originally inhabited the Ethiopian Highlands and were alien to Benishangul-Gumuz until recently. They have been slowly encroaching on the area, some groups as early as the mid-18th century, such as the Oromo (Negaso Gidada 2001).

Unlike the Nilo-Saharans, the people from the Highlands do have a long tradition of written records, starting during the 1st millennium BC. Therefore, most of our knowledge about the history of the indigenous communities of the borderland comes from their slavers, the Ethiopian Highlanders (Pankhurst 1977; Abdussamad Ahmad 1999). Only during the last three decades have some authors started to explore the recent history of the native inhabitants of Benishangul-Gumuz, although never venturing beyond the late 18th century (e.g. Triulzi 1981; James 1988; Abdussamad Ahmad 1999, 2001).

As archaeologists, we are in a privileged position to explore the deeper past. Our research has contributed to shed light on the long term history of Benishangul-Gumuz, and archaeology and modern material culture studies have been quite successfully interwoven with oral history and traditions (Fernández 2004). With the data that we have been able to gather since 2001, we have provisionally defined two different cultural traditions in the area, that we will call Komuz and Bertha.

The Komuz tradition (FIGURE 7) is characterized by archaeological sites that date to the late 1st millennium BC or early 1st millennium AD. The modern descendants of this archaeological tradition are the Koman (Kwama, Komo, Mao) and Gumuz-speaking groups, once called Komuz by philologists (Bender 1994; 2000, 46)

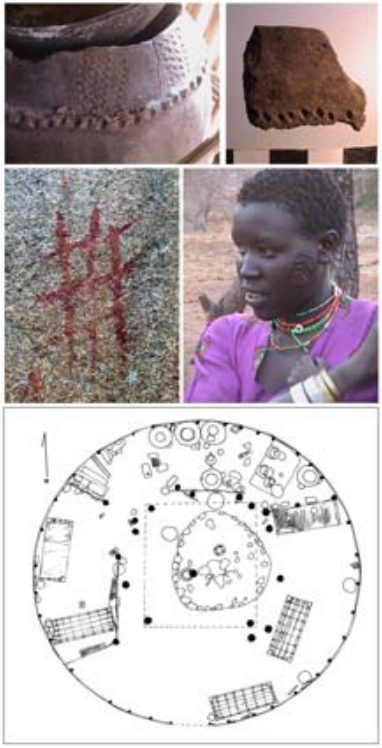

Fig 7

due to their linguistic affinities (now two different groups are recognized). The pottery from Komuz sites bears important resemblances with that of the modern Kwama, Nilotic Mao and Gumuz (thus the label chosen), as well as with other Nilotic traditions of the 1st and early 2nd millennium AD (Lynch and Robbins 1979; Joussaume 1995, figs 101, 311-12). Archaeological sites usually lie in flat, cultivable land, in open valleys. Related to this cultural tradition are some painted rock-shelters, whose geometric motives (ladder-shaped, squares, segmented rectangles) are redolent of the Komuz groups' modern scarifications (Fernández and Fraguas in press). Finally, a style of domestic architecture characterized by large open round huts has been identified, that is shared by all Komuz groups (González-Ruibal 2006a).

With regard to the Bertha tradition (FIGURE 8), the modern Bertha belong to a specific linguistic family to which no other language in the region relates. They currently produce a very particular kind of pottery (González-Ruibal 2005, 46-47), which also appears on the surface of recent archaeological sites (AD 18th-19th c.), but never in stratified contexts. This pottery shows interesting connections with the neighboring Sudanese pottery, both from prehistoric (Neolithic) and historic times (Meroitic, Funj) (Addison 1949-51; Fernández 1985, 1222, 1231-32, etc.; Welsby 2003). The Bertha have no memory of having painted rock shelters (Fernández and Fraguas in press) and their scarifications are three simple straight lines in each cheek, very different to motifs depicted in rock paintings. As opposed to the Komuz tradition, Bertha archaeological sites are dated to ca. 17th to 20th century and tend to appear in mountains, hills and rocky outcrops, with good defensive conditions. After the mid-20th century, the settlements located in elevations were abandoned for lowland locations, due to the end of internecine hostilities and slave raids.

The panorama that has been briefly adumbrated fits remarkably well with local beliefs. The Bertha claim to have originally lived in Sudan, where they played a role in the Funj Sultanate (Triulzi 1981). The Funj Sultanate was the most important state organization in the Sudan between 1500 and 1800 (Crawford 1951). According to various Ethiopian and Sudanese written sources, they seemingly arrived to what is now western Ethiopia some time around the late 17th c. AD (Triulzi 1981, 25) and they displaced other ethnic groups in the region, that the Bertha themselves identify with the Komo and Mao, both belonging to the Koman group of the linguists (Triulzi 1981, 23). Due to tensions that arose among the newcomers regarding the distribution of land, war among the different clans broke out and the Bertha decided to establish their

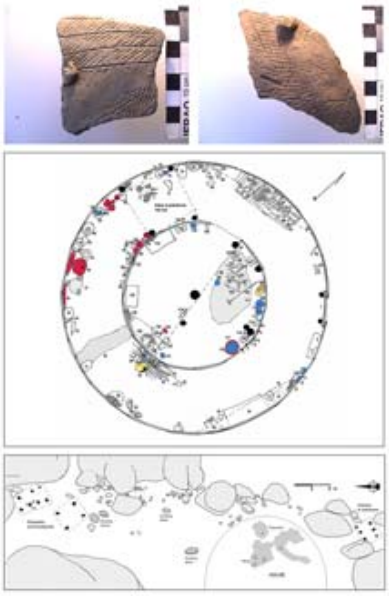

Fig 8

villages in high places—but also due to slave raids conducted by Sudanese "Arabs". With regard to the Gumuz, we know that they lived in the same region they occupy today, north of the Blue Nile, since the Middle Ages, thanks to the documents and chronicles of the Abyssinian state, as well as their own memory. We know that the so-called "Shankilla" from Metekel (the area to the north of the Nile) were already paying taxes to the king Yeshaq in the 14th century (Huntingford 1989, 93) and their customs were depicted in the 18th century by the Scottish explorer James Bruce (Pankhurst 2001, 363-66). Their presence south of the Nile, however, is probably not prior to the 19th century, according to oral data gathered by James (1980).

In relation to history after 1800, the Berthas have been the dominant ethnic group in the region. They established three main chiefdoms and were deeply influenced by Muslim and Sudanese customs (Triulzi 1981). The negotiation of some of these foreign elements was key for some people to achieve power in otherwise egalitarian communities. All the Nilo-Saharan groups suffered from slave raids until the 1940s. However, some Berthas and a few Gumuz profited from the situation enslaving both other Nilo-Saharans and their own kinsfolk. Benishangul-Gumuz was finally incorporated to the Ethiopian state officially in 1897, with the collaboration, in the case of Benishangul, of one of the Bertha sheikhs (Khoyele al-Hassan). Finally, In the late 1970s and 1980s many people coming from the famine-beaten areas of Ethiopia were resettled in Benishangul-Gumuz by the communist government that ruled the country at the time. This has added more problems to an area already characterized by complex inter-ethnic relations.

EXHIBITING CULTURES OF CONTACT IN BENISHANGUL-GUMUZ: POST-COLONIAL DILEMMAS

How should this long and complex multi-ethnic history be represented in a museum? The local authorities of Benishangul, now predominantly Bertha and to a lesser extent Gumuz, have their own ideas about it. Our own problems as scholars have to do with concepts of ethnicity, power, history and ethnography.

Ethnicity

First of all, the local authorities want to organize the museum along ethnic lines, something that may seem paradoxical, given the discredit of the concept of ethnic group (and the sibling "tribe") in recent anthropology, due in large part to its negative colonial implications. It is generally considered that ethnic groups, as described by

ethnographers, are basically a by-product of colonial administration. In this particular region, as James (1979, 7-8) has pointed out, the ethnic groups themselves usually do not recognize the labels imposed by anthropologists, colonial administrators and other foreigners: '"The Gumuz" do not call themselves "Gumuz", "The Koma" do not call themselves "Koma", "The Ingessana" do not call themselves "Ingessana", and "The Uduk" do not call themselves "Uduk"'. Nonetheless, the regional government of Benishangul-Gumuz wants to showcase the five official groups that inhabit the region today: Bertha, Gumuz, Mao, Komo and Shinasha, which comprise about two thirds of the current population. Other major ethnic groups, such as the Amhara (numbering around 100,000 people) and the Oromo (around 60,000) will not be represented at all, due to their later arrival to the area and their dominant role over the other groups in the recent past. The concept of ethnic group in Benishangul, as elsewhere in Africa, is controversial, complex and mutable (Jedrej 2004).

In what follows, we will describe the elusive ethnic characterization of four groups in Benishangul-Gumuz.

Mao and Komo

Fig 9

Mao and Komo are two minor Nilo-Saharan societies (around 6,000 individuals). Mao is an external denomination historically used by the expanding Oromo to identify those groups they entered into contact with and with whom they maintained relations—mainly trade (James 1980; Negaso Gidada 2001, 78-84). Therefore, under the same label we have very different groups, speaking mutually unintelligible languages (belonging to the Omotic and Nilotic families respectively). We can distinguish at least three groups of Mao: the Southern Mao (Grottanelli 1940), the Begi Mao and the Bambasi Mao. The Southern Mao and the Bambasi Mao speak Omotic languages, whereas the Begi Mao are related to the Nilo-Saharan Kwama. For the deeply "Oromized" Begi Mao, the ethnic name today has pejorative connotations (such as rude, wild, savage). When Mao children are naughty and misbehave, for example, their parents say "you look like a Mao".[1] The culture of the Begi Mao now mimics that of their Oromo invaders (FIGURE 9). On the contrary, those living around the town of Bambasi are reluctant to be incorporated to the dominant Oromo culture and maintain many of their traditional customs, even if they

[1] Information gathered in Tongo in 2003. The informants were administrative staff at the local administration.

cohabit with Oromos in the same villages (FIGURE 10). Finally, there is a third group, located far away to the south, also called Mao (Grottanelli 1940), which has particular institutions (including traditional paramount chiefs absent in the north), strongly influenced by the Oromo.

Among the Mao, then, we could distinguish not only two large linguistic groups, but also three different identities, ranging between mimicry and resistance. From the point of view of material culture, it seems that they use a heterogeneous assemblage of items from other groups, which makes it very difficult to define a single Mao material culture (FIGURE 11). This is consistent with the hybrid character of the groups, but it poses serious problems in simple museographic terms. Could this extremely complex situation be displayed in a single showcase in a museum? Are we not accepting a colonial category (though African), if we use the problematic umbrella concept "Mao"? Are not we betraying and dangerously simplifying a multiplicity of culture contacts with very diverse political implications?

Fig 10

With regard to the Komo they are really two groups if not more, which do not call themselves Komo, but Kwama and Gwama, and speak different languages. At least in the case of the Kwama there is a peculiar material culture that could be associated with them (González-Ruibal 2005, 45-6, fig 2), although we are still not sure if it is Kwama or Gwama! (FIGURE 12). The Shita, living further south, are probably also part of the Komo group. Linguists are still not very sure about the classification of these communities (Siebert et al. 2002; Andreas Neudorf pers. comm. June 2005). The Komo or Koma, on the other hand, are a fourth related group living in Sudan (Theis 1995). Should we display three different cultures in the museum, then?

Fig 11

The historical vicissitudes of the area have propitiated the ethnic fragmentation, the assimilation of some groups by others and the mixing up of different communities who have come into contact through time. The creation of an administrative region for those minor groups identified as Mao and Komo is now leading to the creation of a new entity that comprises all of them under the label Mao-Komo, and they will probably

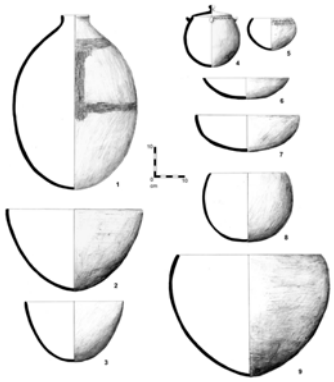

Fig 12

resort more and more to this invented identity to defend their interests as a minority. The musealization of these two groups, without previous in-depth study of their cultural variability and identities, will certainly contribute to their artificial entification.

Bertha and Gumuz

Fig 13

Even those cultures that apparently present less problems, such as the predominant Bertha and Gumuz, are not free from trouble. The Bertha are distributed in several sub-groups—former sheikhdoms, such as Asosa, Fadasi/Bambasi, Komosha and Kurmuk (Triulzi 1981). Those among them that have lighter skin and are more devout Muslims despise other communities: they call themselves Mayu or Bani Ummaya, "from the alleged descent line claimed by the Funj to prove their Arab origin" (Triulzi 1981, 188) and use the term Bertha as a pejorative label for the rest (FIGURE 13 and 14), to whom they also refer as "Blacks" (Andreas Neudorf, pers. comm. June 2005)—a similar situation, as we have seen, occurs with the Mao of Tongo. The Bertha speak different dialects, mutually understandable, and some elements of their material culture—especially architecture—varies regionally (González-Ruibal 2006a). Thus, Bertha houses from the interior are more similar to Komuz houses (Gumuz, Mao and Komo) than to Bertha houses from the Sudanese borderland (FIGURE 15).

Fig 14

Finally, the Gumuz speak several different dialects (Bender 1979), identify themselves with different ethnic names (Ganza, S'es'e, etc.), and are organized as clans which have conducted feuds traditionally—even today inter-clan relations are far from peaceful. Some Gumuz in the Kamashi area (south of the Blue Nile) have been profoundly affected by the encroachment of the Oromo, and their culture now shows many features adopted from this group. Unlike the Bertha, who are massively Islamic (despite the greater or lesser degree of traditional practices among them), the Gumuz are divided in their religious beliefs. Most of them practice traditional religions (Wolde-Selassie Abbute 2005, 72-76). Some are Muslim and a few Christian worshippers, although their beliefs are deeply rooted in traditional practices. Muslims cluster around the Sudanese frontier and Christians (Orthodox, Protestants and

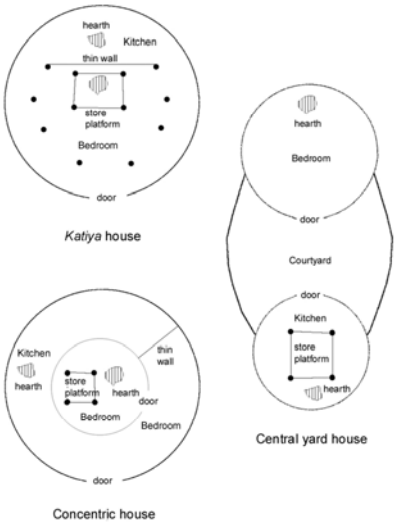

Fig 15

Catholics) live in the south and east. The adoption of Islam and Orthodox Christianity is the result of contact with neighboring Sudanese and Highland Amharas. To a certain degree, as we have been able to find out, conversion plays a strategic role, allowing individuals to acquire a higher status in the local society.

Religion poses important problems with regard to the musealization of ethnic identity. Both Bertha and Muslim Gumuz, but especially the Bertha, are reluctant to publicize their traditional pre-Islamic customs. This includes something as inherent and relevant to their cultures as the consumption of beer and its rich material culture. An exhibition on the Bertha without their big beer pots (awar), bamboo sievers (thasa) and calabashes (agu) would be a misrepresentation of their culture (FIGURE 16). But considering the fabrication and consumption of beer as pivotal to Bertha community life will probably enrage many strongly Muslim Berthas, particularly the Mayu sub-group. Meaningfully, the Bertha authorities (that mainly belong to the Mayu tribe) prefer to use the coffee jar (jebena) and the water jar (al-brik) as material symbols of their identity (FIGURE 17)—symbols that associate them to their neighboring Islamic Sudan (González-Ruibal 2005, 62). For those Bertha that live far from the frontier, Islam and the Sudan are less relevant references for their identity, unlike the brewing and sharing of local beer.

Fig 16

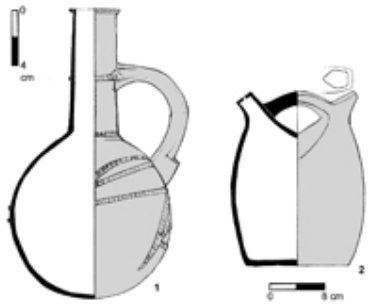

Fig 17

The problem with material culture and ethnic identity is manifold: while some artifacts can be deemed specifically Gumuz or Bertha, others are much less clearly so. For example, the sharakarak, a traditional wooden jar used for preparing coffee among the Bertha, was adopted from the Oromo, although today it is an essential part of the Bertha culture (FIGURE 18). The Bertha have adopted other foreign artifacts, such as large ceramic plates (met'ad) from the Amhara in some areas, or wooden mortars (moñe) from the Oromo. A similar case in point is that of the Gumuz, who use a wide variety of artifacts adopted from the Amhara, Agaw, Sinasha and Sudanese. The opposite case is equally common: the Agaw that live among the Gumuz, for example, use a large amount of pots, baskets and tools acquired

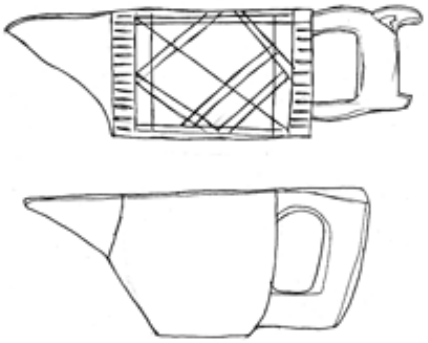

Fig 18

to their Gumuz neighbors. By displaying in the museum only those artifacts that can be considered particular to a certain culture, we would offer a very biased image of the daily experience of that group. The problem of ethnicity, then, collides with the politics of authenticity.

Ethnic Hiararchies

From a post-colonial point of view, the museum should be a space where the concept of ethnic group, ethnic identity and its material correlates should be problematized, rather than readily accepted and displayed. But what happens when the people themselves want to use a traditional concept of ethnic group? Furthermore, what happens when this concept has become necessary for the local population to define themselves and to defend their culture (Meskell 2005)? We can—and we should—accept the concept of ethnic group. After all, we may say that what it is actually happening is an appropriation and renegotiation of a colonial category, which is ultimately subverted. Instead of being used to control the natives, ethnic categories are used as a means to empower them, to grant them political visibility not only at the local level, but at the federal one as well. Ethnic identification is fundamental in claiming political and territorial rights. Although not exactly the same, the case of the native Latin-Americans that have decided to call themselves indios as a symbol in their struggle for emancipation or the Kanaks, who have reshaped the old colonial term Canaque come to mind (Clifford 2001). This is a good example of "the gaze of the discriminated back upon the eye of power", as Bhabha (1994, 112) would put it. But then different ethnic groups are not politically the same: there are important issues regarding asymmetries between ethnic groups, as we have seen. Also, there is a problem with the idea of which ethnic groups should be represented; again, this is an issue of authenticity (and power): who is the authentic aboriginal (Clifford 2001)?

By giving to much power (both real and symbolic) to the once enslaved, we may be replacing one form of tyranny with another, a reason why cultural identity cannot be scripted too tightly—as Lynn Meskell (2005, 77) has pointed out. Different authors have suggested that "the names of ethnic groups [in the Sudan-Ethiopia borderland] are less likely to indicate different ways of life and more likely to mark positions in a ranking of status and prestige (…). So Ja'alayin, Watawit, Jabalawiin, Funj, Hamaj, Berta, and Burun come to represent points on scales between urban and rural, Muslim and pagan, superior and inferior, and master and slave…" (Jedrej 2004, 720). Thus, at the end of the day, it is all a matter of power. The traditional ethnic hierarchy of the region could be described as follows: historically the most oppressed and disempowered groups are those labelled Mao and Komo. Some groups related to

this ethnic cluster were probably wiped out by slave raids in the late 19th century and nowadays only their ethnic names and some dispersed and confusing data are preserved in the literature (Negaso Gidada 2001, 61-91). The Mao and Komo were continually expelled from their lands and today they inhabit the most inhospitable and marginal frontier areas of Benishangul. They were the prey of neighboring groups, namely the Bertha and Oromo. The Gumuz have also been traditionally dispossessed of their lands and chased by other groups, mainly Amharas, Agaw and Shinasha, since the Middle Ages (Wolde-Selassie Abbute 2005). Unlike the Mao and Komo, however, they have posed more fierce resistance and they have been able to preserve large tracts of land and a strong cultural identity. Finally among the Nilo-Saharans, the Bertha have been both victims and tyrants. Among the Nilo-Saharan groups of Sudan, such as the Uduk, they are infamous for their slave raids and attacks. They are equated to other aggressive groups: the "Arabs" (Baggara, Shukriyya) and the Nilotes (Nuer and Dinka). Nevertheless, some of the enslaved groups, such as the Ingessana, admit a cultural bond to the Bertha (Jedrej 1995, 3) and most Berthas have also been victims of enslavement, whether from Sudanese slave merchants or by their own half-caste leaders—once called Watawit, because, like the bats (watwat), they are hybrid beings. As a matter of fact, the Bertha were known as *abid*, "slaves" by the Sudanese Arabs (McHugh 1995, 173).

Among the invaders and traditional oppressors we find the Amhara and the Oromo. The latter do not have an old tradition of statehood, as the Amharas have, and their approach to the groups they contacted has been based on politics of integration, rather than ruthless oppression (Negaso Gidada 2001; Endalew 2002). In turn, they have been conquered by the Amharas and incorporated to the Greater Ethiopia, a process that came to its end by the late 19th century.

This pyramid has been partially subverted after the fall of the communist regime in 1991. The reality now is that some traditional dominants, such as the Amhara, are now in a political inferior position, with regard to the former slaves, especially the Bertha and Gumuz. Thus, the Amhara and Oromo do not have political representation at the local government and their claims cannot be heard. In consequence, a liberating narrative that settle scores with the past may be contributing to a situation of inequality and ethnic exclusivism in the present. How can we find a narrative that accounts for the injustices of the past without endorsing new unfair politics in the present?

Fig 19

Power and the (Real) Subalterns' Voice

Although largely egalitarian, the border communities of Ethiopia did not lack powerful individuals that, in some cases, tyrannized their own subjects. Local authorities, for example, are eager to display the artifacts that once belonged to the mighty Sheikh Khoyele and his large family, including portraits, documents, garments and thrones (FIGURE 19). As we have said, Sheikh Khoyele is, at best, an ambiguous character. He collaborated with the Ethiopian state in the annexation of Benishangul in 1897 (Bahru Zewde 2002, 66, 68); he fought against other Bertha sheikhs; he enslaved "pagan" Berthas, Mao, Komo and other Nilo-Saharan communities in Sudan, such as the Uduk and Ingessana; he offered Benishangul to be colonized by Britain (Bahru Zewde 2002, 68), and with the revenues of the slave trade he built himself a palace in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia's capital (Triulzi 1981, fig 12).

By enhancing the image of Sheikh Khoyele, we may be offering a counterpart from the margin to the well-remembered heroes of the central state (including other dubious characters, such as the kings Tewodros, Menelik or Haile Selassie), but we can hardly consider Sheikh Khoyele to be among the subaltern. If we want to hear other voices, we should perhaps try to recover those of the people Khoyele enslaved. As is usual with subaltern voices, whereas we have many documents about the slave merchant, we have few, if any, from the slaves. A similar problem arises with the Gumuz counterpart of Khoyele, the Sheikh of Gubba, Hamdan Abu Shok. As Abderrahman Khoyele, he conducted slave raids and collaborated with different state authorities to strengthen his power (Garretson 1980; Abdussamad Ahmad 1999). The remains of their palaces (Abu Shok's and Khoyele's) are among the very few historical monuments visible in Benishangul today, which poses important question with regard to their musealization. For the Mao, Komo, Uduk or Ingessana, an uncritical display of Khoyele's memorabilia, would be the equivalent of legitimating ethnic aggression in the past.

Post-colonial museums all over Africa face similar problems related to personal power. Many of them revolve around noble families, chiefs and kings, and some are located in the premises once occupied by local rulers—that usually enjoyed the approval of the colonial authorities (Sylla 2000; Sheriff 2000, 160; Ahonon 2000, 165). The situation is especially thorny when it comes to kings that conquered other kingdoms and enslaved their people. The Musée Historique d'Abomey, for example, housed in the former Danxome royal palace, witnesses all kind of reactions from the public: some visitors belonging to the royal family reacted violently sometimes and rejected what is shown—a critical evaluation of their political role, whereas visitors from those kingdoms beaten by the kings of Danxome have a "feeling of revolt, an

impulse of vengeance" (Ahonon 2000, 168). A museum, then, instead of a vehicle for reconciliation, remembrance and social cohesion, can become a very controversial locale.

Accepting a hagiography of Sheikh Khoyele—or the Gumuz slave trader Hamdan Abu Shok—for exhibition at the Museum of Benishangul may ingratiate us with the local authorities, but it may not be helpful to promote a critical and fair vision of the past. Those in power today (some of them related to Khoyele) by choosing this cultural hero, could impose a nationalist and hierarchical narrative over the majority of the population, who suffered, rather than enjoyed, Khoyele's rule. As Duah (2000, 116) has pointed out "We [Africans] should not replace one set of myths and stereotypes concocted by non-Africans with another set formulated by Africans". Other authors have also criticized those museums centered on chiefs to the detriment of the common population (Ouattara 2000, 111). By producing uncritical descriptions of an idealized past in which only important persons exist, we may protract colonial injustices in modern times.[2]

However, as Europeans, we are not in a particular good position to criticize unequal power relations in Benishangul-Gumuz or elsewhere in Africa. Issues of power, international relations and colonialism are extremely controversial in Ethiopia. On the one hand, Ethiopia had a feudal monarchy until 1974, which showed an aggressive behavior toward the neighboring populations, not dissimilar to that of contemporary colonial powers. This is something that has repercussions today. Thus, the Oromo Liberation Front representative, Fido Ebba (2006) maintains that "Ethiopia/Abyssinia stands alone as the only Black power that participated in the colonial scramble for Africa". It is enough to look at the "Oromo" entry in the Wikipaedia[3] to witness the strong controversy surrounding Ethiopia's relationship to its ethnic components. On the other hand, Ethiopia has been—and to many still is—a strong symbol of independent Africa: despite having been ignored, despised and attacked by European countries in several occasions, Ethiopia managed to be the only African nation never to be occupied by a foreign army (except the brief and unfulfilled Italian lapse). Today the country still hosts the African Union's headquarters. Nevertheless, Ethiopia has been ambiguous with regard to Afro-centric movements and the relations between Haile Selassie and the African-American activists were strongly contentious, with many representatives of the Ethiopian state refusing to be characterized as blacks in the 1920s and 1930s (Sbacchi 1988).

[2] The troubled politics of the postcolony have been aptly dissected by Achille Mbembe (2000).
[3] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oromo, consulted January 27th 2006.

Any criticisms of Ethiopia's internal colonialism may be perceived as an attack against African independence and against its struggle for freedom. Worst, it can be deemed imperial nostalgia, according to Rosaldo's (1989) apt concept. Usually, colonialism was presented as an attempt to impose order on the injustice and chaos in which African societies lived, whether due to internecine wars, Arab slavery or local tyrants. All colonial powers resorted to the protection of minor ethnic groups as an ideological justification for their colonial enterprise: the praise of the San in 20th century South Africa is a well known example; the idealization of the fragile San communities (Van der Post and Taylor 1984) was presented as a justification (sometimes unwittingly) for the oppression of the Bantu populations. The Spaniards themselves resorted to this trick in their colonial enterprise: they set the Berber against the Arabs in Morocco, and the Bubis against the Fang in Equatorial Guinea. A more recent example, in Ethiopia, is Kaplan's (2002) attack to the central government in 1980s, which slips from political accusations to ethnic ones (the Amhara are condemned as evil just for being Amhara), thus reproducing the Italian discourse from Mussolini's time (e.g. Lauro 1949, 135). One of the justifications for the invasion of Ethiopia in 1935 was the existence of slavery in the country and the oppression by the Ethiopian kings of the small peripheral communities annexed during the 19th century. Are we not reproducing the same scheme by narrating a tale of resistance that sets the Kwama against the Bertha or the Bertha against the Amhara?

Power and nationalism are never easy matters in post-colonial nations, but in Ethiopia they are a particularly knotty issue. Who are we, descendants of former colonizers and still members of a neocolonial society, to judge Ethiopia's oppressors and oppressed? It is too easy to trespass the thin line that separates good post-colonial intentions from imperialist nostalgia.

History and Ethnography

One of the obvious problems the museum of Benishangul will face is the concept of history (or historiography) and ethnography. Meaningfully, both concepts imply the idea of writing, which are inherent to each discipline, while in this case we are dealing with oral societies.

The first problem with ethnography, and particularly with museum ethnography, is its beginnings as an imperial science (Shelton 2000). The idea in the 19th century was to display the variety of groups controlled by a certain colonial power and at the same time show the need for those groups to be surveilled by technologically and morally advanced people. Evolutionary schemes were prevalent in ethnological

Fig 20

museums well after the paradigm was overcome by functionalism in anthropology (Shelton 2000, 175).

Museum ethnography is a paradox. Ethnography makes reference to the living, present and transient, whereas the museum freezes in time a certain culture; it either portrays a particular historical moment in that culture's life and presents it as characteristic of the whole history of that culture, or blends different moments in an anachronistic display. The case is more serious in a context like Benishangul-Gumuz, were traditional communities (those displayed usually in ethnological museums) are still alive and in perpetual change. This leads to other questions: what should we do with Indonesian T-shirts, Chinese flashlights or plastic jerrycans? They have become intrinsic to many cultures in Benishangul. A showcase with only pottery, calabashes and wooden implements would be a beautiful but unreal representation of Benishangul's ethnographic present (FIGURE 20). Once again, the problem of authenticity arises. In the Museum of the Institute of Ethiopian Studies new artifacts and western influences have been acknowledged in a remarkably progressive exhibit, set up in 2004. This museum has also opted for a thematic display instead of one based on ethnic groups, although the ethnic ascription of each artifact is clearly shown (Pankhurst 2002; Porras 2003).

The very idea of showing everyday objects, which is inherent to ethnographic museums, may be problematic. Chinua Achebe (1984) says that the Igbo do not like ethnographic collections because the Igbo do not give any importance to finished objects. They are more interested in the processes that lead to them. After all, the idea of a museum is an extremely modernist one. Can we use a modernist concept in a non-industrial context? Is it legitimate? Is it useful? Moreover, for whom is the ethnographic museum of Benishangul? Is it intended for the population of Benishangul represented in it? For their cultivated elites as a means to portray difference with regard to the central state and consolidate local power? For foreign visitors interested in exotic cultures? An ethnographic museum portraying other's culture has a clear function, controversial but clear; an ethnographic museum portraying a local culture is much more problematic.

With regard to history, different problems arise. They have to do with two issues: first, the prevalence of a mythic perception of the past that does not fit with Westernized conceptions of time, and, second, the representation of troubling events, mainly slavery (James 1988; Abdussamad Ahmad 1999), and, more recently, communist dictatorship (Donham 1999) and civil war (for examples of negative recent heritage elsewhere see Audrey Horning this volume). The recent past is currently the object of many museographic initiatives in Africa, and especially in South Africa, where the discussion of Apartheid and colonialism is considered essential to the construction

Fig 21

of a new civil society (Hall 2000). In the case of Benishangul, both communism and civil war have had a tremendous impact in the ethnic and political organization of the region and they should ideally be taken into account. Both, too, have left important material (archaeological) traces in the landscape (González-Ruibal 2006b). The remains of the most recent past, however, are still too controversial and potentially disruptive, among other things because of the entanglement of politics and ethnicity. Thus, in 1988 guerrillas belonging to a separatist Oromo group killed hundreds of people belonging to the Amhara community in Asosa (Young 1999, 327) and there were also clashes among Oromo and Bertha, after the former demanded the latter to identify themselves as "Black Oromos" in order to pursue their fighting against the Derg (the communist government). The Berthas obviously refused the idea. We talked before about the necessity to incorporate both Amhara and Oromo in the museum narrative, but how could this be done without referring to the troubled political context in which their arrival took place (FIGURE 21)? The outcomes of the past are still very alive in the present, especially among the Gumuz of Metekel, who feel marginalized with regard to the Highland settlers (Wolde-Selassie Abbute 2005).

Slavery poses another kind of question. Slavery cannot be ignored in a museum of history in Benishangul-Gumuz. According to Wendy James (1988, 131) "not only the consciously transmitted oral tradition of such peoples but also their patterns of social and cultural practice, indeed their very categories of understanding the world today, are in part the legacy of those former slaving systems which they have in some sense survived" (Jedrej 2004, 710). Nevertheless, the history of slavery can be considered a shameful reality for the current autonomous state, a phenomenon better forgotten, especially due to the active cooperation of some indigenous leaders in the sinister trade, as has been pointed out. Also, the history of slavery makes visible the traditional ethnic hierarchy with all its complications.

DISCUSSION: POST-COLONIAL SOLUTIONS TO POST-COLONIAL DILEMMAS?

Lynn Meskell (2005, 77) reminds us that "Local communities are not passive constituencies that are there for our intellectual mining, nor are they there awaiting our theoretical insights into their situations or histories. They are directly enmeshed in their own critical reformulations, political negotiations and interpretations". Through this paper, we have tried to avoid any imposition of ideas on the local context, a patronizing attitude so common among Westerners (especially those engaged in development projects). This is why no clear solutions have been offered to the issues we have dealt with so far. We have underlined all the problems and intricacies that we

face in the creation of a local museum in an ethnically complex area like Benishangul-Gumuz. However, as Meskell (2004, 127) herself reminds, "relinquishing our power to intervene in the affairs of others may have uncomfortable repercussions". We certainly do not want to espouse an ethical doctrine of laissez-faire.

To conclude the paper, rather than offering answers to the questions raised by ethnicity, power and history described here by means of ready-made post-colonial recipes, we will underline the positive aspects of creating a museum in the region, as well as the things that we can learn from the cultures of contact in Benishangul-Gumuz. Listening to and learning from others, instead of teaching and representing them, is for us one of the quintessential post-colonial principles.

1) The problem of freezing in time cultures that are still alive may have a positive aspect: by seeing their culture on display, people, especially young people that have already been subjected to Western influences through school and media, could learn to appreciate their cultural heritage and mitigate the fast and sudden collapse of many traditional practices and artifacts that comes with the impact of modernity. One of the problems that plague many traditional cultures under the pressures of modernity (through education, media or tourism) is the fading authority of elders and their role as knowledge bearers and mediators. A museum can be a place to revalue and enhance their knowledge in the eyes of the younger generations.

2) The coincidence of archaeological, linguistic and historical narratives with local history is an asset for the production of an acceptably harmonious narrative at the museum, one that can be understood by many indigenous groups and at the same time by visiting foreigners. It is also a good starting point to negotiate other more complicated issues related to ethnicity and power. History does not always have to be a place of contention: it can be a place for mutual understanding and for creating links between cultures.

3) The fact that origins are not necessarily a question of territorial conflict among the Nilo-Saharans is something from which we, as archaeologists and Westerners, can learn. Unlike in nationalism-ridden Europe, claims to aboriginality in sub-Saharan Africa do not necessarily lead to war with latecomers. Many groups acknowledge their late arrival to an area and the existence of previous groups in their new homeland. As Igor Kopyttof (1987, 54) states: 'This is not an uncommon theme in African oral traditions: "We came and found the such-and-such, and they fled."' Emigration and movement are regarded as normal, not as a shameful fact to be erased by claiming a

fictitious aboriginality. Therefore, it is possible to construct historical narratives that do not necessarily offend the present groups. That is to say, it can be asserted that the Bertha arrived at a region already populated by the Kwama's ancestors, without this provoking a political cataclysm. The same would be unthinkable in Kosovo or Israel, where the fight over the territory usually starts with the question of origins (Scham 2001). Besides, this opens the possibility of introducing into the narrative the latest people to arrive—the Amhara settlers—by appealing to a long-lived local tradition.

4) Local institutions aimed at conflict resolution should occupy a prominent place in the museum. Most groups living in the area have developed throughout history different strategies to cope with internal and external violence, conflict and alterity. Be it the Gumuz *mangima* or the Oromo *michu* (Wolde-Selassie Abbute 2005, 242-263; Tsega Endalew 2002), these institutions rest upon the concept of coming to terms with others, without anybody being completely victorious or defeated, and also upon the idea of absorbing different cultures into one's own, accepting difference. Again, rather than teach the people of Benishangul-Gumuz, we can learn from them: about how to deal peacefully with cultures in contact. Institutions aimed at conflict resolution have been recently incorporated to some African museums, such as those of Botswana (Mackenzie 1990). In the exhibition The Heritage of Peace and Reconciliation presented at the Museum of Nairobi, elders and ritual specialists of the Maasai and Pokot groups were invited to explain to the public their traditional methods for restoring peace (Abungu 2001). Similar performances can take place in the museum of Benishangul.

5) In relation to the previous point, there are very positive signs of reconciliation among the indigenous populations and the recent settlers (Wolde-Selassie Abbute 2005). Thus, the ethnic problem and its representation in the museum could be less problematic than thought previously if things do not worsen by external political conditions (the situation in Ethiopia is somewhat volatile). Many villages belonging to different ethnic groups are establishing relations with members of other communities, not only through conflict resolution strategies, but also through trade, land and cattle renting, collective celebrations, cooperative work, schools and so on. Unlike in other situations of culture contact, people belonging to different ethnic groups here acknowledge the improvements brought by others and this usually refers to material culture. Thus, some immigrants say that local houses and large pots are better, whereas locals appreciate the immigrants' abilities in brewing liquor and using the plow.

6) As some authors have pointed out local museums can be a means to promote regional cooperation (Ekpo 2000, 149). Thanks to the frontier location of Benishangul and to the fact that the cultures represented in the museum transcend political boundaries and are continually crossing frontiers, the museum of Benishangul could be a way of enhancing international relations with the neighboring Sudan and minimizing the relevance of artificial nation-state boundaries. The authorities of Benishangul have had meetings already with Sudanese authorities in order to strengthen friendship and cooperation. Also, cooperation can be established with the Museum of Oromo Culture in Nekemte and with the museums at Addis Ababa. Federal politics, when applied to heritage and museums, can turn out to be a means of improving ethnic relations and fostering cultural exchange, thanks to their symmetrical character. Ethnic federalism may be a solution not only for keeping the diverse cultures of Ethiopia together (Kidane Mengisteab 1997), but for solving ethnic problems elsewhere in Africa.

7) Finally, Benishangul-Gumuz offers a wonderful opportunity to counter-attack conservative historical narratives that praise powerful states and ranked societies as evolutionary successes. The stubborn resistance of frontier cultures through centuries if not millennia against the encroachment of the state (Fernández 2003), their ability to preserve and reconstruct their cultural identities and their social organization under all sorts of pressures can be considered a true historical achievement from a post-colonial and democratic perspective. Most Nilo-Saharan communities have cohabited in peace for long periods of time and have freely adopted cultural elements from each other. A museum in Benishangul-Gumuz can be a praise of the frontier, of cultural coexistence and resistance, non-essentialist identities, societies against the state and egalitarian ethics, as opposed to ruthless states, ethnic exclusivism, political centers and hierarchical and aggressive polities (cf. Clastres 1987; Graeber 2004). This does not mean that the area is a political utopia, for sure—there are other sorts of inequalities, mainly those that affect the relationship between women and men. However, there are traditional political elements in Benishangul-Gumuz that clearly demonstrate a fact: cultures in contact can coexist.

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Figure 1. Detail of the model of the urban renewal of Asosa, showing the future museum (round building).

Figure 2. Some of the ethnographic materials collected by the staff of the Ministry of Culture of Benishangul-Gumuz.

Figure 3. One of the Medieval rock-hewn churches of Lalibela (Amhara region, northern Ethiopia).

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Figure 8. Material elements that characterize the Bertha tradition: pottery, scarifications and domestic architecture – "Mayu house".

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