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Journal

Dotawo: A Journal of Nubian Studies, 0(0)

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Publication Date

2026-02-24

DOI

10.5070/D6.63079

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An Obituary for Professor “Makuria” El-Sheikh Mahmoud El-Tayeb (1957-2024)

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Dobrochna Zielińska

This obituary renders homage to the life and legacy of Mahmoud El-Tayeb, a distinguished Sudanese archaeologist and Professor of the University of Warsaw whose contributions to the study of Nubian history and culture have left an influential mark on the field. Known for his scholarly depth, mentorship, and unwavering dedication, Mahmoud's career spanned decades of groundbreaking research, particularly on mortuary practices, the early Makuritan period, and the complexities of Nubia after the fall of the kingdom of Meroe. His warmth, tireless commitment to advancing archaeological research, and efforts to nurture young scholars have earned him deep respect and admiration among his colleagues in Poland and Sudan as well as the entire Nubiological community. Mahmoud's passing is an immense loss to all who had the privilege of knowing him.

Mahmoud's life and career

Mahmoud El-Tayeb was born in Omdurman, in the Al-Abasiya district, where he was raised and began his educational journey in local schools. He later moved to Syria to pursue higher intermediate studies and then to Poland from 1975 to 1982, where he spent one year studying the language before beginning his undergraduate education. He earned a BA and an MA in archaeology from the University of Warsaw, Institute of Archaeology. He was married to Dr. Galia Gar El Nabi, who is currently the acting Director of the National Corporation for Antiquities and Museums (NCAM). They have two children, Ahmed, who is an engineer, and Aza, who is a veterinarian. Mahmoud's family currently lives in Poland.

Upon returning to Sudan, he joined the Sudanese Antiquities Service in 1983, working in the Department of Fieldwork. During his tenure with NCAM, he participated in numerous fieldwork and research projects across various regions of Sudan. He was a member of the French Archaeological Unit for Sudanese Antiquities (SFDAS) missions at El-Hobagi, located on the west bank of the Nile in the Meroe region. There, he collaborated closely with Patrice Lenoble, excavating tumuli dating after the fall of the kingdom of Meroe. Their work significantly advanced the understanding of what is in technical terms called “the post-Meroitic period.” He also worked with Lenoble on excavations in Berber near the Fifth Cataract, El-Giraif, and other archaeological sites in northern Sudan.

Mahmoud El-Tayeb pursued his career as an antiquities officer with a strong commitment to learning and developing his skills, as both a field archaeologist and a researcher in the library and at the university. While working at the Antiquities Service, he was officially awarded a scholarship from Warsaw University, Poland in 1990 to pursue his graduate studies. However, when the Muslim Brotherhood political party overthrew the Sudanese government in 1989, they implemented new policies that resulted in the termination of the employment of many civil servants, allegedly for the sake of public interest. Mahmoud El-Tayeb, Osama Abdelrahman Elnour, Mohamed Hassan Basha, and many others were dismissed from their positions in the Antiquities Service due to their political orientations.

At the time of his dismissal, Mahmoud was in Poland, where he continued his studies and his engagement in archaeological research in Sudan. He completed his PhD thesis in 1995 at the Institute of Archaeology, Faculty of History, with a scholarship provided by the Polish government for doctoral studies. He remained in Poland and became a Lecturer of the Institute of Archaeology of the University of Warsaw in 1998. Mahmoud naturally maintained a strong connection with Sudan and the archaeology of his homeland. He was a member of the Gdańsk Archaeological Museum survey of the Fourth Nile Cataract between 1996 and 2012. He worked closely with Polish archaeological missions and was eventually appointed to a teaching position at Warsaw University. Later, he became the head of Warsaw University’s archaeological mission at their concession sites in Ez-Zuma and Tangasi in northern Sudan. In 2018, he was appointed the head of the Polish Centre in Khartoum, affiliated with NCAM. Besides his significant contributions with the Gdańsk Museum at the Fourth Cataract and at the El-Awalib archaeological site, Mahmoud also collaborated with Polish teams on the Sennar

Archaeological Survey and the Bayuda Desert Archaeological Survey.

Mahmoud El-Tayeb devoted considerable effort to the study of the early Makuritan period in Sudan, earning him the nickname “Professor Makuria” among both Sudanese and foreign colleagues. His most recent publication, a monumental three-volume monograph titled *Funerary Traditions in Nubian Early Makuria* (2021), focused on this subject. The monograph presents findings from an early Makuritan elite tumuli cemetery dating to the 5th–6th centuries CE, a formative period for the Christian kingdom of Makuria. It showcases the results of collaborative work within a multidisciplinary team of specialists. These volumes provide a comprehensive evaluation of burial practices, incorporating bio-archaeological analyses and detailed examinations of the artifacts and finds recovered during the excavations.

Mahmoud’s virtues, accomplishments, and contributions were celebrated in scientific societies and global academic circles. Both Sudanese and international archaeological communities and institutions mourned his loss, most particularly, the Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology and the University of Warsaw,¹ the American Sudanese Archaeological Research Center,² the Sudanese Archaeologists Association, and the National Corporation for Antiquities and Museums.³

Mahmoud in Poland

Mahmoud was deeply integrated into the Polish academic community, endearing himself to everyone with his warm smile, sense of humor, and kind-hearted nature. He was not only a friend and colleague but also a brother to many. He carried with him the essence of Sudanese culture, embodying its warmth and generosity. His passing has left an irreplaceable void in the hearts of his Polish peers, who feel the profound and painful loss of a family member. As is always the case in such moments, we are reminded of the difficult reality of losing our beloved friend, colleague, and professor.

Mahmoud’s doctoral dissertation, titled *Genesis of the Makurian Culture in the Light of Archaeological Sources* (1995), was a groundbreaking contribution. He tackled a particularly challenging and ambiguous period in Nubian history, marked by significant ethnic and social transformations. Research of this nature is inherently complex, with its full implications often becoming clear only after decades of subsequent study. Few scholars are willing

1 <https://pcma.uw.edu.pl/en/2024/06/22/mahmoud-el-tayeb-1957-2024-4/>

2 <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=862209489282927&set=a.463329195837627>

3 These organizations posted obituaries in WhatsApp groups.

to undertake such study, where the ultimate goals may only be realized by future researchers. However, Mahmoud embraced this challenge with remarkable maturity, taking the initiative to explore this difficult subject. Today, his work stands as a testament to his dedication and vision, achieving a legacy that continues to inspire and guide scholars in the field.

Mahmoud's sense of humor is known from Sudanese songs that could often be heard in the corridors of the Institute of Archaeology in Warsaw, because Mahmoud used to sing, just to make the day of his colleagues and friends more pleasant. He immediately conveyed a warm, straightforward demeanor to everyone he met. His colleagues were his friends. He treated his students as colleagues and easily gathered young and eager minds around him. Not only did he initiate teachings regarding the archaeology of Nubia, but he also initiated field schools for excavation practices in Sudan and invited Polish students to conferences. Over the years, he raised a whole generation of Nubiologists. He taught his students not only the profession, but also what is most important: how to remain unpretentious and modest.

After moving to the Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology of the University of Warsaw in 2009, he continued his field research. At the Centre, he completed his last monumental publication of the site in Ez-Zuma, which will serve the Sudanese archaeological community for generations to come. What mostly impressed his students and colleagues in Poland was the love Mahmoud had garnered from his peers. The members of his mission took great care of him every day, and after his health deteriorated, they helped him with his work as his weakened eyesight made it difficult for him to write. This is perhaps the greatest recognition one can receive as a teacher and in the archaeological profession as a director of mission. The help that Mahmoud received and the support that he provided to the local people became a model for his students and colleagues in Poland. It would be great to carry on and encourage this model in the future of the field of Nubian Studies and Sudan archaeology.

Mahmoud in Sudan

Mahmoud was a humble scholar, deeply passionate about knowledge and learning. From a young age, he traveled abroad, dedicating his life to the study of archaeology, never truly leaving behind his love for his homeland. He was well-known at cultural seminars in Sudan and international conferences alike. He was invited to give talks about his work in Sudan and in Ez-Zuma in particular. He was more than just a respected figure, he was a brother, a friend, and

a teacher, always eager to help others within his intellectual and material resources.

His generosity extended to cultural, religious, educational, and sports activities, which he supported as a son of Ez-Zuma village. His close relationships with the community were so strong that a school complex was named after him, while one neighbor even named his newborn Mahmoud in honor of Mahmoud's personal character. In Ez-Zuma, Mahmoud was often called upon to mediate disputes and conflicts, and he played a key role in educating the local community about the importance of heritage and antiquities. He emphasized their significance in fostering national identity and pride, and a sense of belonging. These efforts led to meaningful discussions with the residents, culminating in the establishment of a museum in Ez-Zuma, a project initiated at the request of the community. In light of his legacy, and when peace returns to Sudan, we hope that his friends and the relevant authorities will honor his memory by creating an educational museum in the school complex bearing his name, in recognition of his contributions to the region and in appreciation of his remarkable life.

Mahmoud's life experiences profoundly shaped his journey in Sudanese archaeology, leaving an enduring legacy not only among Sudanese archaeologists but also within the broader archaeological community. His career experiences clearly shaped him into more than just a mentor for Sudanese and foreign archaeologists; he became a generous and inspiring figure in Sudanese archaeological research. He worked tirelessly to pave the way for younger archaeologists, striving to create a brighter future for archaeological research in Sudan.

During conversations, he was critical of the limited contributions of Sudanese archaeologists to archaeological research. Mahmoud's profound understanding of postcolonial policies and their deep entrenchment within Sudan's civil service is remarkable. He elaborated on how these policies have shaped and constrained generations, hindering their ability to enact meaningful progress in scientific research, particularly in archaeology. They have also prevented Sudanese scholars from catching and keeping up with global advancements and changes in cultural heritage management. The postcolonial generation in Sudan inherited a governmental framework heavily influenced by colonial rule, perpetuating many of the same structures and practices established during the colonial era. It became evident that, as in many other African countries, Sudan's governmental system was designed to uncritically serve the agenda of the colonizers. Mahmoud's life reflected this reality, and his career strived to mitigate this oppressive situation.

The Sudanese respectfully addressed Mahmoud El-Tayeb as Sheikh Mahmoud. This title, “sheikh,” is used for religious men in Muslim communities; however, in Sudan, it is also given to wise individuals who have gained the respect of the local society. Sheikh Mahmoud has passed away, leaving a profound void in the hearts of his colleagues, students, family, clan, friends, and loved ones around the world.

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4 The bibliographical list was compiled by Ewa Czyżewska-Zalewska who kindly provided it to Dotawo for publication, where Mahmoud was a member of the Editorial Board.

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