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RESPECT, RECOGNITION, AND REMATRIATION

An Indigenous Egyptian Perspective on Meaningful Public Discourse on the Middle East and North Africa

Heba Abd el-Gawad

Positionality and Terminology

First and foremost, this chapter is not intended to attack or point fingers; rather, it is an appeal for allyship and empathy. Many of the colonial biases and structural injustices discussed here are so deeply entrenched within the knowledge production processes surrounding the ancient societies of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) that they have become normalised.¹ It is our collective responsibility to reflect on our positionality and responsibilities with regard to the continuing legacies of colonialism entrenched in current practices. In this view, I am sharing my frustrations equally as both a professional and as a member of the MENA community, who has been on the receiving end of many racial and ethnic attacks, microaggressions, and misrepresentations. I am aware that changing how MENA is perceived or represented requires a wider socio-political movement, yet since many people first encounter MENA in a museum or history curriculum, I believe that change starts with those of us who produce knowledge for public consumption.

It is also important to acknowledge at the outset that I am writing this chapter from an Egyptian, Indigenous, female standpoint. As Egyptian feminist theorist and activist Nawal el Saadwy has argued, the Indigenous MENA women's perspective is shaped by how patriarchy, imperialism, capitalism, and Eurocentrism interconnect and oppress their ways of seeing, doing, and being.² These oppressors situate MENA women in different power relations and affect our individual social, political, historical, and material conditions. In this vein, my standpoint is the product of my personal and professional lived experience as an Egyptian woman researching my cultural heritage within institutions and academic spaces, which

have structurally discriminated against my community's right to Indigeneity and cultural heritage. In these spaces, I am both the researcher and the researched.

As an Egyptian, colonialism and Eurocentrism are not simply intellectual concepts to critique and challenge, but oppressing realities that I encounter on an ongoing basis. Similarly, I interact with colonial violence constantly in archival documents; academic, institutional, and digital spaces; museums; embassies, as I apply for visas; and at border controls. My lived experience is not, of course, the universal Egyptian female experience. Rather, it represents one of the diverse experiences of Egyptians and MENA communities. My perspectives are shaped by my individual knowledge, my family's cultural and social background, and the collective community in which I live in Cairo. By acknowledging my positionality, I am attempting to fulfil my self-reflective ethical obligation towards my communities and those who wish to interact with my contribution. I am conscious of how this positionality has influenced my research process, interpretations, word choices, biases, and subjectivity. I invite the readers to reflect on their own positionality as they engage with this contribution.

This chapter is addressed to both Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers and practitioners, as the same concerns regarding knowledge creation arise for both. A core difference between Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers is their motivation; most Indigenous scholars engage in researching their own culture to bring benefit to their communities. Additionally, Indigenous researchers are confronted with an added set of complexities shaped by their lived experience in the academy. Among these complexities is the "Indemic" nature of Indigenous researchers, whereby their Indigenous culture, identity, and community intersect with "Endemic" institutional norms and practices.³ Usually, Indigenous researchers will feel a responsibility to protect their communities from the exploitation and extraction of the institutions they represent. These scholars need to resist being made complicit in their own exploitation and exclusion by institutions at the structural and epistemological levels. This is not to suggest that Indigenous researchers or practitioners should be held to lesser professional or ethical standards, but to highlight the greater responsibility they bear, while often simultaneously having little institutional power.

The Coloniality of Public Engagement with MENA's Past

I have always felt there was something wrong with the way we present Egyptian antiquities. It is seen through the eyes of the other rather than our Egyptian eyes. We seem to convey Western point of view not ours.⁴

Is it possible for public engagement with the ancient cultures of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) to be recolonising? The short answer is, yes. Knowledge production and public dissemination of the region's past initially grew out of its colonial occupation and, I argue, scholarship continues to adopt a Eurocentric

Orientalist approach towards ancient and contemporary MENA communities. While today's modern MENA states have full control over the access and management of their cultural heritage, colonial practices still define the power structures of knowledge production and dissemination. At the heart of this built-in coloniality is the strict ancestral, cultural, and intellectual segregation between ancient MENA societies and modern communities, through disciplinary practices.

Whose interests are served by the knowledge produced on ancient MENA societies and engagement practices thereof? While there has been interest in the decolonial turn in the various disciplines governing ancient MENA societies, little has been done to challenge the coloniality of public knowledge production and engagement practices in policy and practice within MENA communities themselves.⁵ Thus, the primary aim of this chapter is to offer, for the first time, a critical assessment of the coloniality of the MENA public discourse and issue a call to approach the region's histories from a settler-colonial perspective.

The use of the term coloniality, instead of colonialism, in this chapter deliberately echoes Maldonado-Torres' urge to focus on colonial ways of seeing, knowing, and doing (i.e., coloniality), which survive beyond military and administrative "colonialism."⁶ I argue that coloniality has three dimensions in the process of knowledge production for MENA ancient societies: an epistemic dimension, a structural dimension, and an ethical/moral dimension. The epistemic dimension is readily visible in how ancient MENA societies are, usually, depicted in the public discourse – that is, as Western, monolithic ("frozen") concepts focused on timeless material culture that is divorced from succeeding historical layers. This material culture is then presented in Orientalist oppositions, in which ancient societies are aligned with the modern West, while present-day MENA communities are associated with the East; in this model, the conservative East is deemed inferior to the progressive West.⁷ These engagements replicate the nineteenth-century travellers, explorers, archaeologists, and writers' colonial extraction and exploitation of the region's heritage.⁸ This framework also perpetuates the domestication of MENA ancient cultures within Western-European frames of knowledge and simultaneously appropriates them as narratives for the development of Western civilisation.⁹ Eurocentric ways of classifying, interpreting, and understanding, then, serve to sustain a "universal knowledge," and ultimately uphold and invest in the power that institutions and societies in the Global North hold over MENA's past.

This epistemic violence of Eurocentrism has also enforced a knowledge dislocation from contemporary communities. According to disciplinary classifications, contemporary communities are tied to the landscape, but not to the ancient societies who occupied these territories. Thus, their relationship to these pasts is one of geographical proximity; modern communities simply happen to occupy the land that was once inhabited by the ancient peoples whose cultures are of interest to the West.¹⁰ Within this "othering" lens, MENA communities are considered neither Indigenous nor source communities. As a result, they do not uphold Indigenous rights to knowledge produced regarding their heritage, their knowledge systems

are not used to better understand their ancient predecessors, and neither researchers nor practitioners are held accountable to them.¹¹

This structural inequity is exemplified in how knowledge production remains centred in the Global North, which is a direct reflection of the disciplinary power structures and misdistribution of economic and academic capital.¹² While there has been a recent, reinvigorating wave that centres the contributions of local practitioners, knowledge production is still largely uni-directional and institutions in the Global North shape disciplinary priorities and validities.¹³ This is evident in the dominance of Global North research institutes, publication presses, and academic journals, which collectively hold the upper hand in the politics of publishing and are perceived as more academically credible. Citation power, moreover, also rests within the Global North, especially when we consider the Arabic language barrier.¹⁴ Ironically, mastering foreign languages is an essential research requirement for MENA researchers, yet learning Arabic with its varying dialects is not a requirement to enrol in a Global North (under)graduate course or to pursue research or participate in archaeological excavations in the region. Entire careers could be built without mastering – or even attempting to learn – the local language. This is reflected in the library shelves dedicated to ancient MENA, which are packed with books in languages reflecting the disciplinary colonial histories. As a result, the knowledge produced and disseminated in Arabic is, largely, dismissed.

In all of this, communities have no voice on the research that directly impacts them, while outsiders, on the other hand, are obtaining information from and building careers based on their land and histories. Excavation and field research can still take place with little or no interaction with communities, including those who live near or on excavation sites. Rarely is the produced knowledge shared with communities in formats accessible to them, nor do they have a say in the what, why, or how of research questions. Most importantly, communities' knowledge systems and ways of being, seeing, or doing are not considered to be Indigenous methodologies that can help to better understand the MENA past. Their knowledge of the land, environment, local languages, and cultures are, thus, lost to Eurocentric opinions regarding what constitutes culture and what is worthy of saving. Within this top-down extractive framing, MENA communities have responsibilities to these ancient societies, but no rights. They are the local translators, facilitators, inspectors, excavators, and informants. They are the “known” but never the “knowers.”¹⁵

The ethical dimension of coloniality can be seen in current approaches to public engagement within museums and excavation sites where MENA communities are not accorded an Indigenous status, nor are they prioritised. For example, archaeological excavations' public engagement programmes are designed to educate or raise the awareness of the local communities, with the typical overall aim of heritage protection or capacity building.¹⁶ Thus, communities are being educated rather than serving as the educators. These engagement practices tend to be an add-on, fringe activity left to the discretion of researchers, rather than an expected

ethical obligation. Although more recently, as public impact has, since the 2011 revolutions, become an integral funding requirement for local economic development, more archaeological public engagement programmes have been introduced throughout the region.¹⁷ Whether this shift is rooted in spurious motives (e.g., to secure additional funding) or in a genuine ethical corrective turn to bring overdue social justice, remains to be seen.

The colonial Othering that currently frames public discourse on MENA ancient societies is not simply a pedagogical or practical failure, but it has serious repercussions for rendering MENA communities invisible. This is apparent in how ancient MENA heritage is perceived as orphaned, with no relation to the modern nations who, in turn, have no right to claim it or contest its interpretations.¹⁸ Thus, MENA, as contemporary Indigenous communities, are excluded from current heritage repatriation debates. A striking example of the omission of North African collections from repatriation debates is the applauded Savoy-Sarr African Collections repatriation report, commissioned by the French government, which centred the need for reconciliation and restitution of African collections in French and wider European institutions, but did not include North African materials as part of wider African collections.¹⁹

The public discourse that results from these exclusionary practices has an authoritative effect as it shapes how communities see themselves compared to others – “others” include, in this case, ancient people who lived in the shared geographic regions of modern MENA nations. For example, the erasure and the silencing of selected modern community groups in contrast to the reverence for ancient material culture can be seen in the strikingly different Western-European governments’ responses to Graeco-Roman heritage destruction in Syria during the Syrian war compared to the refugee crisis. In 2015, Boris Johnson, then mayor of London, was raising a replica of Palmyra’s Arch of Triumph in Trafalgar Square after its destruction by Daesh, while the Home Secretary Theresa May was simultaneously promising to restrict the numbers of Syrian refugees that the UK would receive. When European governments were confronted with a choice between heritage and MENA lives, heritage always won, as the post-2011 unfinished revolutions have attested. However, it is important to point out that not all MENA heritage was seen as worthy of protection; outcry was reserved only for the layers of MENA history appropriated by the West and with which the Eurocentric gaze can find affinity. Other multicultural and multiethnic layers of heritage and architecture received no mourning.²⁰ In this respect, the invented segregation between ancient and contemporary societies reinforced the longstanding colonial and racial interpretations of MENA culture, people, and politics, costing modern inhabitants of these regions their lives and memories.

How can we end this colonising cycle and ensure that knowledge produced and disseminated about ancient MENA societies brings no harm to contemporary communities? In the following section, I build the argument for a settler colonial consideration of MENA that emphasises the ethical responsibility of researchers to the region and its past and present communities.

MENA Settler-Colonialism: From Engagement to Responsibility

Indigenous peoples have the right to maintain, control, protect and develop their cultural heritage, traditional knowledge and traditional cultural expressions, as well as the manifestations of their sciences, technologies and cultures, including human and genetic resources, seeds, medicines, knowledge of the properties of fauna and flora, oral traditions, literatures, designs, sports and traditional games and visual and performing arts. They also have the right to maintain, control, protect and develop their intellectual property over such cultural heritage, traditional knowledge, and traditional cultural expressions.²¹

While directed at states, the United Nations Declaration of Indigenous Peoples Rights (UNDIPR) has been increasingly used by researchers of Indigenous studies as an ethical guideline to prevent harm to Indigenous communities and their lands.²² But who counts as Indigenous? How is it measured? And who gets to decide? Indigenous rights and research responsibilities towards them remain largely controlled by settler-colonial power structures, wherein settler states continue to exercise their sovereignty over Indigenous lands. Given this bias, MENA communities – despite the rich literature on the region's settler colonial status – remain peripheral to settler colonial studies, as well as to broader definitions of settler colonialism and understandings of how its legacies still shape politics and social life today.²³

This unjustified marginalisation of the MENA region with regard to Indigenous rights can be attributed to three main causes. First, settler colonial studies tend to ignore the MENA region, focusing instead on the Anglophone settler societies of North America, Australasia, and South Africa. Thus, MENA remains a blind spot within settler colonial ancient culture studies and wider anthropological studies. However, settler colonialism has targeted countries throughout MENA and these endeavours were crucial to developing a transnational network of settler-colonial ideas and practices. Rather than being marginal to the global history of settler colonialism, MENA was crucial to the long-term evolution of settler colonies around the globe.²⁴

The second cause is the temporality of settler-colonialism in MENA. Settler-colonialism has a long past and continues to shape the present either through direct occupation – as is the case of Ceuta and Melilla on the Moroccan Mediterranean coast or in Palestine – or direct Western European military interventions and bases, resources control, or cultural appropriation and epistemic violence, which will likely continue in the future. All of these have contributed to the normalisation of coloniality in MENA to the extent that it became unnoticeable.

The third significant cause of marginalised indigeneity in MENA is the Eurocentric privileging of genealogical descent, which continues to be the sole legitimator of communities' relationships to ancient societies.²⁵ In this context, MENA communities are perceived as more recent settlements within local proximity to tangible ancient heritage that is of Western-European interest. The

connection between modern communities and ancient MENA societies is one of shared geography rather than a shared cultural, emotional, or socio-political lived experience. The impact of this single-sided perception of genealogy and identity goes far beyond the case of MENA and affects other marginalised and culturally occupied communities around the world. Local and Indigenous are not neutral terms and should not be used interchangeably. To reduce Indigenous communities to local is to deny their colonial trauma and their historic and continuing marginalisation.

Communities reserve the right to self-determine their identity, their connections to the land, and the ancient societies with whom they identify. For example, Egyptian geopolitical scholar Gamal Hamdan (1928–1993) defined Egypt as the “possessor of middle ground,” or “*malekat el-7ad el-Awsat*”;²⁶ its people cannot fit into a single “race” or culture as Egyptians belong to many cultures, given the long history of colonialism which has shaped their multi-layered identity today. Egyptian Indigeneity, in his view, is rooted in the connection between land and lived experience. Therefore, Egyptians possess not only ancestral links with their ancient predecessors, but equally strong emotional connections. Through these geopolitical, ancestral, and emotional links “they can feel ancient Egypt better than any Western scholar.”²⁷

Public discourse on MENA ancient cultures, which has the potential to function as a social justice resource, has failed to recognise and repair the violence of this colonality. Through passive top-down practices and initiatives, scholarship and public discourse alike continue to characterise MENA communities as inferior knowledge recipients rather than as Indigenous knowledge holders. This is evident in the many public engagement training and capacity-building initiatives introduced within Eurocentrically defined archaeological sites throughout the region over the past decade amid the Arab spring.²⁸ While in the diaspora, MENA communities received training in UK and German museums to offer guided tours to visitors.²⁹ Whether at the local archaeological site or at European museums, MENA communities are invited to be educated rather than educate – an approach that would be unimaginable with Indigenous communities in Australia, Canada, or the United States.

When MENA communities’ rights are acknowledged by providing translations of knowledge produced on their ancient cultures, they are, usually, offered in formal classical Arabic.³⁰ Classical Arabic translations have an immediate distancing effect as they ignore the local dialects and their interconnectedness with verbal and emotional perceptions and interpretations of heritage. Through these translations, MENA communities are, thus, painted as a homogenous collective. This is particularly harmful to the multiethnic and multicultural minority groups within the region. Although the challenges of inequality and discrimination are shared, their effects may be felt differently between different sub-groups. While attempts to include contemporary MENA communities in the public discourse surrounding their heritage is a welcomed change, by ignoring MENA rights to indigeneity and

their knowledge systems, these practices end up reinforcing power imbalances and promoting colonial assimilation.

The choice to use classical Arabic can lead to mistranslations and misrepresentations and is representative of how public discourse on MENA ancient cultures is typically developed backwards, in that it primarily responds to Western-European disciplinary and public needs and priorities, rather than those of MENA communities. Providing classical Arabic on a museum label responds to the European museum's desire to appear more inclusive. In an archaeological context, in contrast, excavations tend to operate in total isolation from urban, agricultural, and socio-cultural needs on the ground. The selection of sites to be excavated and research questions to be asked are typically determined by gaps in the disciplinary knowledge of ancient societies. Interpretations of the imagined East are then subsequently imposed on contemporary MENA communities. This is due to the assumed superiority of Western-European ways of knowing, being, and doing, which leads to the view that Eurocentric scholarship produces universal knowledge that is universally relevant.³¹

Knowledge production and its dissemination can bring harm to communities. How knowledge is produced, why, and for whose benefit affects communities' rights to self-determination and sovereignty over their identities and histories. Harm can be done either by marginalising communities' needs and knowledge from research or even by subtle acts, such as referring to archaeological sites as "my sites" or Indigenous excavators as "my workmen" or using the term "discovery" while ignoring Indigenous existing knowledge. Such acts can easily go unnoticed, but they do reinforce the coloniality of the power structure of practices and policies.

Researchers have a responsibility to ensure communities exercise their rights, power, and authority to determine what, how, and why research happens on their land. They can implement this responsibility through the interrelated spheres of control, influence, and interest. A researcher's control lies in the power and privilege they hold by deciding where, when, how, and why their research is carried out, at all research stages from design to delivery. The researcher's sphere of influence is located at the institutional level. Here, researchers might not have direct control, but they can influence research ethics and change how knowledge is produced at the curriculum level, by contributing to or chairing committees, and by pushing for reform at the structural level. Beyond their spheres of control and influence, lies the researcher's sphere of interest, where decisions such as co-producing their research with communities or responding to local needs rather than disciplinary gaps, can lead to policy decision-making or shaping public opinion, all of which can effect social, political, cultural, economic, and environmental changes. How much researchers can affect the spheres of control, influence, and interest depends on their individual values, autonomy, and positionality.

Three Considerations for a Meaningful Indigenous Public Discourse: Respect, Recognition, and Rematriation

I propose the introduction of three “threshold” considerations through which researchers on ancient MENA societies (and beyond) can fulfil their responsibilities towards modern communities. I believe these considerations can contribute to ethical and meaningful knowledge production and public discourse dissemination. I refer to these considerations as a “threshold” because, in my view, they must be considered before any research question, relationship, or public communication is attempted. I also believe that these conditions should be reviewed throughout the knowledge production and dissemination process.

Respect of Self-Determination and Consent

Knowledge produced and disseminated on ancient MENA societies is, I argue, of little to no benefit to contemporary MENA communities and, in many cases, causes harm. Harm is inflicted by reinforcing their invisibility or reaffirming power imbalances that serve neo-colonial practices and policies. These harms include lack of reciprocity, such as extracting knowledge on material culture or sites without any benefit to the community; lack of community-informed consent and coproduction before research is attempted or disseminated; and misinterpretations of community-based research ethics and policies.

Ensuring that research is respectful to communities and of benefit to them requires fundamental changes in the ways that research is designed and conducted. A key manifestation of this respect is to allow communities to determine what and how knowledge is produced on their land. Researchers need to create opportunities for communities to freely determine the research agenda by co-designing research questions, objectives, and approaches.³²

Similar to Indigenous research studies, public discourse on ancient MENA societies should also require the communities’ consent prior to the approval of any project affecting their lands. While the current system of approvals operates through the various ministries of antiquities in the region, communities are rarely consulted, despite the fact that they are the first group to be affected by these activities.³³ In Western-European knowledge frameworks, the consent of research participants is a key feature of research ethics principles, yet the same requirement of consent is rarely imposed on any knowledge production that has a direct impact on MENA communities’ representations and livelihoods. Informed consent should include ongoing consent to conduct research on communities’ land. This requires researchers to accept that communities may not be interested in the proposed research. Additionally, priorities may shift over the course of a project; informed consent should be ongoing and revisited. If consent is withdrawn throughout the course of a project, researchers need to accept a community’s right of refusal.

Respecting communities' self-determination and consent requires careful consideration of how and which data is collected, how it is interpreted, and how results are disseminated. It also requires an understanding of the historical lived experience of communities and their future expectations. Repositioning community priorities, while producing knowledge on their ancient societies, can build lasting and meaningful intercultural relationships, address community needs, and improve research.

Ensuring communities have the right to control the intellectual property produced on their land is key to building respectful relationships. This is highly relevant to archaeological archives that are hosted at institutions in the Global North, which hold crucial information on community histories, yet they are inaccessible to them. Archive institutions and researchers must respect communities' intellectual ownership of these archives and transparently share the material with them in languages and modes of communication that are accessible to them.

Best practices should also include the frequent sharing of research project updates and results with communities about their material culture or land. Researchers should ensure they publish results in open access journals and non-academic formats in local dialects. In addition, we must prioritise and respect a community's contribution to the knowledge production process, particularly through co-authorship and naming community members in funding applications.

Recognition of Rights and Positionality

Building trust is an essential component of any meaningful long-term relationship with communities within a settler-colonial setting.³⁴ Trust should not be confined to conducting fieldwork or engagement activities, but should be established as an inherent basis for researching other cultures. Trust should be built through the recognition of rights. In the case of MENA, this could include the recognition of contemporary communities' rights to accept or refuse proposed research. At present, relationships between MENA communities and Global North institutions and practitioners are, perhaps, best characterised by a sense of distrust.³⁵ This distrust can, in part, be attributed to the Western-European military interventions in the region. On the other hand, public discourse has largely contributed to the current invisibility of MENA communities within the knowledge production process of their histories, as research is usually conducted on the region and not with it. Reaching out and engaging early with communities of practice within the region should be viewed as a non-negotiable. MENA communities of practice can hold formal and informal influence and power within the culture. They can help build bridges with wider communities and provide insights into the cultural appropriateness of the methodologies and theoretical framings that are proposed. However, they should be compensated for their time and knowledge in ways that are appropriate and acceptable for them. Similarly, researchers need to recognise communities' rights to withhold their consent or refuse to share their knowledge.

The recognition of one's own privileges is key in positioning oneself when working on ancient MENA societies. With this unpacking, researchers can recognise how they will never be able to fully understand some of the challenges that contemporary MENA communities face due to how they are isolated from their ancient predecessors. Researchers have the responsibility to use their privilege to dismantle oppressive systems of knowledge production by recognising their responsibilities towards contemporary communities.

The reproduction of coloniality in the public discourse on ancient MENA societies is, perhaps, perpetuated by a lack of reflexivity among institutions and practitioners of their own positionality and epistemological situatedness. An honest, liberating dialogue that centres communities' needs and expectations is essential to deconstruct the current co-option of colonial frames of knowledge production and dissemination.³⁶ While that dialogue will differ across contexts and positionalities, it can be conceptualised broadly as an approach that emphasises the connection between concrete teaching strategies, resources, practices, and significant personal change. Recognition of positionality, in this case, should not be underpinned by merely a self-contained intellectual exercise, but needs continuous interrogation to counter epistemological and practical absences that reinforce "the separation of the scientist vis-à-vis his or her object of research, including his or her own past sociological knowledge."³⁷ It needs to be carried out in light of the context of the struggle that "provides noncognitive dimensions that condition the ways in which absent social groups and knowledge become present"³⁸. Only then will we be more critically self-reflexive and develop a capacity for epistemological and ontological pluralism. Reflection, including self-critique, and action are imperative in any transformative anticolonial work.

A framework centring MENA communities' rights to approve or refuse knowledge produced and the way it is disseminated is key for anticolonial change. Within this framework, researchers need to adhere to relational accountability. Reciprocity and responsibility are key features of a healthy relationship and must be included in any research on ancient societies' modern communities that self-determine as a community of descent.³⁹ In a rights-based framework, researchers need to reflect on a set of questions:

- How do my methodologies help build healthy relationships between my research questions and communities?
- What is my socio-political role in this research and what are my responsibilities?
- How can my research support communities' rights to self-determination?
- Is my research inducing or preventing harm to communities?
- What am I giving back to communities? Is this learning process reciprocal?

By reflecting on these questions, the reciprocal relationship then becomes the guiding principle of the researcher. Researching other people's cultures is a privilege and a responsibility. We, as researchers, are responsible for the methodological

and theoretical framing of our research choices and the harm it can inflict on communities. We must give power to building positive connections with communities and not give strength to ideas that separate and detract the past from the present.

Rematriation and Ways of Being, Seeing, and Doing

The isolation of contemporary MENA communities' ways of seeing and knowing from the public discourse on their ancient societies contributes to their socio-political invisibility and marginalisation. This segregation also contributes to constructing socio-cultural stigmas and stereotypes affecting their day-to-day lives. In this respect, the public discourse does not only replicate colonial framing, but it also perpetuates social injustices.

Rematriation is a powerful term and concept, introduced by the Indigenous women of Turtle Island, to describe how they are restoring balance to the world.⁴⁰ Unlike repatriation, the rematriation of knowledge pushes against the heteropatriarchy. It works to reject narratives and theories that have been used against Indigenous communities by restoring Indigenous epistemological knowledge. It challenges the reductive notion of the return of objects, as material things, by asserting Indigenous ways of seeing, being, and doing in the knowledge production of ancient societies.

Rematriating how knowledge is produced or disseminated is a form of participatory research that requires researchers to work with and in community, rather than on community. Rematriation introduces ways of seeing, doing, and being that are anticolonial and that reject imperial knowledge framing. Thus, rematriation is based on the source communities' unique needs, priorities, and values. Adopting this method rebalances the power structure between researchers and communities by increasing the degree of accountability to communities. This concept resonates with Egyptian feminist Nawal Saadawi's framing of how coloniality could be challenged through anticolonial activism centred around female ways of being, seeing, and doing, disrupting the violence of Eurocentric methodologies.

Coloniality has violently structured how we see ourselves and the world around us. The concept of rematriation, as introduced here, is an act of restructuring how communities relate to the land, one another, and to themselves. Rematriation is founded upon relational accountability, where accountability is a two-way process. Through this framework, researchers and communities are accountable to one another and share the power. This can challenge power hierarchies and introduce alternative ways of partnership and collaboration. This is of particular relevance and importance to MENA communities as they struggle to fit within Eurocentric boxes of ethnicity and race. By applying rematriation to MENA communities, we acknowledge their Indigenous rights to their cultural heritage. Their indigeneity is based on the collection of thoughts, feelings, and internal and intrapersonal behaviours that intentionally allow them to reconnect, reinterpret, and relearn in ways that prioritise and restore a spiritual and emotional relationship to the

land and their ancestors. Once their indigeneity is rematriated, their rights to self-determination and consent to knowledge production and dissemination of their ancestors will be recognised and respected.

Conclusion: The Importance of Continuously Asking the Am I Complicit? Question

The manifest Othering which defines the knowledge production and dissemination on ancient MENA societies shows that imperialist policy can be expressed via non-intervention. Colonialism continues through the perpetuation of the status quo, which is favourable to neo-colonial interests, and not just via the interventionism that is normally associated with imperialism. Public discourse on MENA needs to expose and explore the discomfort of the past and present colonial practices of its knowledge production. We, as researchers are bound to the colonising project through the practices and policies which govern our disciplines and institutions. By acknowledging how our work negatively affects contemporary communities and enduring the resulting discomfort, we can develop self-awareness and humility, after which we are bound up to the liberation of ourselves, the modern, and the ancient MENA communities.⁴¹ This process of collective liberation could be initiated by asking ourselves if we are complicit in the harm and suffering of contemporary communities. In posing this question, we can, perhaps, remain conscious, reflective, and appropriately uncomfortable of our positionality and attempt to heal, rather than harm.

Notes

- 1 By Middle East and North Africa (MENA), I refer to the 22 Arabic-speaking countries in the region. This is based on Egyptian use and wider understanding of the term within these countries today. However, I am conscious of the continuing colonialism and geographical inaccuracy and ambiguity of the term. MENA as a term and concept is loaded with imperial scarring and Oriental stereotypes. Over the past years and following the decolonising turn, there have been various Indigenous MENA scholarly attempts, mainly in the diaspora, to adopt a more neutral term that directly reflects the geographical parameters of the region. As a result, Southwest Asia and North Africa (SWANA) was introduced as a more geographically and culturally accurate alternative term. While SWANA has found some traction in academic circles, it remains unpopular and unfamiliar among communities. As the term Middle East and North Africa remains widely known and is used among Arabic-speaking communities for self-identification, I am adopting it with care – respecting communities' choice while acknowledging its colonial legacy. For a discussion of SWANA, see Bishara 2023.
- 2 El-Saadawi 1980.
- 3 Kwaimullina 2016.
- 4 Abd el-Gawad and Stevenson 2021, 121.
- 5 See, for example, Munawar 2024; Azzouz 2022; Kathem and Kareem Ali 2021.
- 6 Maldonado-Torres 2007, 243. On the use of this term, see also Rodgers, this volume.
- 7 Colla 2007, 103. See also the chapter by Malvoisin in this volume.
- 8 Anderson 2015.

- 9 Abd el Gawad and Stevenson 2021.
- 10 Abd el Gawad and Stevenson 2023.
- 11 Abd el Gawad 2024.
- 12 For example, see the affiliation and background of majority of speakers at British Ancient Near East Association, ASOR, and the International Congress of Egyptology conference programmes; Kamash 2021.
- 13 Bonnie et al. 2023.
- 14 Kamash 2021.
- 15 Moreton-Robinson 2004, 75.
- 16 See for example: Regulski 2018.
- 17 Cultural Protection Fund (n.d.).
- 18 Abd el-Gawad and Stevenson 2021.
- 19 Sarr and Savoy 2018. On the issue of separating African collections from Egyptian and Nubian collections, see Malvoisin, this volume.
- 20 Azzouz 2022.
- 21 United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, Article 31 (2007).
- 22 Ignace et al. 2023.
- 23 Atia et al. 2022.
- 24 Atia et al. 2022.
- 25 For a discussion of the problems of genetics and DNA as the basis of indigenous links to land, see, for example, TallBear 2021, 467–78.
- 26 Hemdan 1967, 34.
- 27 Heikal 1926, 10.
- 28 See for example Regulski 2018; Bonnie et al. 2023.
- 29 Brusius 2021, 197.
- 30 For example, the labels of the ancient Egyptian galleries at the Petrie Museum of Egyptian and Sudanese Archaeology, University College London, UK; Museo Egizio Torino, Italy; and the Museum am Rothenbaum – Kulturen und Künste der Welt, Hamburg, Germany are all in classical Arabic.
- 31 Amin 1989.
- 32 See for example Atalya 2012, 220–24 for a discussion on obligation towards indigenous communities within North American Archaeological Practices.
- 33 Myskell 2000.
- 34 Lin et al. 2020.
- 35 Abd el-Gawad 2024.
- 36 Freire 1996.
- 37 Santos 2018, 28.
- 38 Santos 2018, 27.
- 39 Weber-Pillwax 2001.
- 40 Rematriation 2023
- 41 Wright and McCoy 2012.

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