

Lovers of Light

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Stills from *Tajouje* (1977). Courtesy: Arsenal Filminstitut.

The Gubara family film archive, which holds important parts of Sudan's history, has been endangered for a long time. Once a physical place, the archive was located in Studio Gad, named after Sudan's first filmmaker, Gadalla Gubara (1920–2008). The police seized the studio and its contents in 1999. When this happened, suddenly Gadalla's vision shrank – a sliver of neon was all he could see. He had been struck blind.

His daughter, international long-distance swimming champion Sara Gadalla Gubara, had a dream in late 2025 that she couldn't find the small, locked room in her house where the film canisters and hard drives were stored. Sara had fled rebel-controlled Khartoum with her husband, Bella Abu Sineina, in May 2023 when he needed an emergency medical procedure. Although they had planned to return home after the procedure, they were instead forced to depart from Port Sudan for the UAE before eventually arriving in Cairo. They have still not been able to return home. Sara is now sixty-nine, Bella a bit older. Sara had helped her father make films since she was a child, and she grew up to become Sudan's first female filmmaker. These storage devices held both her father's and her work and, therefore, a film history of the country from the 1940s onwards. Sara asked a neighbour in Khartoum to film the looted house. The neighbour's video shows the storage room still locked, untouched. Sara believes the rebels thought it was a bathroom and that entering it would soil their uniforms.

Gadalla Gubara

Gadalla Gubara was Sudan's first cameraman and filmmaker. During the Second World War, he worked for the British Army's Royal Corps of Signals. The Colonial Film Unit (CFU), Britain's propaganda arm during the war, screened films for the troops, and it was at these screenings that Gadalla first saw and learned about film. Gadalla trained further in film after the war, when he was posted in London

and Cyprus. The CFU commissioned him to make films about agriculture in the Sudan, and he later worked for the BBC as a newsman. This not only gave him access to film technology but also to mobility across the African continent. In 1960, he received a scholarship to study film at the University of Southern California. Sara says he was the only student to arrive with a film already in the can: *The White Cotton*, an educational documentary about one of newly independent Sudan's leading crops. When he returned home in 1962, Gadalla got a job at the Sudan Film Unit, where he was able to document Sudan's early days as an independent nation.

In 1969, along with Ousmane Sembène, Med Hondo and Souleymane Cissé, Gadalla created the Pan African Federation of Filmmakers and started its biennial film festival, FESPACO, in Ouagadougou. However, Gadalla found France's role in supporting African cinema problematic. In former French colonies, there was often a Ministry of Francophonie, a French school and/or a French Cultural Centre. With their support, films would circulate in the francophone world. But Gadalla wanted his films to be known outside this small linguistic and cultural sphere. He wanted to make big films that competed with the standards and budgets of Italian, Indian and American films, films that went on the international film festival circuit.

Gadalla had left his earnings with the BBC in London, treating it like a bank. When the BBC was selling a Moviola editing table, he cashed in these earnings. Around that time, at a press conference in London, Sudan's President Nimeiry invited Gadalla to join the official junket – to take a break, he said. Gadalla jumped at the opportunity to have the Moviola flown back to Sudan on the presidential plane. Over time, Gadalla had gained the respect of President Nimeiry, and in 1972, he was awarded a piece of land on the outskirts of Khartoum to create Studio Gad, the first independent film studio in the country.

The old Moviola and the new studio were used to make *Tajouje* (1977), one of Sudan's first feature

films, based on what is considered the country's first novel by Osman Muhammad Hashim. It won prizes at festivals around the world, from Cannes to Cairo.

By the time of the making of *Barakat Al-Sheikh* (The Sheikh's Blessings, 1998), a family member of the new president, Bashir, was assigned to oversee films coming out of Studio Gad. Sara remembers him parading a certificate bearing her father's name around town after the film was warmly received at Cannes.

Studio Gad and *Les Misérables*

When President Nimeiry awarded Gadalla the plot of land, it was on the outskirts of Khartoum. It grew more coveted as time passed. In 1999 – ten years after Bashir's rule began – the police took over the studio on various trumped-up charges, including the production of pornography. Gadalla was taken to Omdurman Prison, where he went blind.

Sara helped get him out of prison. She noted his growing sadness – and anger – during her visits. Despite his blindness, Gadalla rode buses to hear what people were talking about. If he heard something on the radio that was newsworthy, he would get himself to the scene. He wanted it known that he was still active.

Sara moved back to Khartoum the following year with her own filmmaking equipment, which she had pieced together as she built a studio in Saudi Arabia, where her husband was practising psychiatry.

On Sara's return, Gadalla regained his spirit. He had at least four film scripts on various themes already typed up. However, the film he wanted to make immediately was *Les Misérables*. Before his blindness, he had read various versions of Victor Hugo's magnum opus and had planned to make a film about universal suffering. Even when he lost political favour, he held on to this idea. He and Sara agreed that the making of *Les Misérables* would be

their revenge. Gadalla was still very angry, and the making of *Les Misérables* cannot be separated from their fight for the studio. It was also a fight to restore Gadalla's reputation.

From 1999 to 2005, the studio space was occupied by the police, while the surrounding land was developed for other government functions. Police barracks and film canisters were all crammed into one small space – along with the Moviola. When I asked Sara why the government didn't destroy the films, she said, 'They don't care about film, they don't care about culture.'

Lawyers wouldn't take their case at first, because they were going up against a Bashir family member and widespread corruption. Eventually, the Gubaras found a champion and went to the courts every week for five years. Sara told me what it was like to engage in the legal battle for the studio and to see her father come back to life as an artist, while also taking over the filmmaking series for the Ahfad University for Women and becoming the filmmaker she intended to be. It was an intense period – Sara had also fallen and broken her leg when she returned. At the end, they were offered the small plot with only the studio – police barracks had been built on two-thirds of their land – as well as some money and a piece of land far away. Sara kept pushing for the full, original plot until they were threatened, at which point their lawyer encouraged them to take the offer. They began reoccupying the studio – including for the making of *Les Misérables* – before the new arrangement was finalized in 2006.

Sometime in early 2005, I went to Sudan on work; my day job focused on the impending genocide in Darfur. On one of my first nights, I met Sara Gadalla Gubara and Gadalla Gubara at a screening of his film *Barakat Al-Sheikh* at the French Cultural Centre in Khartoum. The Gubaras were outspoken artists. I would like to think we made sense to each other and developed mutual trust. I became friends with the family over time, and began to understand the significance of their making *Les Misérables*.



Stills from *Les Misérables* (2006). Courtesy: Arsenal Filminstitut.

I headed from Khartoum to São Paulo via Nairobi and Johannesburg, stopping to visit art spaces along the way. At the Film Resource Unit in Johannesburg, I was told of an online film catalogue, the African Film Library, that could distribute Gadalla's 1977 film *Tajouje*. It would pay \$20,000. This could help pay for the new film, *Les Misérables*. Gadalla propped himself up from his straw mat and asked what percentage I would expect. I hadn't thought about it. I suggested 5 per cent. The agreement went through, and later I helped arrange a post-production contact in Tehran.

Earlier that year, Gadalla had applied for permission to buy seventy-five 35 mm reels of film (ten of them with night sensitivity) from France and now needed help from the French Cultural Centre to transport them to Khartoum. This discussion evolved into the donation of film materials and a programme that would feature Gadalla's work. The reels were used for *Les Misérables*.

On 30 July 2005, John Garang, leader of the Sudan People's Liberation Movement, died in a mysterious helicopter crash while returning from a meeting with the Ugandan president. Khartoum became a war zone with fighting between locals and the southerners living in the internally displaced persons camps surrounding the capital. I remember we were all scared. Life was intense for a while.

A friend told me that a group of peace singers from the south – Stephen Ochalla's group, Orupaap – was in town and needed a place to practise. I brought it up with Sara and her father, thinking of the outdoor space behind their studio. They quickly agreed, suggesting that the Orupaap singers help maintain the space in return for its use so that we could soon throw a neighbourhood party. (We did.)

I had a short contract in Sudan, and I eventually left to create a network of artist residencies that would host artists in danger. The Gubaras helped form my vision.

The filming of *Les Misérables* happened over forty days after I left in 2005. When the film cans suddenly arrived from France, the Gubaras had

two months before the celluloid would degrade without proper storage facilities. Sara was the boss. She cast a twenty-person ensemble. She drew the storyboards. She talked with her father and then directed the scenes. If he heard something he didn't like, he would tell her how to retake it. He also added scenes.

Samhar, Gadalla's granddaughter, plays Cosette, and Jamal Hassan Saeed, a well-known TV actor and comedian, plays Jean Valjean. Gadalla convinced him to take a pay cut for the film, saying, 'You'll be remembered better in film, people will forget TV.' The twenty actors met three or four times to rehearse before the filming began.

There were no major sets. They used Sara's house, her sister's house, a boxing club and both Kobar and Omdurman prisons. The use of Omdurman was symbolic because this was where Gadalla had been incarcerated when Studio Gad was confiscated.

Post-production for the film was completed over three trips to Tehran in 2006. Once, Sara flew on the state plane with the national women's swimming team and stayed behind to work on the film. *Les Misérables* was the last 35 mm film to be made in Sudan.

Gadalla Gubara died of a heart attack in 2008, aged eighty-eight. Sara's husband Bella thinks that up to 10,000 people came to his funeral. Afterwards, the family sold the remaining studio plot, and the equipment was donated to Sudan University. Studio Gad, now an archiving, digitization and distribution project based at the Arsenal Institute for Film and Video Art, Berlin, holds some of the Gubara family film archive.

Artists and intellectuals have been leaving Sudan for several decades. More established filmmakers, like Ibrahim Shaddad of the Sudan Film Group, moved to Egypt, while younger groups such as the Sudan Film Factory operate out of Nairobi. The filmmakers stay in touch with each other – Sara called to get Shaddad's number while we were talking.

Sara and Her Family

Gadalla Gubara had six children – two boys and four girls. Sara is the third youngest and was born in the year of Sudanese independence, 1956. The first five children shared the same Egyptian mother. Noor Jihane, the last child, is the mother of the well-known Sudanese American musician AlSarah. I met her once at a Brooklyn house party, and more recently saw a video of her explaining how she controls the distribution of her own works. I swear I heard her grandfather, Gadalla, in her voice.

Sara Gadalla Gubara and her husband Bella have four children, two in Dubai and two in Egypt. They met when Bella was in medical school and Sara in film school in Cairo. In 2025, we met at their daughter Samhar's place in one of the new cities outside Cairo.

Sara is the president of the Sudanese Filmmakers Union, head coach of the Sudanese Swimming Federation, and vice president of Sudan's National Paralympic Committee. On 15 December – the last day of our visit – Sara was busy with a guest and signing papers for the International Paralympic Committee, into which Sudan was readmitted despite the impending war and its lapsed dues. Sara had been working on this from afar. 'Imagine how many more people will need the Paralympic Committee now (after the war),' she said to no one in particular. I had the sense that we were talking about Sara's two favourite things – sports and film – and I was thankful for the cover of a small crowd, both to discuss how we would follow up on all the plans we had made as well as say goodbye to each other.

Sara told me that at age two she was afflicted with polio in her left leg. At age five, she went crying to her father. The other kids wouldn't play with her and made fun of how she walked. He responded, 'You are strong and the most beautiful in the world.' Her parents took her to a doctor in Cairo who encouraged swimming as a helpful therapy. Sara had been known since the age of seven as a champion swimmer, and

later in life it was hard for her to change her image to that of a filmmaker, even though she'd gone to film school for five years.

When she told her father that she wanted to be taken seriously as a filmmaker, he said she'd have to work very hard. She did one year of drawing at the Sudan Fine Art College. Her father – who sometimes ran post-production for his films in Egypt because of its well-developed film industry – called her to say she needed to be in Cairo in two days to take an entrance exam for the Cairo Higher Institute of Cinema. She rushed to get a passport. There were five hundred candidates for thirty-five spots; she scored the highest marks of them all.

After a period in Saudi Arabia running her own studio – filming weddings and instructional videos – Sara came back to Khartoum to be with her father. Gadalla had a long history of working with Ahfad University for Women on films advocating for women's rights. Sara transitioned into this role immediately despite her broken leg. In 2004, she made a documentary, *The Lover of Light* (sometimes called *Light Worshipper*), about her father's blindness and all that he had done to draw attention to social issues in Sudan. Sara's film echoes her father's documentary, *Viva Sara* (1984), which celebrates Sara's determination and focuses specifically on her participation in the Capri–Naples swimming race in 1974. Gadalla named his film after the chants of the people who watched the race – 'Viva Sara!'

Sara offered me a 'delicious chicken', and her cousin brought sweet potatoes from another floor to share with the family. Mohammed, one of Sara's grandchildren, took time off from a game he was playing on his phone to order delivery from the mega-shopping mall across the mega-street. I asked him, why not eat the delicious chicken I'm eating? He said he had had it for lunch. I was amused at the thought of what his great-grandfather might think of the technology now in our hands. A Darfuri peace singer had told me that Gadalla Gubara is the G.O.A.T. (greatest of all time), and I passed this view on to his great-grandson. 'Like LeBron James,'

he responded knowingly. He shared his memory of leaving Khartoum for Cairo overland when the Rapid Support Forces had taken the capital. He described his mother Samhar's strength when her husband was turned away at the Egyptian border and she had to carry on alone with her three small children.

Sara and her family have refugee status. After years of working with displaced people, I weighed what I know about the difficulty of return against my friend's determination. She told me she'd be on the first plane back; Bella chimed in that she'd find him already there.

Bella offered to go back to Khartoum and check on the house and the archive, but the family agreed that one of their sons should do this. Although it is bombed out, Khartoum is supposedly safe, taken back from the rebels in March 2025. He would need two other people and seven days to organize the archive, Sara estimated. 'It would cost money,' she said. 'I know,' I said, 'I'm telling you that the Dutch fund has signalled it could pay for this – they've asked for your proposal – but you must send it personally.' I like thinking about logistics and how to bring a network of people who can help each other into play. This conversation was made all the more pleasant by the convivial atmosphere that surrounded the Gubara family. As we chatted and made plans, another guest announced that the Sudan's National Paralympic Committee had been recognized by the International Committee.

This was the last of our four meetings. I had brought my friend Amado Alfadni, an artist and archivist, with me. I wanted to broaden the discussion to include a follow-up plan for the creation of a safe, accessible Gubara family archive. I knew that it was an idea Sara was preoccupied with.

Sudan is what it is. It is the world's largest humanitarian crisis. I don't know how anyone is supposed to care about Sudan's film history without first crying for a nation with a forever war. But after all these years of problems, where should the physical archive be located? It has been endangered since 1998 at least. What if the Dutch fund and the German and Egyptian archives teamed up for this? There is the risk that any package shipped internationally could be intercepted. And yet, there is support to evacuate the Gadalla archive. The film canisters can't be crated until you know where they're going – they could draw unwanted attention. Sara's daughter's family now lives in Cairo, and a family member is the ambassador to Egypt. Could Cairo be the place where the archive might be cleaned and digitized in its entirety? A place where it can be organized in peace? That last day was spent in discussions like these.

At one point, we were talking about who could be the next Sudanese president, and Sara joked that it could be her. I agreed. She had a glint of hope in her eyes. Viva Sara!