

2018

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Recommended Citation

Elcheikh, Zeina (2018) "Tales from Two Villages: Nubian Women and Cultural Tourism in Gharb Soheil and Ballana," *Dotawo: A Journal of Nubian Studies*: Vol. 5 , Article 3.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.fairfield.edu/djns/vol5/iss1/3>

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Tales from Two Villages: Nubian Women and Cultural Tourism in Gharb Soheil and Ballana

Zeina Elcheikh

1. Introduction

Nubians, who have historically lived in the region stretching between the south of Aswan in southern Egypt and Dongola in central Sudan, and developed there a civilization dating back to 8000 BCE, have long been considered as a distinct population. They have been divided, on the basis of linguistic differences, into two main groups: Kenuzi–Dongolawi (Mattokki–Andaandi) and Nobiin (Mahas–Fadijja). In their (historical) geographical setting, Nubians had developed an intimate relationship with the river Nile, which was not just their only source of water, but the center of their daily activities and rituals, which were celebrated in a close association with the river. This lasted until the effort to regulate the flow of water in the Nile increased, first by the Old Aswan Dam in 1902 and its subsequent raisings in 1912 and 1933, and later by the High Dam in the 1960s and the resulting permanent lake which submerged 500 km of the Nubians' historical land.

The construction of the High Dam in Aswan threatened many historical sites with imminent submersion under the lake, and made them the focus of UNESCO and the international community in the greatest archaeological rescue operation of all time.¹ In order to save them, monuments and artifacts were displaced from their original settings. Colossal stone temples, such as Abu Simbel and Philae, were dismantled and relocated to safer locations where they were put together again, while others were transported to far-flung museums around the world as a reward to various countries

1 MOHAMED, "Victory in Nubia: Egypt," p. 5.

for their assistance.² However, while the world gathered to save the monuments of Nubia, no such attention was really paid to the fate of Nubians and to their cultural heritage, strongly connected through history to their original homeland, and which was doomed to be submerged.³ As a consequence of the traumatic experience of losing their homeland forever, “Nubian” has risen as a collective identity in Egypt.⁴

As we look at the present situation of Egyptian Nubians, their strategies for earning a living have turned them away from Old Nubia – and, for many, also away from New Nubia [...]. What then of Nubian culture and ethnicity? Much of our discussion has centered around the loss of language, traditional customs and ceremonies, even the commercialization of dance and music. Yet Nubians are far from disappearing as a distinctive part of Egyptian society.⁵

Culture and environment are interrelated, interwoven, and integrated, and places, like heritage, are socially constructed.⁶ Yet, societies change over time and accordingly their culture changes with them. Signals of the past are being preserved to satisfy images of the future, especially when the present offers no desirable ones, but it is not merely about saving old things but also about maintaining a response to them. This response, however, can be transmitted, lost, or modified,⁷ because generations overlap constantly, and preserving a whole context in itself is not possible.

However, change could be dealt with more effectively when a partial continuity is preserved simultaneously, not only of things and places but also of people.⁸ As far as tangible aspects are concerned, the extinction of a heritage, not a people, is relatively simple: intangible heritage has been shown to be “much less amenable to such direct action.”⁹ The Nubians’ gradual loss of their land, their labor migration, the forced displacement, and assimilative governmental policies, made them practice their values in a different setting than the original one. New practices accelerated changes in their culture and traditional economies, changes which were later complemented by the introduction of cultural tourism activities.

2 USICK, “Adventures in Egypt and Nubia,” p. 118.

3 ELCHEIKH, “Beyond the Borders: Nubian Culture and Cultural Tourism.”

4 FERNEA, “The Blessed Land,” p. 66.

5 FERNEA AND ROUCHDY, “Contemporary Egyptian Nubians,” p. 380.

6 TURAN, “Review: Anthropology and Architecture” p. 355; ASHWORTH, GRAHAM, and TUNBRIDGE, *Pluralising Pasts*, p. 54.

7 LYNCH, *What Time Is This Place?* p. 53.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 199.

9 ASHWORTH, GRAHAM, and TUNBRIDGE, *Pluralising Pasts*, pp. 105–107.

Ethnic Tourism and Authenticity

The distinctive traditions and customs of ethnic communities have attracted not only cultural anthropologists, but also tourists. Consequently, ethnic tourism has been increasingly developed as a particular trend of cultural tourism:

[W]ith the broad integration of ethnicity into tourism worldwide, the representation, consumption and experience of ethnicity has become fashionable. “Ethnic” has become a popular tourist icon and has been consumed and promoted locally and afar, from ethnic restaurants, neighborhoods and markets to ethnic museums, themed parks and tourist villages.¹⁰

Nubian culture in Southern Egypt seems to be no exception. Today in its quasi-original settings, it has become a new tourist attraction. In Aswan, the internationally famed tourist destination, “Nubian” has turned into a brand used even by Egyptian guides and dealers to attract visitors. Packaged tours to the South have started to schedule Nubian villages, and have also played a role in making the culture of Nubians polished and (over)simplified so that they become easier for tourists, especially foreigners, to understand and consume.

Tourists in the first place seek experiences, and what is “real,” “truthful,” and “authentic” is definitely a major tendency driving ethnic tourism.¹¹ Therefore, authenticity is a subject of unending discussions caused by ambiguities coming from a lack of how to measure and compare it, and assessing it is therefore, “extremely ambivalent.”¹² Yet, “if keenly seeking ‘the real thing’ is a dilemma for the tourists, it is even more so for those putting their cultures and heritages on display for touristic consumption.”¹³ On the one hand, activities associated with this flourishing tourism trend have created new job opportunities for Nubians. On the other hand, the tourism industry has caused visible changes in the lifestyle and customs of the community in some villages.

Approach and Methodology

This paper was a part of a Master’s Thesis in integrated urbanism at Stuttgart University. Work focused on the impacts of cultural tourism on identity and income in the Nubian villages of Gharb Soheil and Ballana, as well as on the role of the Nubian museum in Aswan.

10 YANG and WALL, *Planning for Ethnic Tourism*, p. 9.

11 XIE, *Authenticating Ethnic Tourism*, p. xiii; FRANKLIN, “The Tourist Syndrome,” p. 208.

12 LOWENTHAL, *The Past is a Foreign Country*, p. 18.

13 MACDONALD, *Memorylands*, p. 111.

Figure 1. Painting in Aswan in the tourist corniche area, showing a Nubian woman with traditional jewelry (Zeina Elcheikh, 2013).



The fieldwork took place in March 2013, and included interviews and meetings with Nubians from both villages, tourism professionals, museum officials, and tourist guides.

A small pool of initial informants helped in nominating, through their social networks, other participants; some were spoken to directly or via telephone. The informants (Nubian community, tourist guides, and expert groups) were encouraged, through a phenomenological methodology, to describe their experiences, thoughts, and memories. During the field visits, secondary meetings with several Nubian women took place. In this paper I draw on accounts of two groups of women, informally initiated by the two main female informants in the two different settings, in which they describe their experiences and reflect on the flourishing trend of “Nubian” cultural tourism, as an observer and as an active contributor.

Finally, it is important to mention that the sample of Nubian interviewees in this paper is not large, and the qualitative phenomenological research’s data, and the theme itself, are subjective. Moreover, the work did not include narratives about cultural tourism activities in the Sudan due to the lack of time and travel difficulties. Therefore, the ability to generalize the findings of this work is limited to the Nubian communities in southern Egypt, especially the two studied villages.

Nubian Women and Society

Nubians were known for their labor migration, due to the shortage of agricultural land, and because there were few other resources to exploit.¹⁴ Men voluntarily went to the urban centers, worked there

14 SCUDDER, “The Economic Basis of Egyptian Nubian Labor Migration,” p. 159.

for small wages, and returned to Nubia when they had accumulated some savings.¹⁵ There is a general image of Nubians in urban Egypt: they were thought to work only in service occupations such as cook, doorkeeper, and waiter. Nubian women have traditionally had the right to earn additional money as well.¹⁶

Although in Nubian society social segregation of males and females is not rigorously practiced as in many other traditional settings in the region, the labor migration of men resulted in a high proportion of working woman in Nubia. The society became largely a land of women, children and elderly men, as the Nubian author Idris Ali describes in *Dongola: A Novel of Nubia*:

[A]nd her waiting grew long because she was like the other forsaken women of Nubia, all of whom were waiting for men who had journeyed far away, to the cities of Egypt, the Arab lands, and overseas. [...] Women. Women. Wherever she went, they were all she saw, crowding into the markets, streets, parties, funerals, the telephone and telegraph office, the railroad station, at the public water spigot and sitting on benches, tense and argumentative, quarrelsome, and always shouting.¹⁷

In the past, Nubian women raised sheep and goats to sell, which helped support them when their husbands were away from home as labor migrants, but which they continued to do even with their husbands present at home.¹⁸ Even at present, Nubian women have a section in the Aswan marketplace reserved for them, where they sell eggs and fowl.¹⁹ Furthermore, women had a great role in Nubian society. They struggled to survive while their husbands left to the urban centers for work: they farmed, restored, and decorated the house. Moreover, they became, with the elderly, the main channels through whom traditions were channeled to the new generation.²⁰

Although the money that a woman makes is regarded as hers, a Nubian woman usually uses her money for her children, but she may also invest in some gold jewelry or in enlarging the house her family is living in.²¹ Women participated in several stages of the house construction, including plastering the walls and creating a smooth surface which they filled with traditional decorative paintings. They also produced plates and fans from material they would have found in the surroundings: straw, clay, etcetera. They also made bead

15 GEISER, "Some Differential Factors Affecting Population Movement," p. 188.

16 JENNINGS, "The Nubian Response to Tourism."

17 ALI, *Dongola*, pp. 93–94. See also ODDOUL, *Nights of Musk*.

18 JENNINGS, *The Nubians of West Aswan*, p. 72.

19 Ibid.

20 MERDAN, *Development Concepts and Implementation Strategies for New Settlements*, p. 104.

21 JENNINGS, "The Nubian Response to Tourism."

necklaces and bracelets which have been generally replaced, after the displacement, by a commercial version available in the markets.

As expected in a displacement of such magnitude, the first months were tremendously difficult in several parts of New Nubia. Yet, one year later, a dramatic change was reported in New Nubia, and a “new air of optimism” was stated to be palpable.²² Markets started to be run; people commuted daily between the new settlements and to Aswan; and many women were “busy with handicrafts introduced by the Egyptian Ministry of social affairs.” Many houses were adjusted in traditional Nubian styles by reasserting basic elements of their past architecture, and the bond between Nubian traditions and Nubian architecture has reappeared. Nubian women should be given credit for taking the initiative and participating in a widespread practice in most of the villages “to change the government house to Nubian homes.”²³

However, this “air of optimism” does not seem to have continued. For instance, the remodeling of houses did not go on for long, as people chose to spend money on what they could take with them, if actually they had to move again one day, rather “than wasting money on houses they do not even own.”²⁴ The resentment of Nubians toward the Dam was expressed in different forms of the arts, in which women played a significant role: music, songs, tales, poems, house decoration, paintings, and drawings on clothes, especially on bed sheets and handkerchiefs.²⁵

(Nubian) Cultural Tourism: Between *Now* and *Then*

In the 1980s, tourists who visited the botanical garden near Aswan started to enter the neighboring Nubian houses and get a cup of tea. Jennings, who observed the trend in the village of Gharb Aswan over a period of twenty-five years of fieldwork in Nubia mentioned:

[V]isitors have been coming to the west bank of Aswan for more than a century in order to see the pharaonic tombs and the monastery of St. Simeon, and Nubians have been meeting tourists there in order to offer aid and advice, or just out of curiosity, for almost as long. It was not until the High Dam was built, however, that the tourist industry in Aswan began to bloom.²⁶

22 FERNEA and KENNEDY, “Initial Adaptations to a New Life for Egyptian Nubians,” pp. 252–253.

23 FAHIM, “Community Health Aspects of Nubian Resettlement in Egypt,” p. 270.

24 FERNEA and ROUCHDY, “Contemporary Egyptian Nubians,” pp. 373–374.

25 SALIH, “Nubian Culture in the 20th Century,” p. 419.

26 JENNINGS, *Nubian Women of West Aswan*, p. 123.



Figure 2. Nubian women performing with the Nubian "Aragide" group at the Egyptian Center for Culture and Arts (ECCA)/Makan (Courtesy of the ECCA in Cairo).

Since the late 1980s, a growing interest in Nubian houses and culture in Egypt has been noticed, as "Nubian tourist guides and tourist shops" became "a regular feature in Aswan, added to the felluccas, which have for many years offered boat rides to foreign visitors." As a consequence of the interest in Nubian traditions shown by the tourism industry in southern Egypt, some commodification was reported to have taken place as a "packaging of expressive forms for the consumption of others," with Nubian dance acts featuring in every hotel and night club of Aswan, as well as certain ones back in Cairo.²⁷

The establishment of the Nubian Museum was of major importance to acknowledge Nubians and their heritage in Egypt. The museum was opened to the public in November 1997, and captured the attention of tourists and scholars who wanted to explore the rich history of Nubia. Moreover, it has become the main attraction in Aswan, not to be missed by any visitor to Southern Egypt. The total area of the site is 50,000 sq.m., consisting of 7,000 sq.m. for the museum's ground floor area, and 43,000 sq.m. allocated to the outdoor exhibit amphitheater and green areas. The museum's collections host artefacts excavated during the UNESCO campaign. These artefacts range in time from prehistory, through Egyptian domination, to the Christian and Islamic periods. The more modern part representing Nubian culture is found in the ethnographic exhibit. The outdoor area includes a sample of a typical traditional Nubian house, with its architecture and decorations.²⁸

27 FERNEA and ROUCHDY, "Contemporary Egyptian Nubians," p. 378.

28 ELCHEIKH, "Outside the Walls of the Nubia Museum," pp. 32–33, 36.

Figure 3. Part of the ethnographic diorama at the Nubia Museum in Aswan showing Nubian women in front of the traditional Nubian house (Zeina Elcheikh, 2013).



More recently, some Nubian villages started to attract more visitors. As tourism blossomed, many Nubian women in these villages, who used to sell their crocheted items and beaded necklaces, could no longer keep up with the growing demand of tourists, and started to sell Egyptian-made (sometimes China-made) items. Yet, the successful experience of “Nubian” cultural tourism has been assessed on the financial benefits it has brought to the communities, which is, accordingly, worth encouraging and promoting in other Nubian villages.²⁹

Following the uprising in 2011, the struggling state of the tourism industry in Egypt as a whole seemed to be one of the biggest threats to the country’s future. Tourism provides direct jobs for nearly three million people in Egypt, critical income to more than 70 industries and 20 percent of the state’s foreign currency, now desperately needed to prop up the plummeting Egyptian pound.³⁰ In 2010, prior to the political unrest in Egypt, fourteen million international tourists were reported to have visited the country. Yet, early 2011, when former President Hosni Mubarak was forced out, international tourism declined by forty-five percent.³¹ Today, Egypt is still recovering from the worst instability in decades, after the ousting of President Mohamed Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood in 2013. Despite reassurances from the Egyptian Tourism Ministry, the usual masses are keeping their distance.³²

29 Ahmad Saleh Ahmad, the General Director of the Abu Simbel monument & Nubian Temples at Supreme Council of Antiquities (telephone interview, 4 June 2013).

30 FAHIM, “Egyptians Struggle As Wary Tourists Stay Away.”

31 GUERRIERO, “The Number: 45%.”

32 ASSAD, “Egypt Travel.”



Figure 4. With Awada and her son at their house in Ballana (Zeina Elcheikh, 2013).

Tourism in Aswan and the Nubian villages has also had its share of this turbulent situation. The flourishing Nubian cultural tourism, and the profitable economic success it made for its communities seem to be threatened. This has forced many Nubians working in the industry to increase their advertising and organizing of festivals and tourism-related activities. Some of these activities were initiated with the aim of reviving the role of Nubian women in the decoration and wall painting of traditional houses.³³

Tales from Two Villages

The Nubian Village of Ballana

Ballana is a Fadijja Nubian village, and one of the villages displaced to Kom Ombo (around 50 km to the north of Aswan) because of the High Dam. The old Ballana was closer the Sudanese border, a few kilometers away from the Temples of Abu Simbel. The traditional houses in Old Ballana were of the typical Nubian style: several spatial rooms around an open courtyard or community room, and traditional decorations. Today, most of the houses are those cement-block houses issued by the government.

Nubians in the village live partially from state employment, while others run businesses in the Aswan area. Arab Gulf countries are on the top of the list for young men in Ballana seeking jobs. Tourism played a big role in the village, either as a primary or secondary source of income. Some of the Nubians go to Aswan to earn their living, while others head to further urban centers, and some to the Red Sea to work in tourism facilities and resorts.

³³ May Gad-Allah, the contact person and coordinator of the festival (telephone interview, 1 July 2013).

Figure 5. View in Ballana (Zeina Elcheikh, 2013).



Awada is the head of the informant family in Ballana. Her husband, who passed away a few years ago, owned a boat and worked in tourism near Aswan. She was nine years old when she left the old village, and recalled how they were put with their belongings in the boat. Awada also mentioned how people got very ill, and how many died after this huge shift in their lives. She also talked about how she had been involved in a handicrafts workshops initiated thirty years ago by the government after the displacement. However, this did not last for long:

Why were we all gathered to produce all these hand-made items? We did not need them all. Perhaps it was the government's way to keep us busy, instead of thinking of our fate.

Today her crafts serve as good gifts for newlywed friends and relatives. She has said, however, that things are not done the same way anymore, that traditions have changed. Marriages were arranged in the past by parents, for instance, and the groom was not allowed to talk to his bride before their wedding. Now things are completely different. Her mother, in her mid-seventies, added, although she did not speak Arabic, that daughters and granddaughters are dressed like other Egyptian girls, and their traditional *jarjar* are only worn at home. She considers the younger generations more flexible at dealing with the changes which her community has been gone through in the displacement.

Awada found the bridal scene and the jewelry section in the Nubia Museum the best among the others. They seemed to her an almost accurate presentation of weddings she used to attend in the old village. She was amazed by the pictures of saving Abu Simbel

and other monuments, and wondered, at the same time, why nobody showed the old villages being evacuated, when they were all forcibly displaced to Kom Ombo.

The youngest daughter wanted to visit the museum to know what the government would tell foreigners about Nubians. Just the museum's name, Nubian Museum, is for her a source of pride and an official acknowledgement of Nubians' culture and existence in Egypt. She expressed her dislike of the presentation of Nubians in the media, especially on television: "When an actor wants to play a Nubian's role, he immediately starts to talk a broken Arabic." However, she had a pleasant feeling, and was even proud to see the diorama, which reminded her of her mother's and grandmother's stories about Old Nubia. Although she believes that the right of Nubians to return to their geographical settings is not being seriously taken by the government, her mother still considers it a right, and even a long-awaited dream.

Awada emphasized that if tourists wanted to see Nubians and to learn more about their lives and traditions, they should come to see them in their houses and not in a museum. She interrupted herself, however, saying:

[B]ut here there is nothing to attract tourists. They will definitely need hotels, restaurants, and other facilities. It is just a desert here, we don't even have a view on the Nile.

She mentioned that an exhibition was made decades ago for tourism purposes, but the displacement villages cannot compete with the already established facilities and attractions in Aswan and in its direct proximity. The strong competition in the tourism business among Nubians and Egyptians near Aswan has forced her son to make his living in tourism but in Sharm El-Sheikh and the Red Sea resorts.

The Nubian Village of Gharb Soheil

Gharb Soheil is a Kenuzi Nubian village, located on the western bank of the Nile, around 15 kilometers to the south of Aswan. Although part of the village's population is engaged in diverse occupations (agriculture, state employment, trade, etc.), the majority is involved in tourism in one way or another. Gharb Soheil has become a part of packaged tours to Aswan, organized through prior arrangements between travel agencies in Cairo and Nubians in the village.

The majority of the tourist locations are concentrated in a small part of the village on the Nile's bank. Nubian (guest)houses and other rental rooms are dispersed within the village. The women living far from the tourist enclave go there to sell their handmade products

Figure 6.
Religious
decorations at
Iman's house in
Gharb Soheil,
showing a mosque
(Zeina Elcheikh,
2013).



(mainly beaded necklaces and bracelets, head coverings, bags, and other crocheted products), together with additional Egyptian-made and even Chinese-made souvenirs which could be found anywhere. Many women in the village make henna tattoos and dyes for brides as part of their ceremonies. This has nowadays become a special service offered to female tourists too.

Iman, the key female informant in the village, who earned some money from doing henna for brides, did not yet consider offering her services to female tourists coming to Gharb Soheil. Her aunt Fatheya – who did not speak Arabic but wanted to serve a cup of tea and some traditional bread – mentioned that she rarely goes out and heard only from Iman and other relatives that foreigners (tourists) come to the village. She has not yet met any of them, despite the fact that a Nubian house, run as guesthouse with rental rooms for tourists, is a few meters away from her. Iman explained that tourists usually come in organized groups, for an all-inclusive service in the village. It is usually arranged beforehand between the Nubians and agencies in Cairo. Other Nubians who recently started their tourism business also started to get more independent by creating webpages and Facebook pages to advertise their services, and show pictures of the village and the Nubian houses.

A friend of Iman who joined the meeting, and who lives uphill in the village, far away from the Nile and the tourist area said that “it is far away from what would attract tourists.” She believes that tourists are being attracted by the decorated Nubian houses, which they see at first when they arrive in the village. She mentioned that tourism has brought lot of benefits to those who are directly working in it, but she added, “I still cannot imagine myself charging anyone entering my house for visiting me and drinking a cup of tea. We



Figure 7. German tourists in the tourist's area in Gharb Soheil (Zeina Elcheikh, 2013).

were always known for our generous hospitality, and I do not want to lose this quality.”

Iman did not seem to be bothered by the tourists coming to the village, mainly because she does not encounter them. However, she mentioned that some of her neighbors felt unhappy with the new habits which have appeared among young men working with the tourists, especially drinking alcohol and smoking, which she considered against their religion and belief as well. Cultural exchange between Nubians in Gharb Soheil and foreign tourists imported some modernized patterns. Marwa, a woman who helps her husband in the tourism business they run in the village, has shown her satisfaction with the profit they gained from tourism. However she is afraid that her kids will become influenced by the behavior and dressing fashion of the foreign tourists. Women in the village are dressed in a very conservative way, while female tourists, especially foreigners, are not properly dressed and even sometimes wear swimming suits.

Discussion

The visit to the two villages showed that the residents running businesses, or at least engaged in tourism activities, are those frequently encountering tourists. On the other hand, those living in the village uphill in Gharb Soheil, or in displaced Ballana, rarely meet visitors. This is especially the case with women who are relatively more isolated, and hardly ever notice the presence of foreigners. In Gharb Soheil, where the tourism business is blossoming, unlike in Ballana, Nubians who live in the proximity of the tourist area or running their business there have continuous chances to meet tourists, who usually go only to this area. This creates a greater opportunity for

them, especially women, to sell their goods and offer services, and consequently increase or generate incomes.

Traditional Nubian houses were known for their architecture. They were usually spacious, with several large rooms around a courtyard for extended family members and guests. The main façade of the house was usually decorated with colorful geometric symbols referring to a variety of Nubian beliefs. Although the houses in Ballana are those made by the government for the displacement, one can see modest alteration within the house: decorating walls with hand-made plates, the presence of *zir*,³⁴ and few religious decorations on the facades.

The wall paintings in the region of Aswan are no longer a part of Nubian tradition, as they used to be. Today, they are done by men and professionals, sometimes of Nubian descent but more often by Egyptians. They became popular only with the increased tourism there and are intended specifically to attract the attention of visitors. Their motifs and styles today have hardly anything in common with the type of house decoration done formerly by the Nubian women in the old villages. In the new villages near Kom Ombo wall paintings are nowadays obsolete.³⁵

However, these traditional features still exist in many houses in Gharb Soheil, but the majority of them were made with a focus on shape and form to retain a “Nubian” atmosphere for tourists. This is also seen in many decorated façades that have lost the symbolic significance of traditional decorative patterns, and have become a kind of advertisement.

The *beit Nubi* looks more like a bazaar than it does like a home, but tourists cannot be expected to know that. It has just enough touches of the traditional to make it seem exotic for foreigners, yet enough of domestic that it can appear to be a “real” Nubian home.³⁶

In Gharb Soheil, the more one comes closer to the tourists’ area, the more houses are being decorated with motifs, sometimes exaggerated, not like the traditional symbols seen in traditional Nubian decorative arts, but more commercial.

The beaded necklaces and accessories, which Nubian women were known for, in addition to the colorful crocheted bags, hats, and traditional plates and baskets, had been used in the past in their daily life, and for decorating their houses, mainly the nuptial rooms. The Nubian interviewees – both in Gharb Soheil and Ballana – stated that these crafts have often become gifts, especially for their non-

³⁴ Water jars.

³⁵ Armgard Goo-Grauer, e-mail communication, 30 July 2013.

³⁶ JENNINGS, *Nubian Women of West Aswan*, p. 127.



Figure 8. Nubian house in the tourists' area in Gharb Soheil (Zeina Elcheikh, 2013).

Nubian friends, as a part of introducing their culture. However, the bazaars in Gharb Soheil are replete with all kind of souvenirs to be found in almost every shop in Aswan or even in Cairo, apart from the Nubian crafts and some masks and wooden sculptures showing sub-Saharan African features.

The establishment of a Nubian museum was a recognition of the part played by Nubians in Egypt. Yet it makes the recreated image of Nubians in the museum debatable: “living” culture and “museumified culture” are often very different things.³⁷ The showcased picture of Nubians and the real one are not quite the same. The first is a snapshot of a Nubian community at a certain period of time, while the second reveals a continuity of inherited traditions, despite all the changes that the community has gone through. Nubians in the real world outside the ethnographic exhibit live their daily lives differently.

Museumification aims at depicting perceived deviant groups as harmless and non-threatening. Their heritages are contained and marginalised as curious, colourful and somewhat quaint survivals from the past, which can be treated as museum artifacts or folklore. In the museumification of heritage, the intent is to break any possible connection between the viewer's present and the displayed past. The exhibits are presented as interesting for their antiquity, ingenuity, beauty or strangeness, but they possess no intrinsic ideological message or any significance to the present or the future.³⁸

37 ELCHEIKH, “Interpretation in Cultural Tourism: Nubian Culture in Southern Egypt,” p. 26.

38 ASHWORTH, GRAHAM, and TUNBRIDGE, *Pluralising Pasts*, p. 111.

One prominent opinion of Nubians, when facing exhibits of pre-Dam life, appears mainly among those who experienced the displacement; they believe it is an inaccurate image given to tourists. The ethnographic exhibit is, in a way, a tangible interpretation of stories told by older generations of Nubians who used to live like what is seen in the diorama. However, many Nubians, mainly women, have not yet visited the museum.

Nubians were wrenched out of their original context twice: first when they were uprooted from their historical homeland, and secondly when their picture in the museum, and in the public mind, dates back to pre-Dam times. It could cause disappointment for tourists to see the traditional Nubians' mud-brick houses, clothes and accessories only in museums, while finding out that Nubians in real life live in modern houses made of concrete and wear more westernized clothes.³⁹

Tourism is parasitic upon culture, to which it contributes nothing. If taken to the extreme, the economic commodification of the past will so trivialise or distort it that arguably this can result in the destruction of the heritage resource, which is its *raison d'être*.⁴⁰

McIntosh, Hinch, and Ingram found that the cultural experience offered in a commodified tourist setting may be authentic or a careful representation of certain aspects of a group's identity.⁴¹ Moreover, the "ostensibly more personalized relationship" between the consumer and the producer "is a performance of the authenticity of relationship."⁴² Authenticity is often referred to as genuineness, and in the context of cultural tourism it needs to be further discussed. Locals started to use imported Chinese- and Egyptian-made products instead of their traditional handmade crafts in a response to the increasing demand accompanied by the flow of tourists. However, crafts are continually being produced for both use by locals and sale to visitors. Perhaps one could argue that cultural tourism has helped keep them alive.

Nubians are well-known for choosing certain aspects of a new thing and incorporating it into their already existing culture. So we must be careful when we ask what threatens the authenticity of Nubian culture.⁴³

39 ELCHEIKH, "Outside the Walls of the Nubia Museum," p. 36.

40 ASHWORTH, GRAHAM, and TUNBRIDGE, *Pluralising Pasts*, p. 43.

41 MCINTOSH, HINCH, and INGRAM, "Cultural identity and Tourism," pp. 39–42.

42 MACDONALD, *Memorylands*, p. 124.

43 Anne M. Jennings, e-mail interview, 11 April 2013.

Cultures are not stagnant, and they are constantly reevaluating and remarking themselves and their past, which is a potent segment of their identity.⁴⁴ The fact that many women cannot communicate in Arabic reveals how keen they are to maintain their culture. Yet, as one sophisticated Nubian leader stated the dilemma, "we want to modernize our houses but not our values." It now seems more difficult than ever before to accomplish this, but perhaps the practicability with which Nubians have solved their problems in the past will enable them to reconcile the many conflicts inherent in their new life.⁴⁵

Conclusion

Cultural tourism offers a strong motivation to save identity and to create economic benefits. However, its sustainability depends on how much local community is involved, and in which ways. Many local Nubians working in tourism started to depend increasingly on incomes they earn from tourist activities. This creates a great challenge to make a profitable tourism business run without damaging its basis: the culture itself with its tangible and intangible features. However, with the sharply declining tourism industry in Egypt as a whole, Nubians working in this industry are facing more challenges. The risk that Nubian culture in Southern Egypt could be facing through cultural tourism is the loss of the simple social values of hospitality, and the loss of the ideal image of the Nubian village which might become debased and just a tourist's gaze. Yet Nubian villages continue to sustain their authenticity revealed by the presence of Nubians themselves, the continuity of their traditions and customs in their daily life, their insistence on maintaining their language, and keeping their identity, an identity which has been historically shaped by interaction with outsiders, seen today as tourists.

44 ZIMMERMAN, "The Past is a Foreign Country," n.p.

45 FERNEA and KENNEDY, "Initial Adaptations to a New Life for Egyptian Nubians," p. 262.

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