



2018

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## Recommended Citation

Jaeger, Marcus (2018) "Aspects of Gender in Dongolawi and Kenzi Nubian Wise Sayings and Proverbs," *Dotawo: A Journal of Nubian Studies*: Vol. 5 , Article 6.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.fairfield.edu/djns/vol5/iss1/6>

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# Aspects of Gender in Dongolawi and Kenzi Nubian Wise Sayings and Proverbs

Marcus Jaeger

This paper presents insights into gender issues among the Dongolawi and Kenzi Nubians, and specifically Dongolawi and Kenzi Nubian women's lives, as provided by their proverbs and sayings, touching on related areas where helpful.<sup>1</sup> At the time of writing (May 2017) the corpus consists of nearly 300 wise sayings and proverbs in the Dongolawi language, and nearly 350 wise sayings and proverbs in the Kenzi language, with some of them occurring in both.

Dongolawi and Kenzi are two related Nubian languages spoken in the Nile valley of northern Sudan and southern Egypt. The speak-

1 I want to thank the following Dongolawi speakers who presented me with wise sayings and proverbs relating to gender: 'Abd al-Ra'uf (Old Dongola), Ahmad Hamza (Lebeb), Ahmad Sati (Buunaarti), El-Shafie El-Guzuuli (Khannaag), Muhammad Hasan (Tura'), Sami 'Abdallah (Aartigaasha), Shawqi 'Abd al-'Aziz (Haminaarti). Some further Dongolawi speakers helped me to correct hearing and writing the proverbs, and understand their meanings: 'Abd al-Qadir Samiltood, al-Sir 'Abd al-Jalil, Fagiri Muhammad, Ibrahim Muhammad, Idris Ahmad, Kamal Hisayn, Mu'amr al-Fil, family of the late Mahmud Sa'id Mahmud Sati, Muhammad Sharif, Samira al-Malik. Amna Mustafa and her relatives (Binna) were also very active in collecting Dongolawi proverbs. I want to thank the following Kenzi speakers who presented me with wise sayings and proverbs relating to gender: Wife and sister of 'Abd al-Qadir 'Abd al-Ra'uf (Dakke), female relatives of the late 'Az Aldin Qasim (Dabood), 'Abd al-Sabur Hasim (Dakke), Fathi 'Abd al-Sayid (Dakke), Khalid Karar (Siyaala), Muhammad Subhi (Elephantine Island), Ramadan Muhammad (Allaqa), from Sa'id Zaki (Awaad Island), Sayid al-Hasan (Aniiba), Umm 'Umar Hasan (Dabood). Some further Kenzi speakers helped me to correct hearing and writing the proverbs, and understand their meanings: 'Abd al-Hakim 'Abdu, 'Abd al-Rahman 'Awaq, Ahmad 'Uthman Hasan, 'Ali Ahmad, wife of 'Amm Sali, Muhammad 'Abd al-Basit, the late Mahmud Muhammad, the late Muhammad Gum'a, Muhammad Jabali, Mustafa Rabi', Thabit Zaki, 'Umar Hasan. Also very active in collecting Kenzi proverbs were the female relatives of 'Abd al-Qadir 'Abd al-Ra'uf (Dakke), 'Adila Sulayman (Dehmit), 'Aisha 'Abd al-Raziq (Jebel Togoog), Hajja 'Atiat Sabr and her lady friends (Dabood), Khayria Musa (Maharraqa). While not a Kenzi Nubian, yet a good Kenzi speaker, Dr Armgard Goo-Grauer provided further input in correcting and analysing the Kenzi proverbs on gender. And last but not least, during the process of writing the paper Anne Jennings provided most valuable support in all its stages. Carolyn Fluehr-Lobban peer-reviewed an earlier version, Derek Cheeseman corrected English spelling and grammar of an earlier version, and Giovanni Ruffini did a thorough job of editing. I want to thank all of them.

ers name their languages Andaandi<sup>2</sup> and Mattokki.<sup>3</sup> Genetically the Nubian languages are classified as members of the Eastern Sudanic subgroup of the Nilo-Saharan phylum, along with other Nubian languages located in the Nuba Mountains and in Darfur (both Western Sudan). Dongolawi and Kenzi speakers are shifting towards Arabic with restricted or no intergenerational language transmission. Their proverbs are even more endangered and many speakers, especially younger ones, do not remember them.

Some wise sayings and proverbs were provided by Nubians as a list or even in published form.<sup>4</sup> I worked on orthography,<sup>5</sup> determined meaning, and usage. Other proverbs were collected from individual speakers, especially while regularly visiting the respective language areas in Dongola and Aswan/Kom Ombo since 2009 where I became well known. When remembering a proverb or understanding its meaning many Kenzi and Dongolawi speakers were most willing to pass it on. During informal visits the speakers frequently initiated a discussion about proverbs.

Nubian culture and wisdom are presented as they are perceived by speakers who are usually above 40 years of age and at least theoretically respect their Nubian culture and values. Non-mother tongue speakers, who nowadays form the majority of the Dongolawi and Kenuzi, are nearly always excluded. Generalizing, I may classify my collaborators as culturally “conservative” and above average in terms of formal and informal education. Religiously they represent the whole spectrum from agnostic to very conservative Muslims. These orientations need to be considered when interpreting the proverbs and their meanings as provided by the speakers.

The speakers were aware that their proverbs and further insights were to be presented at conferences outside of Nubia and published. They even encouraged it. That will have been reflected in their answers. However, after knowing most of them for an extended period, I may assume that for most of them strategic considerations were not in the foreground even with a topic as sensitive as gender. Some of the speakers involved are known for their especially direct answers. At one place a speaker was reprimanded by another

2 “Dongolawi” is a term used by outsiders, and by insiders when speaking in Arabic. The language name “Andaandi” means “which belongs to us.” There is no insider term for the people group itself. “Oshkir” is an outsider term applied by Nobiin speakers. I use the term “Dongolawi,” as in other academic papers.

3 “Kenuzi” or “Kenuz” as an ethnic group and “Kenzi” as a language name are terms used by outsiders, and by insiders when talking in Arabic. When speaking in Kenzi both the language and the ethnic group are designated as “Mattokki,” with different interpretations of the term. In order to stay consistent with the term “Dongolawi” I use the terms “Kenuzi” for the speakers and “Kenzi” for the language.

4 Especially HĀMĪD KHABĪR AL-SHAIKH, *Nubian Wisdom and Proverbs from Dongola*.

5 Based on EL GUZUULI & JAEGER, “Aspects of Dongolawi Roots and Affixes Related to Orthography.”

speaker in my presence for not hiding the problems which had just occurred among that group. I am thankful for all the insider information entrusted to me and to my wife Eliane during our visits.

Proverbs and wise sayings reflect and transmit not only wisdom and long-standing experience, but also cultural stereotypes of self and others. Both a proverb's literal translation<sup>6</sup> and meaning-based translation<sup>7</sup> are taken into account. While a proverb's literal translation remains mainly unaltered, its meaning-based translation shifts due to the context in which a proverb is uttered, and, especially in our topic, the speaker's perception of women and their role. With a few proverbs using archaic words, any meaning-based translation is difficult to reconstruct.

Bibliographies related to gender and African proverbs which provide helpful insight for this research are Obododimma OHA (1998) from Ivory Coast, Jeylan HUSSEIN (2005) from Ethiopia, and Tunde AKINWUMI, Olufunke ADEBOYE, and Tosin OTUSANYA (2011) from Nigeria. Geographically closer to the Nile-Nubian valley is Salwa AHMED (2005) from Western Sudan.

Oha codifies fifty Igbo proverbs from Ivory Coast according to whether they are face-threatening, non-face-threatening, or neutral.<sup>8</sup> The vague term "non-face-threatening" is defined more precisely as "promotion of face for woman."<sup>9</sup> Within a shame-honor framework, one can speak of "honoring of women." Part of women's negative portrayal in Igbo and some other cultures' proverbs is due to "proverb use [being] a male art."<sup>10</sup> Oha goes as far as considering some proverbs about women as not "cultural models of 'wisdom'."<sup>11</sup> The absence of critical analysis of gender-related rhetoric in African proverbs is lamented. As meaning-based translations of the Igbo proverbs are missing, at some places the paper's arguments are not easy to comprehend.

For Hussein "[i]n Africa, gender ideology figures importantly in proverbs,"<sup>12</sup> having "harmful effects,"<sup>13</sup> especially in terms of control-

6 The literal translation (or allusive plane) renders the proverb nearly "word-for-word" into the meta-language English with slight syntactical reordering of words and morphemes.

7 The meaning-based translation is also called the "interpretative plane" as it reflects the interpretation of the "interpretative community"; see FISH, *Is There a Text in This Class?*, pp. 147-174. While Fish develops his theory of interpretative communities for readers of written texts, it is possible to extend it to speakers of oral texts.

8 OHA, "The Semantics of Female Devaluation in Igbo Proverbs," p. 89.

9 *Ibid.*, p. 90

10 *Ibid.*, p. 94. Among the Kuku from Southern Sudan proverbs are coined and employed by men only. In particular, the negotiations before a wedding, where only men are present, rely heavily on the proper use of proverbs, some of them speaking derogatorily about women. The publication of Kuku proverbs would result in an opening of men's sphere to women (Scopas Poggo, p.c., 2015).

11 *Ibid.*, p. 94.

12 HUSSEIN, "The Social and Ethno-Cultural Construction of masculinity and femininity in African Proverbs," p. 60.

13 *Ibid.*, p. 61.

ling women. As Oha does, Hussein observes that “[l]ittle attention was given to this aspect of the function of proverbs in Africa.”<sup>14</sup> Not restricting herself to one language, Hussein collects proverbs from a wide range of African languages in order to “intervene in cultural practices,”<sup>15</sup> uncover sexism, the continuation of women’s subordination, and “the intolerability toward a woman’s failure to bear [a] child,”<sup>16</sup> resulting in a classification of gender-related African proverbs into 13 proposed categories. There is an underlying assumption that African proverbs inherently show a negative attitude towards women. Like Oha, Hussein looks at the literal translation, thereby hoping to overcome the ambiguity that “a single proverb can have divergent meanings used under varied circumstances.”<sup>17</sup> Later on I will employ her categories in order to classify gender-related Don-golawi and Kenzi proverbs.

Akinwumi, Adeboye, and Otusanya’s paper reveals a more positive attitude towards gender issues when looking at a female Yoruba merchant born at the end of the 19th century, who became proverbial when a female(!) elder uttered a statement about her. The proverb is placed in its historical context where until the early 20th century (i.e., into the colonial period) Yoruba women “occupied important positions in the local and state economy as well as in the political arena.”<sup>18</sup> The authors warn “against the dangers of interpreting African realities based on western oppositional male/female binary and its attendant privileging of male categories.”<sup>19</sup>

Akinwumi, Adeboye, and Otusanya’s paper results in a different outlook on African proverbs than the two former ones. In some African cultures proverbs are coined by women, as in their case. There are African proverbs honoring women and describing them in a non-patriarchal way. Cultural clues need to be interpreted within their own framework and not within a postmodern Western male-power/female-subordination dichotomy or related ideology.

Acknowledging the negative attitude towards women in many Western Sudanese Arab proverbs, Salwa Ahmed’s PhD thesis supports Oha and Hussein. In her collection and analysis of about 850 proverbs she observes that “proverbs are important weapons in

14 Ibid., p. 61.

15 Ibid., p. 62. Hussein avoids the term “status,” which is used a lot when discussing gender but is not really defined. See also FAITHORN, “Gender Bias and Sex Bias,” p. 277.

16 Ibid., p. 73.

17 Ibid., p. 64.

18 The article by AKINWUMI, ADEBOYE, and OTUSANYA, “Rabi “Alaso Oke” of Colonial Lagos.”

19 Ibid. That point is illustrated by WHITEHEAD and CONAWAY, *Self, Sex, and Gender in Cross-Cultural Fieldwork*, p. 11 who write about the Kafe women of Papua New Guinea: “Kafe women do not define their social status primarily in terms of relationships to men, as do many Western women. Hence the concepts of subordination and submissiveness had little or no relevance in analysing female-male relationships among the population [...] studied.” Instead, among the Kafe, kinship considerations outweigh gender and sex considerations. The identity of being a person rather than a woman is primary.

men's hands within a particular society.”<sup>20</sup> In the context of oppressive gender-related proverbs Salwa Ahmed seems to justify her Islamic faith. If a proverb supports a behavior not fitting a Western mind she frequently adds apologetically that the behavior encouraged is un-Islamic. In conclusion, Salwa portrays Islam as essentially consistent, without critical insight into the different layers Islamic sources provide on gender issues.<sup>21</sup>

In order to be just towards their origin and their belonging to a shame-honor-oriented culture, Dongolawi and Kenzi Nubian proverbs are put into historical context. Subsequently the life of daughter, wife, and mother according to the proverbs is described, revealing their teaching about honoring, dignifying, and promoting women and their abilities. Some analysis follows, classifying the Nile-Nubian proverbs according to Hussein's criteria. Do they encourage “sexual violence,” “ridicule women,” “instigate men to power and control,” or frame “women as passive, acted upon rather than acting”?<sup>22</sup> Finally the shift from Nubian languages to Arabic is taken into account. Will a shift in proverbs result in a shift in women's status?

Being a male researcher, opportunities to obtain women's insights were limited. Being influenced by segregated Middle Eastern culture, contact with Nubian female research participants was limited, especially in the two Nubian-language areas around Dongola and Aswan/Kom Ombo. Still, the research is not without female influence. Hāmid Khabīr, the first Dongolawi to gather Dongolawi proverbs, collected proverbs to a great extent from his sister.<sup>23</sup> The Fadija speaker Maher Habbob got his collection of Kenzi proverbs from two female Kenzi students and kindly passed it on to me.<sup>24</sup> Es-

20 SALWA AHMED, *Educational and Social Values expressed by Proverbs in two Cultures: Knowledge and Use of Proverbs in Sudan and England*, p. 20, citing NASHWAN, *Women in Popular Proverbs in Jordan and Palestine*, p. 127.

21 As *ibid.*, pp. 88–89: “Islam grants complete rights to women. [...] One should mention here that Islam has highly honoured women. [...] (mis)treatment of women is governed by customs and tradition, not by Islam's view.” Bartlotti, *Negotiating Pakhto*, p. 203, observed a similar behavior among his Pashtun research participants when discussing the Pashtun proverb “Islam is under the sword.” In that respect Salwa Ahmed is an insider missing the critical reflection of the relationship between religion and proverbs as “competing forms of moral authority.” (Bartlotti, *Negotiating Pakhto*, p. 2)

22 HUSSEIN, “The Social and Ethno-Cultural Construction of masculinity and femininity in African Proverbs,” pp. 66, 68, 70.

23 HĀMID KHABĪR AL-SHAĪKH, *Nubian Wisdom and Proverbs from Dongola*, and Hāmid Khabīr, p.c. Nearly half of the Dongolawi proverbs discussed in this paper are taken from him. That matches the overall number of Dongolawi proverbs in my proverb collection, in which nearly half of all proverbs stem from him. Recently Hāmid Khabīr has published an updated and extended version of his Nubian proverbs which, however, needs a thorough revision due to careless editing and printing, even in his own eyes. Also, the additional proverbs rarely deal with gender. Therefore, this version has not been considered in this paper.

24 However, only one of their proverbs deals literally with women. I do not assume the students omitted proverbs intentionally. At some stage easterners were more liberal in giving proverbs than western researchers. BURCKHARDT, *Arabic Proverbs*, p. iii, describes the way he edited his Egyptian Arabic proverb collection: “Of those [proverbs] he [Burckhardt

pecially in the Kenzi-speaking area some women provided me with further proverbs.<sup>25</sup>

### Historical overview

Even if historical references are rare, proverbs originate and need to be understood within a people's historical environment. In the following, I restrict historical aspects to outsider sources which talk about the status of ancient and modern Nubian women, beginning in the Kushite period covering the Christian and Muslim periods until more recent history:

The Kushite monarchy was perhaps matrilineal; there were at least five reigning queens. Kushite royal women had very high status, and queens' tombs in the royal cemeteries contained great wealth.<sup>26</sup>

Under the possible assumption that Aesop was a Nubian<sup>27</sup> it is noteworthy that the four books ascribed to Aesop himself do not include a single fable which speaks disparagingly about women or presents western negative stereotypes of women. Instead they reflect women's high status. In the fable "Of the Wicked Thief and the Son" the bad son is likened to the father, not to the mother.<sup>28</sup> All fables in the latter sections speaking negatively about women are ascribed to other collectors.

The high status of a Nubian woman connects well with the ancient title of queen mother or "Candace" among Kushite royalty, at least from the time of King Taharqa to the time of the New Testament.<sup>29</sup>

Later, during the Nubian Christian period

speaking about himself] has omitted a considerable number, many being altogether uninteresting, and others so grossly indelicate that he could not venture to lay them before the public, although it must be acknowledged that they excelled in wit."

25 While among female Andaandi speakers I collected ten proverbs; among female Mattokki speakers there was a greater yield of 66 proverbs. About one third of the Kenzi proverbs in this paper initially were collected from students, one third were given by Kenuzi originating from Heesa Island, having then settled in Dakke during the last century, and the last third from other Kenzi speakers. I would have preferred to include more proverbs uttered in a women-only environment. While my wife had planned to collect further Dongolawi proverbs during a visit to the Sudan in March/April 2015 that fell through.

26 JENNINGS, *Nubian Women of West Aswan*, p. 24. While it is acknowledged that after Kushite times in the Nile valley there was a lot of mingling with other people, so that Kushites are not necessarily the same as Nubians, there is a geographical and historical continuum from Kushites to Nubians. Therefore I include the quote.

27 As concluded by LOBBAN, "Was Aesop a Nubian Kummaji (Folk teller)?" However Giovanni Ruffini (p.c., 2018) urges caution. He considers the tradition that Aesop was "Ethiopian" as very late with earlier commentators giving an explicitly Greek origin to him.

28 AESOP, *Aesop's Fables*, p. 59. The fable is more like a parable.

29 Acts 8:27; the Greek original text speaks of "Κανδάκη" (Aland and Aland, *Novum Testamentum Graece et Latine*).



The position of women [during the Christian period] was higher than in the post-Christian period. Women were able to buy, sell, make donations; and they could appear as witnesses, as documents from Qasr Ibrim show. They enjoyed access to education – at least one woman acted as a scribe for one document [...]. In Meinarti there were three Coptic steles of women who were reckoned to be owners of churches.<sup>30</sup>

In the first half of the 20th century a medical doctor working in Egyptian Nubia praised women highly:

Of all the women in the East, those of Nubia are the most virtuous. [...] Public women, who are met in hundreds in Egypt, are not tolerated in Nubia.<sup>31</sup>

Of course Nubian Egyptian women were in a unique situation:

Before their relocation [i.e. *hijra* to Kom Ombo in 1963/64] a long process of labor migration had brought most Kunuz [men] to Egyptian cities. The segment remaining in Nubia was mostly female by a ratio of 3 to 1. Most of its adult women were widowed, divorced, or married to migrants.<sup>32</sup>

This led to many women supporting themselves, either partially or entirely, by agriculture or in commerce. Therefore, a dichotomy of men's and women's domains was not possible.

Also in Sudanese Nubia, women held a prominent position. Andreas Kronenburg, a German anthropologist working in the second half of the 20th century mainly in the Dongolawi speaking area, is referred to as follows:

One of his most important anthropological observations concerned the elevated position of women in Nubian society, in spite of Islamic tradition which, although dominant later, was hitherto unable to dismantle the earlier high position of women proven to exist in the Napatan period.<sup>33</sup>

30 WERNER, *Das Christentum in Nubien*, p. 344; translated from German: "Die Stellung der Frau war [in christlicher Zeit] höher als in nachchristlicher Zeit. Frauen konnten kaufen, verkaufen, konnten stiften und konnten als Zeuginnen auftreten, wie die Dokumente von Ibrim zeigen. Sie hatten Zugang zu Bildung, mindestens eine Frau erscheint als Schreiberin eines Dokumentes. [...] In Meinarti fanden sich drei koptische Stelen von Frauen, die als Besitzerinnen von Kirchen bezeichnet wurden."

31 ENDERLIN, "The Nubians Past and Present," pp. 11, 12. There are similar statements to be heard today.

32 CALLENDER, "Gender Relations in Kenuz Public Domains," 193.

33 SCHOLZ, "Konferenzbericht: 6. International Konferenz für nubische Studien," 444; translated from German: "Zu seinen bedeutenden ethnologischen Beobachtungen gehört



Even closer to the turn of the 20th century an American political scientist writes:

Muslim Sudanese women [...] are among the strongest and most independent women that I have ever met.<sup>34</sup>

The daily chores of a Nubian woman were manifold, not only domestic but also outside of the home. One Kenzi elder born before the *hijra* describes the daily routine: a woman carried water from the river Nile up to her house, fed the pigeons and other animals, prepared and kneaded the flour, prepared breakfast, concerned herself with agriculture, and looked after the fields. Later, she prepared lunch, afternoon tea, and dinner. While bread lasted until the next day other food was cooked fresh each day. *Jakuud* was shared with neighbors. If some bread remained at the end of day, it was dried and prepared as *garguush*.<sup>35</sup> In Old Nubia husband and wife worked in partnership as they shared their work in agriculture and made their decisions together.<sup>36</sup>

Nubian oral stories underline the importance of women, especially as wives and mothers. One Dongolawi fairytale<sup>37</sup> begins with the king's daughter telling her father repeatedly: *ten endotonum* meaning "that is from his wife," implying that without his wife a husband cannot achieve anything of importance. As the father doubts that statement he takes all his daughter's property away and marries her to a lazy pauper. She does not give up, makes her lazy husband work, and successfully improves his character. Finally they build a castle like her father's to which the father is invited. He has to admit that his daughter was right, that "that is from his wife." In their discussions many modern-day Nubians underline women's positive status in history and lament its change. Women were regarded as bearers and transmitters of culture and peacemakers. They sowed the seed of peace in their children. In case of strife and discord between children both mothers acted as intermediators to settle the dispute,<sup>38</sup> thereby being role models for children who later

u.a. die hervorgehobene Position der Frau in der nubischen Gesellschaft, trotz der später dort dominierenden islamischen Tradition, die bislang nicht in der Lage war, die frühere, seit der napatäischen Periode belegte hohe Stellung der Frau abzubauen."

34 HALE, "Alienation and Belonging: Visions for Sudan's Post-Islamist Future," p. 30. That includes Nubian women who are Muslim Sudanese. Hale does not research the historic roots of Sudanese women's strength and independence.

35 Muhi 'Abd al-Fatāh, p.c., 2015. *Jakuud* is a Nubian stew, *garguush* a kind of hard biscuit or rusk.

36 Muḥammad Maḥmūd Muḥammad, p.c., 2015. He is Fadidja with one of his father's parents being Kenzi. While Muḥammad Maḥmūd was born after the *hijra* most probably he refers to what he heard from his deceased father, who was regarded as an expert on Nubian culture. Similar the Dongolawi El-Shafie El-Guzuuli, p.c., 2015.

37 MASSENBACH, *Nubische Texte im Dialekt der Kunūzi und der Dongolawi*, pp. 152–156

38 As Fathi 'Abd al-Sayid, p.c., 2015, as well as other Nubians.

as grown-ups resolved disputes on a larger scale.<sup>39</sup> While the following proverb does not speak explicitly about women, it was uttered by a woman and interpreted in relation to ancient women:

K01<sup>40</sup> ΕΚΚΙ Δ̄ ΔΟΛΕΛ, ΚΟΥΛΟΥΓΙ Δ̄ ΓΟΛΛΙ.

*ekki aa dolel, kulugi aa gollī.*

“The one who loves you, swallows a stone.”

- ▶ If there is love, there is forgiveness. / If there is love, everything said sounds good.

That led to mothers and older sisters being honoured, respected highly, worshipped or even regarded as “holy”.<sup>41</sup> Younger brothers obeyed their older sisters.<sup>42</sup>

Of course historical memories are easily flawed by idealization. Still, a positive attitude towards women is reflected in a Nubian proverb available both in Dongolawi and Kenzi:

D01<sup>43</sup> ĒN KĀN CΑΒΛΟ ΤΑΝΝΑΝ.

*een kaan sablo tannan.*

“The wife is [like] the large water trough of the house.”

K02<sup>44</sup> ĒN KĀNΔ Δ̄ΑΒΙ ΤΕΡΑ.

*een kaana jaabi tera.*

“The wife is [like] the channel of the house.”

- ▶ The wife rules the house. / The wife brings everything good to the house. [both Dongolawi and Kenzi]

In a society living on the edge of the desert, flowing water literally means life in the home.<sup>45</sup> So this proverb considers woman as the life-giver and the one who keeps the family “alive.” One example is the fact that some Nubian women still nowadays manage the family finances.<sup>46</sup>

<sup>39</sup> Compare the title of a prominent book on Nubia: FERNEA, *Nubians in Egypt*.

<sup>40</sup> From the female relatives of the late ‘Az al-Dīn Qāsim, Dabood. The proverb number relates to the forthcoming collection of Dongolawi and Kenzi proverbs and wise sayings. Dongolawi proverbs are marked by D, Kenzi proverbs by K. All proverbs are written in Old Nubian characters as preferred by Nile Nubians and in Latin characters, making it easier for readers not accustomed to the Old Nubian characters. Usually the literal translation follows, then one or more meaning-based translations, marked by “▶.”

<sup>41</sup> ‘Abdel Wahhab ‘Abd al-Gabir, p.c., 2014. He is from a Fadija background.

<sup>42</sup> Muḥammad Maḥmūd Muḥammad, p.c., 2015.

<sup>43</sup> From HX30. Both research participants, Dongolawi and Kenzi, interpreted *een* as “wife.” Their interpretation parallels Jewish thought as in the Old Testament, Proverbs 31. In Muslim thinking such a saying would honour a mother.

<sup>44</sup> From Fathi ‘Abd al-Sayid, Dakke

<sup>45</sup> I want to thank Anne Jennings for discussing that aspect.

<sup>46</sup> Observed by Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Raḥman (p.c., 2016) and myself.

When listening to Nile Nubians talking about the former status of Nubian women, one is reminded of a description of a Swiss Bernese farmer's wife during the first half of the 19th century:

Just as a farmer's son happily becomes a farmer, why should a farmer's daughter not happily become a farmer's wife? It is not because of the husband himself [...] but because of the independent regime that a self-respecting farmer's wife has, and the respect that is hers by right; for [in the canton of Bern] a farmer's wife is the family's intermediary between God and man, the embodiment of the special providence in all things material.<sup>47</sup>

Therefore it may be assumed that the Nile-Nubian view of gender and women shares common aspects with the Yoruba one as discussed in Akinwumi, Adeboye, and Otusanya's paper.

There were two events in Sudanese history which led to a shift in Sudanese women's ancient status and also had consequences for Nubian women. The first was the introduction of slavery in the Funj kingdom, which included the Dongola region:

One consequence of domestic slavery among the middle classes of the Heroic Age [of Sinnar] was a gradual change in the role of women, who found themselves relieved of their traditional contributions to production. Symbolic of their new status was the invention of the symbolic fiction that the female of the species cannot swim – a skill hitherto vital to rural folk in a land where cultivated islands were numerous but boats were few.<sup>48</sup>

The second and even more severe shift took place during the rule of the Mahdiya in the late 19th century:

As a result [...], the women of Kordofan experienced a transformation that subjected them to a decade and half of regulation by the state unlike anything experienced by their mothers or grand-mothers during the Turkiyya or under the rule of the Funj or the Für.<sup>49</sup>

47 GOTTHELF, *Geld und Geist*, p. 47, translated from German: "Wie der Bauernsohn gerne ein Bauer wird, warum sollte die Bauerntochter nicht auch gerne eine Bäuerin werden? Es ist nicht nur wegen dem Manne selbst, [...] sondern wegen dem unabhängigen Regiment, das eine rechte Bäuerin führt, und der Achtung, in der sie steht; denn eine rechte Bäuerin [im Kanton Bern] [...] ist die Mittlerin des Hauses zwischen Gott und Menschen, ist die sichtbare Vorsehung in allen leiblichen Dingen."

48 SPAULDING, *The Heroic Age of Sennar*, p. 193

49 DECKER, "Females and the State in Mahdist Kordofan," p. 100; talking about the Haraza Nubian women of northern Kordofan. Decker does not clarify in what regards the position of women changed except that their situation became more regulated, meaning determined by Islamic sharia law as understood by the Mahdi and his followers. So far I have not come along any source, oral or written, describing the situation in the Nile-Nubian areas; however, similarities can be assumed.

While this quote talks about Kordofan, and the Mahdiya government was short-lived, its founder, the Mahdi, was born on an island close to Dongola, and before the advent of modern railways and roads Kordofan was as distant from Dongola as Khartoum. Everywhere in the Sudan similar developments were experienced. Later, the increase of Arabic Muslim cultural influence in the 20th century impacted Sudanese Nile-Nubian women, too.

In Egypt among the Kenzi Nubians other historical events showed similar results, especially the *hijra* when Nubians had to leave their home land and were resettled in the Kom Ombo area surrounded by non-Nubian Egyptians.

### The Life of a Nubian Woman – According to the Proverbs

This paper centers on the life of Nubian women as described by their proverbs. Further insights into the life of a Kenzi Nubian woman before the relocation to Kom Ombo in 1964, especially the wedding, the raising of children and her work, are provided by SCHÄFER (1935) based on material collected by the Kenzi Samuēl Alī Hisēn.

Gender-related proverbs and sayings center on family life. The family is a vital pillar especially in times of transition and crisis. In the following, I describe the life of a Nubian daughter and woman based on Dongolawi proverbs, adding and comparing features from Kenzi proverbs. A woman grows up as a daughter within her extended family and becomes suitable for marriage. Her wedding ceremony is the highlight of her life, and hopefully she brings up her own children, continuing the life cycle.

#### Daughters and Sons

In Dongolawi and Kenzi proverbs, parents are viewed as their children's owners, whether they are daughters or sons:

Do2<sup>50</sup>    TIPTI KIƆƆI

*tirti kinynyi*

“Without owner”

- ▶ He is without family / an illegitimate child.

50 From HX13; co-investigated with Muḥammad Ḥasan. Seventeen Dongolawi proverbs were taken from HĀMID KHABĪR AL-SHAIKH, *Nubian Wisdom and Proverbs from Dongola*, 2007. I mark these proverbs by HX. The number (here: 13) following HX denotes the number in the proverb collection.

As in 2007 Andaandi orthography rules had not been established, I revised Hāmid Khabīr's spelling applying the rules nowadays in use among Dongolawi who read and write their language. Hāmid Khabīr is aware of my spelling changes and agrees with using an updated orthography when presenting his proverbs. He himself is also in the process of updating the spelling of the proverbs he collected.

- Κο3<sup>51</sup> ΑΦΦΙ ΤΙΡΤΙΓΟΔΟΝ ΚΑΛΟΥ, ΤΑΛΛΕΜΝΟΥ.  
*affi tirtiigodon kalu, tallemnu.*  
 “The child eats with the owner [the parents], it does not walk [with them].”
- ▶ Especially for parents eating with little children is possible, they just eat less and leave more for the others. However, walking with children is difficult as they are slower or want to be carried.

While more could be added about children, I focus on Nubian proverbs which treat daughters and sons separately, taking into account that Dongolawi and Kenzi *tood* has two meanings, “son” and “child.” So far three Dongolawi and two Kenzi proverbs mention daughters unambiguously. Only one Dongolawi and one Kenzi proverb mention a son explicitly. One Kenzi proverb talking about a daughter was collected from a female speaker and gives a young woman a powerful weapon to justify herself:

- Κο4<sup>52</sup> ΑΨΑΜ ΔΙ ΑΜΒΑΒΝ ΒΟΥΡΟΥ, ΙΚΚΕ ΤΕΡΕ, Α ΩΕΡΑ.  
*asham ay ambaabn buru, ikke tere, aa weera.*  
 “Well mannered, I am my father’s daughter, like this, they [the people] say.”
- ▶ Your slandering about me is not right.

One Dongolawi and one Kenzi proverb talking about daughters are similar in wording, yet not necessarily in meaning:

- Δο3<sup>53</sup> ΒΟΥΡΟΥ ΤΙΜΒΑΒΝ ΔΑΡ ΙΨΚΑΡΤΙΝ.  
*buru timbaabn daar ishkartin.*  
 “A daughter is [like] a guest in her father’s home.”
- ▶ It is more important to have sons than daughters, since after marriage a son stays at home whereas a daughter leaves.
  - ▶ A woman becomes the ruler in her own home, not her father’s.

The proverb may be considered more recent as in former times daughters did not necessarily leave the home.<sup>54</sup> Instead daughters learnt to be willing to help and to stay with their parents when they grew old. They were regarded as a blessing.<sup>55</sup> In contrast, in the

51 From Fathi ‘Abd al-Sayid, Dakke. ‘Abd al-Ṣabūr Hāsīm (p.c., 2015) remembers that in former times Nubian parents and their children ate together, offering the children the opportunity to get acquainted with Nubian customs.

52 From the wife of ‘Abd al-Qādir ‘Abd al-Raūf, Dakke.

53 From El-Shafie El-Guzuuli, Khannaag.

54 Ibrāhīm Muḥammad, p.c., 2015

55 Aḥmad ‘Uthmān, p.c., 2016. While talking in German, he used the Arabic word *baraka* instead of the German term “Segen.” The connotation of *baraka* is wider and more positive than the English “blessing” or the German “Segen.”

mind of many modern-day Nubians a son is more beneficial than a daughter, as after marriage a daughter tends to move in with her husband's family while at least in the rural areas a son remains with his parents.<sup>56</sup> When a daughter gives birth to a grandson, it is not named after her father as it would be in the case of a son.<sup>57</sup>

Kenzi Nubians have a similar proverb, yet interpret it differently:

K05<sup>58</sup> ΒΟΥΡΟΥ ΙΩΚΑΡΤΙΜΑ.

*buru ishkartima.*

A daughter is [like] a guest.

- ▶ Everything is done for a daughter.
- ▶ I am still caring for my unmarried daughter.
- ▶ I am caring for my married daughter who comes for a visit.<sup>59</sup>

The “interpretive communities” of the Dongolawi and the Kenzi research participants differ. While usually an *ishkarti* “guest” is highly respected, the proverb does not imply this connotation here.<sup>60</sup> However, both Kenzi research participants who originate from different villages value their daughters at least as much as their sons, which may be reflected in their interpretations. Additionally, the Kenzi custom where the groom moves into the bride's family's home until he is able to build a house himself enhances the daughter's status.<sup>61</sup>

Nubians are glad when their daughters are considered beautiful. Especially large eyes are considered attractive.<sup>62</sup> One Dongolawi proverb compares the “beauty” of a girl with a kind of bird:

D04<sup>63</sup> ΒΟΥΡΟΥ ΚΑΡΜΑΛΕΝ ΜΙΣΙΝΚΙΓΙ ΚΩΛ

*buru karmalen missincigi kool.*

56 As 'Abd al-Qādir Samiltood, p.c., 2016.

57 Older Dongolawi woman, p.c., 2014. Her interpretation reveals contemporary thought as in former times some Nubian children carried the names of their mothers.

58 From Faṭḥi 'Abd al-Sayid, Dakke.

59 'Ali Aḥmad, p.c., 2015. He distinguishes the proverb's meaning by whether it speaks about an unmarried or a married woman.

60 'Ammār Ya'qūb, p.c., 2016 and 'Abd al-Qādir Samiltood, p.c., 2016.

61 A different approach would be to consider the husband as guest: one foreigner being in frequent contact with Kenzi women was surprised how easily they dealt with the absence of their husbands working in Egyptian cities or in the Gulf States. For the women a husband's presence meant more work. However, Dongolawi and Kenzi proverbs do not emphasize the husband as an occasional visitor.

62 Girls even in a strict Islamic society love to put some blue make-up around their eyes and use it to their advantage: in 2000, shortly before Friday prayer, I was the only customer in a pickup truck between Seleem 2 and Seleem ferry station. The young driver was willing to drive me back, setting the prize at 1000 SD, ten times the usual fare. Two young girls appeared with lovely eyes. Having the same destination, they sweet-talked the driver into taking each of us to the ferry for the usual 100 SD. After 10 minutes of the girls alternately putting on pretty faces and pouting, the driver gave in. The older sister sat in front with the driver and the younger one behind. The proverb always reminds me of that story.

63 From HX79. The proverb does not regard a girl as a sexual object (El-Shafie El-Guzuuli, p.c., 2015).

“A girl having the eyes of the Oriental turtle dove.” (The *kar-mal* is a bird with big eyes which is considered beautiful. In size it is similar to a pigeon and has colourful feathers.<sup>64</sup> It is relatively unknown among contemporary Nubians.)

- ▶ She is a beautiful girl.

One proverb talking about a girl’s beauty, without mentioning *buru* explicitly, is:

- Do5<sup>65</sup>    ΤΕΝΝ ΜΑΣΚΑΝΕ ΚΟΛΕΝΘΙΓΙ ΚΟΥΣΙΝ.  
*tenn maskane kolencigi kusin.*  
 “Her beauty stops the waterwheels.”
- ▶ She is very beautiful.

In Nubian poetry “beauty” is connected with being close to the river.<sup>66</sup> The area next to the river is the most beautiful area of the whole village as it is the place most likely to be green.

The proverb imagines a meeting of a waterwheel attendant (male) and a young woman (female) during work hours. Due to her beauty<sup>67</sup> she distracts the waterwheel attendant, makes the expensive waterwheel not work properly and thereby stops income. By associating “beauty” and “waterwheel” “beauty” is not necessarily regarded as something basically negative; however, a stopped waterwheel is a warning that not everybody who looks nice on the outside brings a positive outcome. Instead, contemporary Nubians would confirm the Sudanese Arabic proverb: “Beauty is beauty of manners.”<sup>68</sup>

When daughters grow older, they begin wearing beautiful garments, or at least wish to do so:

- Do6<sup>69</sup>    ΚΑΔΕΝ ΕΝΘΙ  
*kaden eenci*  
 Women’s garment.
- ▶ This woman wears nice clothing but is not good at anything else.

64 ‘Alā al-Dīn Khayri, p.c., 2017

65 From HX16. Again, the proverb does not regard a girl as a sexual object (El-Shafie El-Guzuuli, p.c., 2015).

66 As in the two Dongolawi poems transcribed in Ibrāhīm and Bell, 1990.

67 Already Burckhardt during his travels mainly in Kenzi Nubia observed beautiful ladies: “The women are all well made, and though not handsome, have generally sweet countenances, and very pleasing manners; I have even seen beauties among them” (BURCKHARDT, *Travels in Nubia*, p. 145).

68 SALWA AHMED, *Educational and Social Values expressed by Proverbs in two Cultures*, Sudanese proverb 299.

69 From HX31.



The proverb is not only valid for daughters, it is used for wives and other women as well. The other Dongolawi proverb talking about a daughter, D15, will be dealt with later as it symbolizes the prospective bride.

In comparison, proverbs dealing explicitly with a son are:

D07<sup>70</sup> ΜΕΖΕΜΕΛ ΑΝΝΤΟΔΝ ΕΩΡΕ ΣΔΡΙΝ ΤΑΝΘΕΓΙ ΑΔΔΟ ΜΕΡΚΟΝ.

*Mehemed anntoodn ewre jaarin tancegi addo merkon.*

“My son Mehemed’s agriculture cut [stopped] the neighbors’ alms to me.”

- ▶ When a man has work, or at least his relatives, others outside the family expect him to be self-sufficient and don’t give him anything, even when he has nothing to eat.

K06<sup>71</sup> ΟΓΙΣ, ΟΝΔΙΓΙ ΟΥΚΕΔ ΔΓΙΛ, Δ ΔΙΜΝΟΥ.

*ogij, ondigi usked aagil, aa diimnu.*

“The man who has given birth to a male, he does not die.”

- ▶ He who leaves behind a male successor will not be forgotten.

Nubians regard themselves not as individuals but as part of an enduring continuum. Especially sons are expected to support their parents and carry on their names. If a Nubian father only has daughters he “cries” as nobody continues carrying his name.<sup>72</sup>

In conclusion, among Dongolawi and Kenzi proverbs the gender difference between children and between the male and female lineage is not the most important aspect. Instead they encourage behaviour tending towards customary African culture, which is inclined to regard male and female kin without difference, as in the Bemba proverb:

*abana ba mfubu: bangala amatenga yonse.*

“Children of the hippo play in all the pools of water, in the river or lake.”

- ▶ Children belong to both their paternal and maternal kin.<sup>73</sup>

One Kenzi man explained the difference between Nile-Nubian and Arab customs as “Arabs living in the desert needed to fight in order to survive. Men were more beneficial as they protected their tribal communities in times of war. In contrast, Nubians were settled and engaged in agriculture where both boys and girls were of use.”<sup>74</sup>

<sup>70</sup> From HX74.

<sup>71</sup> From Kenzi students (5). This is the only Kenzi proverb collected thus far which regards male offspring more positively than female offspring.

<sup>72</sup> The late Umm Hamdi, p.c., 2003.

<sup>73</sup> KAPOLYO, *The Human Condition*, p. 131. Bemba is spoken in Zambia.

<sup>74</sup> Khālid Karār, p.c., 2012

Orphans or children whose parents have died, a proverbial topic of other African languages,<sup>75</sup> are missing. That may be due to Islam, which treats orphans in a different way from the Christian faith.<sup>76</sup> Instead, Nubians expect relatives to take in children whose parents have died in a kind of guardian or trustee relationship.

### *Finding a Marriage Partner*

Nubian marriage is one of the rights of passage regulated by specific customs. While some customs change, their controlling mechanism remains:

In the days before girls went to school in great numbers, they married between the ages of fourteen and eighteen. The preferred marriage partner was a relative from either side of the family; often siblings betrothed their children to each other. Although the senior female members of the family were usually the initiators and primary negotiators, it was important that both male and female seniors agreed to the match before it could take place.<sup>77</sup>

Changes introduced during the past decades include an increasing marriage age to enable both partners to finish their formal education<sup>78</sup>, the search for a marriage partner outside of the family, the decrease in the number of feast days,<sup>79</sup> the introduction of electronic music instruments or pre-recorded music and, in the Sudan, the re-introduction of mass marriages.<sup>80</sup>

Change is limited when identity is endangered:

75 GOLKA, *Die Flecken des Leoparden*, p. 136, lists proverbs from Malagasy (Madagascar) and Kundu (a dialect of Oroko in Cameroon) talking about orphans.

76 Adoption in Islam is well explained in <http://islam.about.com/cs/parenting/a/adoption.htm> (last visited on 3 November 2015). One aspect is: "When the child is grown, members of the adoptive family are not considered blood relatives [...] members of the adoptive family would be permissible as possible marriage partners, and rules of modesty exist between the grown child and adoptive family members of the opposite sex."

77 JENNINGS, *Nubian Women of West Aswan*, p. 56

78 Especially among the Kenuzi. Still, some marriages happen when the bride is about 17 years of age. (p.c.)

79 Especially in the cities.

80 Based on the *kora* marriage ceremony practiced in the former Funj kingdom. SPAULDING, *The Heroic Age of Sennar*, p. 107, describes *kora* as: "It differed from ordinary marriage in two ways. The amount and forms of wealth that changed hands at marriage were publicly fixed at a uniform standard lower than prevailing rates, and communitywide compliance was assured by the practice of public mass marriages of all eligible community members." In 2005 in Shaikh Shariif I observed a well-organized mass "agid ceremony for 26 couples. Guests came from different villages, especially some sheikhs, lots of men and a few older women. Pre-recorded music was played from tape. While a few dignitaries gave their speeches, the guests were more interested in the soda, some sweets and dates. The first signing of contracts was properly performed. A bride's older relative and a groom's older relative gave their signatures. Afterwards the guests were told that the remaining signings would be performed in the same way. So the men started to leave and the event carried on without nearly any audience. While there is no historical indication that mass marriages were performed in the medieval Nubian kingdoms there is also no clue as to where that tradition came from.

In conclusion, concerning the [Nubian] wedding ceremony as part of the strategies for maintaining identity, it is worth saying that while adopting the usual traditions of Alexandria, the Nubians [in Alexandria] have kept various features which were the custom in Old Nubia.<sup>81</sup>

The mother teaches her daughters cooking and cleanliness in order to increase her chances of being married.<sup>82</sup> Among the Kenuzi, additional educational goals include the expectation that sons be hard-working in order to find a job, buy a home and then marry.<sup>83</sup>

Parents prefer their children to marry before their death in order to ensure that the marriage partner is chosen with their consent, which frequently means that the partner is a related Nubian.<sup>84</sup> While formerly, “women obviously directed the process of spouse selection,”<sup>85</sup> nowadays the option of bride and groom choosing each other is more regularly employed while the parents are asked for approval. This is obvious from the increasing number of Nubians marrying outside their related kin, including non-Nubians.

It is not expected that a girl actively searches for a marriage partner in spite of Muḥammad’s first wife Khadīja proposing to him.<sup>86</sup>

In order to overcome the difficult first step, Nubian society encourages marriage while not hiding its consequences. To the man it is said:

Do8<sup>87</sup> ἸΡΙ ὤΡΟ ὠἘΚΙ ΚΟΥΣΟΥΡΟ!

*iri shooro weeki kujuro!*

“Please, put on one light rope!” (*Iri*: From the marriage onwards a husband has to direct and protect his wife. Therefore, he is not as free as he was before marriage. *Irigi kujur* also means “to write a marriage contract.” *Iri digir*, lit. “a rope falls,” denoting the marriage.)

- ▶ Encouragement (usually by a man) to a man to marry a woman.

Besides marrying for the first time, men are especially encouraged to remarry after their wife dies in order to have a helpmate. Possible

81 ROTH, *Nubier in Alexandria*, p. 53. In the original: “Zusammenfassend lässt sich über die Hochzeit als Teil der Strategien zur Identitätswahrung festhalten, dass die Nubier sich trotz der Anpassung an die in Alexandria üblichen Ausrichtungen verschiedene Elemente bewahrt haben, die im Alten Nubien üblich waren.”

82 People from Urbi, p.c., 2005.

83 As Ismā’il al-Abādī’s wife, p.c., 2006.

84 Thābit Zāki, p.c., 2014.

85 CALLENDER, “Gender Relations in Kenuz Public Domains,” p. 195.

86 As in the *sīra* of Ibn Ishāq as transmitted by Ibn Hishām in the 9th century which Muslims consider an authoritative biography.

87 From HX110.

options include a formerly divorced wife, because of the mutual children.<sup>88</sup>

While, especially in the cities outside the language area, it is possible to meet an unmarried Nubian woman, it contradicts the Nubian perception of a woman's biography. The man marrying a woman is performing a good deed. Therefore the proverb can be said to encourage a man to marry a woman just for her own sake.

The proverb likens a woman to a "light rope." As long as a man is married it is said that "he is on the rope."<sup>89</sup>

In order to encourage a girl to marry, regardless of the characteristics or financial means her marriage partner might have, it is said:

- D09<sup>90</sup> ΟΓΙΔΝ ΟΛΛΙ ΩΑΛΛΑ ΚΑΤΡΕΝ ΟΛΛΙ.  
*ogijn olli wala katren olli.*  
 "A man's shade rather than a wall's shade."  
 ▶ Encouragement to a woman to marry a man.

If a man is engaged he says:

- D10<sup>91</sup> ΔĪ ΔΓΙΛΓΙ ΚΟΥΣΕΔ ΔΓΡΙ.  
*ay agilgi kused aagri.*  
 "I have opened the mouth."  
 ▶ I am engaged.

In accordance with ancient regional customs the oldest daughter is to be married first:

- D11<sup>92</sup> ΚΑΡΔΕΛΓΙ ΟΩΩΕΛΕΝ ΔΟΡΡΑΝ.  
*karjelgi owwelen jorran.*  
 "They harvest the ripe first."  
 ▶ The oldest daughter has to be married first.

As noted before it is not strange for a groom to take a very young bride:

- D12<sup>93</sup> ĒN ΟΓΙΔΝ ΟΓΙΡ ΔΟ̄ΥΛ ΔΝΙΝ.

88 As observed in Toshka in the resettlement area.

89 El-Shafie El-Guzuuli, p.c., 2015.

90 From ТАНА, "Proverbs in a threatened Language Variety in Africa." In his article on Dongolawi proverbs two pages deal with "Marriage and Family Issues."

91 From Muḥammad Ḥasan, Tura. The meaning seems to have changed since then. In the 1920s it still meant a ceremony during the night when the bride and the groom were on their own for the first time. "The bridegroom then gives her a present 'to open her mouth,' but though she accepts the present she is not supposed to speak at least until the following night" (CROWFOOT, "Wedding Customs in the Northern Sudan," p. 8).

92 From Aḥmad Sāti, Buunaarti.

93 From ТАНА, "Proverbs in a threatened Language Variety in Africa."

*een ogijn ogir duul anin.*

“The [young] woman grows up on her husband’s chest.”

- ▶ Young girls could still be big enough to marry.

K07<sup>94</sup> ΦΕΛΑΝΔΙ, ΔΑΓΙΝ ΤΔΛ, ΒΙ ΒΟΡΚΙΔΔΙΜΝΟΥ.

*felanji, jagin taal, bi boorkiddimnu.*

“The one who comes pushing [is proactive] will not be caused to collapse.”

- ▶ When you marry a girl young she will not become an old spinster.

If one waits too long and is too careful about choosing, suitable partners may have already gone:

D13<sup>95</sup> ΤΔ, ΒΑΡΡΕΓΙ ΒΑΡΒΟΥΛΛΟ ΔΙΓΙΡΙΝ!

*taa, barregi barbuullo digirin!*

“Come, fall in the intervening space you chose!”

- ▶ You want to select the good, yet because you wait so long you find the bad.
- ▶ You are taking a long time to find a wife. In the end you have to take what remains.

However, among the Dongolawi the proverbs of encouragement are balanced by four proverbial warnings of choosing a prospective bride (or groom) carefully by observing the bride, her mother, and her roots:

D14<sup>96</sup> ΩΕΛ ΟΥΜΔΡΚΙΛ, ΔΟΥΓΓΟΥΡΚΙ ΟΥΣΚΙΝ.

*wel sumaarkil, dungurki uskin.*

“The dog which is in a hurry gives birth to a blind [one].”

- ▶ Don’t rush; instead be patient!

D15<sup>97</sup> ΕΔΚΙΝ, ΒΟΥΡΟΥΝ ΤΙΝΕΝΓΙ ΕΔ!

*edkin, burun tineengi ed!*

“If you marry, [you] marry the daughter’s mother!”

- ▶ Look at the characteristics of the bride’s mother. Her daughter will be similar.

D16<sup>98</sup> ΔΕΚΚΙ ΤΔΒΒΕΛΓΟΝ ΔΕΝCΙΡ ΔΝΙΝ,

ΚΑΤΡΕΓΙ ΤΔΒΒΕΛΓΟΝ ΚΑΤΡΕ ΔΝΙΝ.

94 From Kenzi students (27).

95 From ‘Abd al-Raūf, Old Dongola.

96 From HX26.

97 From HX91.

98 From El-Shafie El-Guzuuli, Khannaag. Frequently the proverb is said from woman to woman.

*deski tabbelgon densir anin, katregi tabbelgon katre anin.*

“While the one who touched the fat [something valuable], becomes full of goodness; the one who touched the wall, he becomes a wall.”

- ▶ If you marry a good wife / husband you will become good, if you marry a bad wife / husband you will become bad.

While Nubians and “Sudanese believe that children inherit their mother’s and father’s behaviour”<sup>99</sup> there has been no proverb attested where the bride’s character traits are connected with a male relative. With Nubian proverbs the mother’s behavior determines that of the child. In reality Nubians acknowledge that both mother and father imprint the child’s behavior.

Among the Kenuzi there is only one proverbial warning. The mother of D15 is replaced by the paternal aunt:

Ko8<sup>100</sup> ΒΟΥΡΟΥΓΙ ΤΙΜΒΑΝΕCCΙΝΑ ΙΝΑ CΟΡΟ Δ ΒΔΣΒΟΥ.

*burugi timbaanessina iina sooro aa baajbuu.*

“The writing of the hand of the girl’s paternal aunt is written in her.”

- ▶ The girl becomes like her paternal aunt.

For both sides, bride and groom, family roots are to be considered:

D17<sup>101</sup> ΟΥΡCΕΓΙ ΚΟΛΝΑΡ ΔΟΥΡΑCΓΙ, ΤΕ ΦΔΩΙΡΟΥ ΔΟΥΝ?

*ursegi koolnar juurangi, te faawiru juun?*

“While going with someone having a root [is possible], why are you going [with someone] without a root?”

- ▶ When marrying take into consideration the origin of the family. A family “with root” is to be preferred.

Once when a daughter came along with a non-Nubian suitor, her parents asked her: *gurbattiga bi aare?*<sup>102</sup> As Nubians, like other human beings, tend to consider their own family positively, a close relative of the other sex becomes the best choice of partner for a stable marriage. It is a means of protecting oneself and the related family from being talked about and being shamed. Marrying a non-

99 SALWA AHMED, *Educational and Social Values expressed by Proverbs in Two Cultures*, p 40; confirmed by El-Shafie El-Guzuuli, p.c., 2015.

100 From Fathi ‘Abd al-Sayid, Dakke. There is no explanation why the proverb talks about the girl’s paternal aunt. In former times maternal relatives were regarded as closer than paternal relatives. The maternal uncle functioned in many regards as one’s own father (Thabit Zaki, p.c., 2016).

101 From HX122.

102 ‘Ali Ahmad, p.c., 2012. The Kenzi phrase means “You take an outsider/ foreigner?” For more insight into the preference of insiders as marriage partners see JAEGER, “The Perception of the Outside and the Outsider in Dongolawi and Kenzi Proverbs.”

relative may lead to exclusion from one's family.<sup>103</sup> The marriage partner should at least be from the same village or close by,<sup>104</sup> minimizing negative surprises regarding the marriage partner's future behaviour. Concerning the wife, gossiping about one's own family is considered negative conduct, being content with what is available and sharing her thoughts with her husband positive. Egyptian non-Nubian women are supposedly different, especially more secretive towards her husband.<sup>105</sup>

The following proverbs, implicitly or explicitly directed towards the male suitor, support choosing a relative as marriage partner. The first five proverbs all have the same meaning, as do the final two:

D18<sup>106</sup> ΖΑΜΒΟΥ ΩΑΡΡΙΓΙ ΟΛΛΙΚΙΡΙΝ.

*hambu warrigi ollikirin.*

"The doum palm causes shade in the distance."

D19<sup>107</sup> ΖΑΜΒΟΥ ΤΕΝΝ ΤΟΓΟΓΙ ΟΛΛΙΚΙΡΜΟΥΝ.

*hambu tenn togoogi ollikirmun.*

"The doum palm does not give shade to its lower (part)."

K09<sup>108</sup> ΑΜΒΟΥ ΝΑΩΙΤΤΕ ΩΑΡΡΙΡ ΝΟΥΝΙΓΙ ΔΓ ΔΩΙ.

*ambu nawitte warrir nuunigi aag aawi.*

"Like the doum palm he makes shade in the distance."

D20<sup>109</sup> ΤΕΝΝ ΔΔΔΙ ΚΟΥΣΒΟΥΝ, ΕΒΕΛΙΝΔΙΓΙ ΤΑΓΙΡΙΝ.

*tenn daadi kusbuun, eccelindigi tagirin.*

"His vessel remains open, he covers what belongs to others."

K10<sup>110</sup> ΕΝΝΑ ΚΙΣΙΒ ΩΑΡΚΙΔΔΙΒΟΥΝ ΓΟΝ, ΖΟΛΙΝΔΙΓΙ Δ ΤΑΓΙΡΙ.

*enna kisib warkiddibuun goon, zoolindigi aa tagiri.*

"Although your earthen bowl is exposed, you cover what belongs to others."

► He wants to marry outside of his relatives.

<sup>103</sup> Haydar Azzain, p.c., 2002.

<sup>104</sup> Kamāl Hisayn, p.c., 2005. There is a field between the villages of Teeti and Urbi so they are considered to be distant. Between Sori and Urbi there is no field so they are close.

<sup>105</sup> Kenzi Nubian from Alexandria, p.c., 2009 and 2010. Being content goes against the observation that Nubian women enjoy nice clothing more than non-Nubian Egyptian women. HOPKINS and ΣΟΗΑΡ ΜΕΗΑΝΝΑ, *Nubian Encounters*, p. 37, note that the concept a suitor has of his future wife and the woman he marries if he is able to choose are diametrically opposed in some instances. I would take anything said by Nubian men about female-male relations with a pinch of salt. ΡΟΤΗ, *Nubier in Alexandria*, p. 22, confirms that Nubian women in Egypt usually do not work outside of the home. Twenty-five years later that is still valid for most married Nubian women.

<sup>106</sup> From HX127.

<sup>107</sup> From El-Shafie El-Guzuuli, Khannaag.

<sup>108</sup> From Ramaḍān Muḥammad, Allaagi.

<sup>109</sup> From El-Shafie El-Guzuuli, Khannaag.

<sup>110</sup> From Ramaḍān Muḥammad, Allaagi.



- D21<sup>111</sup> INN ΙΨΑΡΙ ΩΔΝΔΙΝ, ΙΡΙΝΔΙΓΙ ΤΑΓΙΡΡΟΥ.  
*inn ishari waandin, irindigi tagirru.*  
 “Your (pl.) leavened flour appears, you (pl.) cover [the leavened flour] belonging to other people.”
- D22<sup>112</sup> ΟΓΙΣ ΤΕΝΝ ΚΟΥΒΕΓΙ ΤΑΓΙΡΙΝ.  
*ogij tenn kubegi tagirin.*  
 “The man covers his jar.”<sup>113</sup>
- ▶ You (pl.) / He should marry one of your / his relatives.

If a suitor has restricted means he has to be satisfied with less:

- D23<sup>114</sup> ΚΟΥΚΚΑΪ ΒΟΛΑΝ ΜΟΝΜΟΥΝΟΥΝ.  
*kukkay boolan moonmunun.*  
 “A man without genitals / a eunuch does not hate a woman without uterus.”
- ▶ Somebody who has something negative inside is not interested in the negative aspects of somebody else.

After finding a suitable marriage partner, the next step would be discussion of dowry or bride wealth payment. However, proverbs dealing with it are absent so far.

### *The Wedding*

In the life of most Nubians, wedding celebrations were and are the most joyful of events. In former times the bride would prepare herself for a whole month, in order that on the wedding night fine fragrances might emanate from body and clothing. One old Dongolawi woman wore a ring in her nose for that occasion, and proudly showed the piercing.<sup>115</sup>

Among the traditional Kenuzi, bride and groom must invite all the guests personally. In one instance the bride was assumed to require four days for inviting everyone in her home village and one further day in the next city. Even ill feeling is not a reason to exclude a villager from being invited, a helpful custom to heal hurts and quarrels. Whoever does not turn up for the wedding and sends no apology is ostracized.<sup>116</sup>

<sup>111</sup> From HX114.

<sup>112</sup> From ТАНА, “Proverbs in a threatened Language Variety in Africa.”

<sup>113</sup> There is a similar Sudanese Arabic proverb, but no Modern Standard Arabic proverb. From a Sudanese Arabic point of view SALWA AHMED, *Educational and Social Values expressed by Proverbs in Two Cultures*, p. 201, explains: “The word pot metaphorically refers to the blood relationship.”

<sup>114</sup> From HX82.

<sup>115</sup> Amna (old Dongolawi woman), p.c. to Eliane Jaeger, 2010.

<sup>116</sup> Hasan ‘Abbās, p.c., 2008. The danger of not inviting anybody is vividly described in the fairy tale “Kōgna gissa - The story of the raven” as collected and published by MASSENBACH,

The first highlights of any wedding celebration attended by a crowd of villagers and other guests are the nights of *ḥinna* where at the end of the celebrations both bride and groom are dyed with a brown-reddish paste from the *ḥinna* plant on hands and feet. The mother of the bride provides the *ḥinna*. Bride and groom celebrate separately. Among the Kenuzi the nights of *ḥinna* have been reduced to one, the friends of the bride and groom celebrating together, spaced somewhat apart. The *ḥinna* process occurs in the middle of celebrations.

The final ceremony is the wedding night. In the rural areas it includes a communal meal, frequently before the bride and groom have arrived. Formerly it lasted until sunrise, as during the second half of the night the moon shone brightest.<sup>117</sup> Nowadays it can be organized by a catering service or, in the cities, even be omitted. With both, the nights of *ḥinna* and the wedding, a music group is invited.<sup>118</sup> In Dongola at communal wedding celebrations only the boys dance; the girls stand by, and watch. Among the Kenuzi boys and girls dance.

One proverb uses the wedding meal as a metaphor:

D24<sup>119</sup> ΕΡΟΝ ΖᾶΛΛΑΡ ΤῸΝ ΚΑΛΚΙΝ, ΕΝΝ ΒΑΛΕΡ ΤΟΥΡΟΥΓ ΔΟΥΚΚΙΝ.  
*eron haalar toon kalkin, enn baler turug dukkin.*  
 “If you eat from the cooking vessel, at your wedding the wind will start.”

While at a wedding the groom shows as much generosity as possible, the proverb shames him jokingly as being a poor man. Only poor people eat from a cooking vessel instead from a bowl.

Meanwhile the night of *ḥinna* has gained in prominence, frequently even more important than the wedding night.

With the advent of photo studios a date in the next town has become a fixture. Both the bride and the groom are shown at their best thanks to modern graphics editing software, as Adobe Photoshop is a more recent development.

Since about the turn of the century wedding celebrations are taped on video or DVD and afterwards shown to visitors or lent to neighbors or relatives living elsewhere.<sup>120</sup> The focus is on bride,

*Nubische Texte im Dialekt der Kumūzi und der Dongolawi*, pp. 22–23.

117 Farīd Muḥammad, p.c., 2017 and Ajīb Jabāli, p.c., 2017.

118 As long as it is not a Salafi wedding where strict Islamic rules are adhered to. With the increase of Nile-Nubians working in Saudi Arabia where strict Islamic rules are enforced these ideas became popular among returning Nubians who either want to be especially pious or receive financial aid from a Salafi sponsor. Due to financial constraints pre-recorded music may be played.

119 From Aḥmad Hamza, Lebeb.

120 Muḥammad Tutu, p.c., 2010. In Dabood village every household is allowed to have the wedding video for one day.

groom, groom's mother, and the golden jewelry given by the groom to his bride, even passed into passages of the video in which other guests are shown while the bride is not.<sup>121</sup>

Among the Dongolawi if the bride is below the age of consent, bride and groom live for some period in her family's household.<sup>122</sup> Among the Kenuzi sometimes the new house is erected inside the living compound of the groom's future mother-in-law. For the first year the newly-weds live with the wife's family,<sup>123</sup> clearly strengthening the wife's position. In the cities, with limited space the custom has been difficult to maintain and nowadays it is less observed in Nubian villages as well,<sup>124</sup> another aspect of adapting Nubian culture to a changing environment.

### *Being married*

After her wedding night the bride wakes up to her duties as a wife, not always what she expected. Nile-Nubian proverbs show a wide range of attitudes, from praise to mistrust. The wife is always expected to be efficient in domestic affairs,<sup>125</sup> and generally speaking she is considered the better manager of the household's finances.<sup>126</sup> Preferably, she earns some money while working at home. Still, the husband needs money to support his mother and sister. One Dongolawi man married for the expressed reason that he wanted his mother to have someone to do her housework.<sup>127</sup>

Despite their heavy work load Nubian women before the *hijra* gave a generally happy and satisfied impression to the outsider. While there were no insurances against life's calamities, their safety was provided by their extended family.

In other proverbs women are shown as needing protection. Besides D21, one further proverb likens women to "leavened flour" who must be well looked after to prevent shame. This train of thought underlines the previous observation that men are performing a good deed when marrying: they divert a woman from improper, shameful behavior.

121 As observed in wedding videos shown to me.

122 Anas Muḥi al-Dīn, p.c., 2010. Formerly that was a general custom among the Dongolawi; see Crowfoot, "Wedding Customs in the Northern Sudan," p. 9.

123 Hasan 'Abbās, p.c., 2008. That observation restricts Callender and el Guindi's statement, "The Kenzi," pp. 111-112: "The [Kenzi] social organization is still based in concept, and largely in practice, on a Bedouin-like tribal structure that shows very few traces of the matrilineal system characterizing Nubia before the Arab invasion." While the tribal organization of the Kenuzi clearly shows Arabic influence, its features of supporting women in transitional phases are different.

124 Faṭḥi 'Abd al-Sayid, p.c., 2015. Among the Kenzi, the resettlement homes built during the *hijra* offer much less space for establishing a new family than the spacious court yards of Old Nubia.

125 See proverbs Do1 and Ko2 above.

126 As Muḥammad 'Abdallah, p.c., 2017; and other sources.

127 Dongolawi man in Khartoum, p.c., 2009.

- D25<sup>128</sup> ΙΩΔΡΕ ΚΟΥΣΒΩΥΛΓΙ, ΩΕΛΛΙ ΜΑΛΛΕ ΓΑΨΙΡΑΝ.  
*ishare kusbuulgi, welli malle gaanyiran.*  
 “When the *ishare* is open, all dogs lick [from it].” (*ishare*: clay vessel used for fermenting milk to yogurt)
- ▶ Do not walk on your own as a woman.
  - ▶ She is an immoral woman who walks on her own at night.
  - ▶ She has a bad reputation and will end up promiscuous.

While adultery among Nubians is not referred to in public, it is still described by some proverbs:

- K11<sup>129</sup> ΚΙΣΙΒ ΩΑΡΒΩΥΛΛΟ, ΩΕΛ Δ ΕΚΚΙ.  
*kisib warbuullo, wel aa ekki.*  
 “In the uncovered earthen bowl, the dog urinates.”
- ▶ She is an immoral woman who goes with other men.
- K12<sup>130</sup> ΟΥΡΤΙ ΩΑΡΡΙ ÌÀ ΔΕΓΓΙ, ΔΕΛΕΓ Δ ΚΑΛΙ.  
*urti warri ya анги, jeleg aa kali.*  
 “The domestic animal being far away, the jackal eats [it]. / The domestic animal that moves away from the home, the jackal eats [it].”
- ▶ Exhortation to keep one’s wife close.

These proverbs compare an adulterous man to a dog, or a jackal which is close to a dog, with no favourable connotation. In the last proverb the wife is like a domestic animal in need of protection.<sup>131</sup>

One approach for ensuring protection of married and unmarried female relatives is offered by a first-born Dongolawi son. He prefers staying in the Sudan to working outside of the country, being ready to earn less. He regards it as his duty as the eldest son to ensure that his brothers-in-law behave well towards his sisters.<sup>132</sup>

<sup>128</sup> From HX129.

<sup>129</sup> From Kenzi students (21).

<sup>130</sup> From Kenzi students (76).

<sup>131</sup> A nearly mono-lingual Kenzi grandmother told her grandson a metaphor where the roles are changed (Khālid Karār, p.c., 2012, in English): If a dog approaches a human there are two ways of reacting, either to take a stick, chasing the dog away, or to offer some cake, making it come closer. She explained the metaphor: the same goes for a woman. If a man approaches her she is either good and tells him to go away, or she is bad and encourages him further. In the metaphor, the man is the “dog” and the initiator of adultery. In contrast, in the sharia-based laws of Saudi Arabia and the Arab Gulf States the woman is the initiator as shown in a recent case in Dubai (as in *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 13 July 2013: <http://www.faz.net/aktuell/gesellschaft/menschen/dubai-norwegerin-zeigt-vergewaltigung-an-und-wird-verurteilt-12288166.html>).

<sup>132</sup> Dongolawi living in Khartoum, p.c., 2009.

While some Dongolawi men speak of enjoying the prospect of marrying a second wife<sup>133</sup> most women dread it.<sup>134</sup> Still, while some Nubian men are polygamous, one Dongolawi proverb encourages them to have one wife only:

D26<sup>135</sup>    ΚΑΓΚΟΝ Ι66ΙΝΓΟΝ ΩΕΡΩΕΓΟΝΟΝ ΝΟΓΜΟΥΝΟΝ.  
*kaagkon icciingon werweegonon nogmunun.*  
 “A snake and a scorpion do not walk together.”

- ▶ If one marries two wives he will have jealousy and fighting.

The two wives are likened to two dangerous animals, leaving open whether both wives only develop into snake and scorpion after the marriage of the second wife. However, that is not the only place where a woman is compared with a scorpion; Kenzi proverb K18, discussed below, works with a similar metaphor.

One reason for the impracticability of having two women is that a man married twice must satisfy the needs of both of them, which usually requires a degree of pretence towards each one.<sup>136</sup>

One older Kenzi Nubian insists that in former times Nubian husbands did not beat their wives physically as women had a higher standing.<sup>137</sup> Still, one Dongolawi proverb talks about beating one’s wife at least metaphorically:

D27<sup>138</sup>    ΕΝΓΙ ΤΙΩΡΙΓΕΔ ΔΟΜ!  
*eengi tiwriiged jom!*  
 “Beat the [unruly] wife with another!”

- ▶ If you are fed up with your wife, marry another one.
- ▶ Do not physically beat your wife; look for another kind of punishment.

This is a piece of advice to a husband whose wife does not obey, at least from his point of view. If a second wife is taken she receives some of the time and energy the husband spent on the first wife. Thereby the first wife is “beaten” metaphorically by the second wife but not physically.<sup>139</sup>

<sup>133</sup> As heard frequently when sitting with Dongolawi men.

<sup>134</sup> Usually said to my wife, as a woman in Irtide, p.c., 2010. One Dongolawi man (p.c., 2014) confirmed that fear: any information a Sudanese wife obtains from her husband may be used to prevent him from taking another wife.

<sup>135</sup> From ТАНА, “Proverbs in a Threatened Language Variety in Africa.”

<sup>136</sup> Kenzi from Alexandria, p.c., 2012. E.g.: each women may want to be more important than the other. That can lead the husband to exaggerating or lying to one or the other in order to satisfy their needs.

<sup>137</sup> Thābit Zāki, p.c., 2006

<sup>138</sup> From ТАНА, “Proverbs in a Threatened Language Variety in Africa.”

<sup>139</sup> In one Kenzi village (2012) I observed a Kenzi woman who was her husband’s first wife.

She had broken her ankle and was limping. There were no children in her home who could support her. The husband continued to spend most of his time with his second wife.

Even if the husband is the source of marital problems or there is seemingly unresolvable disagreement between husband and wife, older women invite the wife for coffee, explaining the advantages of obedience to one's husband, and trying to solve the marriage problems.<sup>140</sup>

If a Dongolawi wife became divorced, other women visited and encouraged her saying:

- D28<sup>141</sup> ΚΑΛΙΛΗΝ ΟΥΡΣΕ ΔΕΚΚΕΝ.  
*kaliln urse dessen.*  
 "The eater's root is green."  
 ▶ There is hope for you.

Among Egyptian Nubians divorce was rarely practised and nearly always discouraged. A wife who does not suit can be lamented:

- K13<sup>142</sup> ΩΟ ΖΑΪΡΑΝ ΑΝΓΑΡΕΪ!  
*wo hayran angaree!*  
 "O weak bed!"  
 ▶ I made a bad choice when marrying. But I will not take a new wife.

Comparing a woman to a "weak bed" is certainly friendlier than speaking of a "snake" and a "scorpion," as in D26.

When one Kenzi man's grandfather wanted to leave his wife, he went as far as Khartoum without telling anybody. Otherwise villagers would have worked for reconciliation and demanded his return.<sup>143</sup> If a Nubian husband does not deal fairly with his wife, other Nubians break their relationship even if the husband is a relative.<sup>144</sup>

If a husband marries a second time his first wife may be scolded:

- K14<sup>145</sup> ΩΕΚΚΙ ΕΝΝΑ ΙΔ ΕΔΟCΟΥ, ΩΟ ΝΑΦΟΨΡΑ ΩΟ ΓΙΜΑ ΚΙΝΝΙ.  
*weekki enna id edosu, wo naafuura wo giima kinni.*  
 "Your husband married one (another wife), o woman, o worthless woman."  
 ▶ If you had been a good wife your husband would not have married a second one.

140 Ahmad Hamza, p.c., 2010.

141 From Shawqi 'Abd al-'Aziz, Haminaarti.

142 From "Abd al-Ṣabūr Hāsīm, Dakke.

143 Kenzi from Dehmiit, p.c., 2012.

144 Thābit Zākī, p.c., 2012, Alexandria. While that may be regarded as a pronounced positive view of former customs, I observed a similar case.

145 From Sayid al-Ḥasan, Aniiba; co-investigated with Thābit Zākī.

A *naafuura* is a woman who is married yet living separated from her husband. Note that the two nouns *naafuura* and *giima* are borrowed from Arabic which may point to a later origin.

When talking about the other wife the following expression may be used:

K15<sup>146</sup>    ΔΝΝΑ ΤΙΩΡΙ  
           *anna tiwri*  
           “my friend”

- ▶        This woman has the same husband as me. (said by a woman)

Women have the opportunity to ask for divorce, too.<sup>147</sup> Kenzi women are strongly discouraged from doing so. Other married women who hear about it, say:

K16<sup>148</sup>    ΔΝΝΑ ΙΔΝΑ ΓΑΒΟΥ ΔΟC ΩΑΛΑΝ ΑΜΒΑΒΝΑ ΖΩΩ.  
           *anna idna gabu joos walan ambaabna hoosh.*

My husband’s two vaults and not my father’s courtyard.

- ▶        Encouragement to a woman to stay with her husband.

K17<sup>149</sup>    ΑΜΒΑΒΝΑ ΔΑΖΑΒ ΔΟΓΟΡ ΤΕΝΝΑ ΝΑΖΑC ΓΕΝΟΥ.  
           *ambaabna dahab dogoor tenna nahaas genu.*

“His [my husband’s] copper is better than my father’s gold.”

- ▶        Encouragement to a woman to stay with her husband.

Nowadays in Egypt divorce is on the increase.<sup>150</sup> Kenzi Nubians are not excluded from this development.<sup>151</sup>

Gender-related proverbs show a heavy focus in women’s lives on marriage and family. However it has to be taken into account that proverbs about leadership, politics and court ruling are nearly non-existent, so they are naturally missing in the gender domain, too.

### *Parenthood*

Marrying and then begetting children is one of the most important tasks of any Nubian man or woman. For a Nubian it is not intelli-

146 From Khālid Karār, Siyaala.

147 According to the Dongolawi Hāmid Khabīr (p.c., 2016), who observes his society extremely well, it seems to be that nowadays Dongolawi women ask for divorce more frequently than Dongolawi men.

148 From ‘Alā al-Dīn Aḥmad, Dehmiit; co-investigated with Muḥammad Ṣubḥi.

149 From Faṭḥi ‘Abd al-Sayid, Dakke; co-investigated with Muḥammad Ṣubḥi. Note that both *dahab* and *nahaas* are Arabic loan words possibly pointing to a later origin than the proverb before.

150 Khālid Karār, p.c., 2015. He is a highly valued marriage registrar, informally also working on reconciling quarrelling partners before divorce becomes unavoidable. In his observation the main reason for marriage break-up is a lack of patience with each other.

151 Also observed by Armgard Goo-Grauer, p.c., 2017.



gible that somebody remains unmarried, for this means that he cannot live on in his children.<sup>152</sup> One Kenzi man put it poetically: his task is to continue writing the letter his parents began.”<sup>153</sup>

In the Dongolawi proverbs I collected thus far, fathers and parents occur more frequently than mothers. Being a father is compared with a channel, too, but a channel leading to an agricultural field, i.e., outside of the domestic domain:

D29<sup>154</sup> ΜΑΛΤΙ ΣΩΩΕΔ ΕΝ, ΒΔΓΙ ΔΟΡΡΑΝΜΟΥΝ.

*malti sowwed en, baagi joorranmun.*

“The channel is dried up, they do not harvest the basin.”

- ▶ The child cannot benefit before the father.

In the upbringing of the children, mothers play an important and positive role, more so than the fathers:

D30<sup>155</sup> ΒΟΥΤΤΟΥΛ ΤΙΝΕΝΓΕΔ ΑΜΜΙΔΚΙ ΚΟΪΡΙΝ.

*buttul tineenged ammiidki kuurin.*

“The male goat learns leaping with its mother.”

- ▶ A mother is very important. Every animal and each human learns the first lesson from its mother.

Being childless was and is a great curse. Special remedies were passed on to overcome childlessness.<sup>156</sup> The wife especially felt the consequences of not having children:

If he [the husband] should divorce her [his wife] and they have no children, he takes back all of the jewellery he bought, as well as the household articles and furniture.<sup>157</sup>

However, none of the Dongolawi and Kenzi proverbs collected so far reflect on a woman not bearing children.

152 As expressed by a Kenzi man working in the the “Nubian house” near Aswan, p.c., 2002. The topic popped up frequently as I did not marry till 2007.

153 ‘Umar ‘Abd al-‘Aziz, p.c., 2002. He said the sentence in Arabic.

154 From HX50.

155 From ‘Abdullahi ‘Uthmān, Irtide; co-investigated with Samīra al-Malik.

156 The Dongolawi ‘Abd al-Athīm ‘Abd al-Hamīd (p.c., 2005) related that until recently a woman who was barren touched the ground in order to become pregnant. Another method to make her pregnant was to break a male goat’s penis. A deceased Kenzi from Toshka (p.c., 2005) remembered that one garlic from the male root and several garlic from the female root were put in milk, stirred, and drunk. The whole process was repeated for three days. At this point he switched to English, and explained: garlic and milk are sexual stimulants. Afterwards the wife must sleep on her back. This facilitates the passage of the sperm.

157 JENNINGS, *Nubian Women of West Aswan*, p. 69. In former times the only reason for a divorce among Nubians was barrenness (Armgard Goo-Grauer, p.c., 2017).

There are still a few Nubian men who carry their mother's name as a nickname.<sup>158</sup> However, it is a dying custom.<sup>159</sup> Nubians explain this custom as Christian influence because Jesus is called the son of Miriam.<sup>160</sup>

Similarities between parents and their children are expressed in the next two proverbs:

D31<sup>161</sup> ΕΛΟΥΜΝ ΤῸΔ ΒΟΩΩΙΚΑΤΤΙΝ.  
*elumn tood bowwikattin.*  
 “The crocodile’s child is a skilful swimmer.”  
 ▶ Good parents have good children.  
 ▶ He is diligent like his father.

K18<sup>162</sup> Ι66ΪΝ ΜΙΝΓΙ Δ̄ ΟΥΚΙ ΚΑΚΕΓΙ?  
*icciin mingi aa uski kakegi?*  
 “A scorpion: what [kind of] young scorpion does it give birth to?” (*kakee* is a young scorpion. Its bite is worse than the bite of an old scorpion.)  
 ▶ The son / child is like his / its parents in good as in bad ways.  
 ▶ The daughter’s talk and behaviour is worse than her mother’s.

According to some research participants both proverbs refer to both parents on the meaning-based level. In an alternative reading, in the first proverb the positive comparison is restricted to the father and in the second proverb the negative metaphor “old scorpion” to the mother and “young scorpion” to the daughter.

The father is to be respected, whatever his son is like. He is the origin of the children’s wealth:

D3<sup>163</sup> ἸΓ ΟΥΒΟΥΡΤΙΓΙ ΟΥΚΙΝ.  
*iig uburtigi uskin.*  
 “The fire gives birth to the ash.”  
 ▶ The father is good yet the son has become bad.

158 As Kenuzi “Samir Hōša” (\*-1970) and “Sabry Nūra” (\*-1960). Both names are the official first name or nickname plus the mother’s name. In Khartoum I met a middle-aged Dongolawi man from the northern Dongola region who also carried his own and his mother’s name when addressed by friends.

159 An about 30-year old Dongolawi man (p.c., 2007) from Magaasir Island remembers the same from when he was young. His was the last generation on the island which kept that tradition.

160 The term “son of Miriam” is not a Christian term, but a Qur’anic expression, occurring more than twenty times in the Qur’an.

161 From Aḥmad Hamza, Lebeb.

162 From Kenzi students (31).

163 ‘Abd al-‘Aal Aḥmad Hamat, 93, اكتب و اقرأ اللغة النوبية, 93.

D33<sup>164</sup> ΖΑΝΟΥ ΒΕ̄, ΩΕΛΓΕΔ ΑΩ̄Ε̄.

*hanu bee, welged ashee.*

He kills the donkey; it is the evening meal for the dog.

- ▶ He is a wealthy father whose children spend his money when he is absent.

Expectations towards a son, especially the first one, are definitely high. Grown-up sons are expected to support their parents and especially their mothers financially in old age, offering her companionship when she is ill and needs assistance.<sup>165</sup> A Kenzi man put the whole matter more bluntly: you can retire when the children are earning. It is their duty to provide financially for their parents.<sup>166</sup>

However reality can be different; children may neglect their parents:

D34<sup>167</sup> ΟΥΣΚΕΛΝΔΙΓΟΝ ΤΩΔΙΡ ΓᾹΡΙΝ, ΤΩΝΔΙΓΟΝ ΒΕΡΡΟ ΓᾹΡΙΝ.

*uskelndigon toodir gaarin, toondigon berro gaarin.*

“While the one who gave birth [the parent] embraces the child, he [the child] embraces the wood belonging to the child.” (*uskelndi*: While “the one who gave birth” literally means the mother, the research participants related the term to both parents. *Gaar* describes a habitual action: the parents continuously think about the child; the child continuously thinks about other people and objects. *Ber*: The child metaphorically embraces the wood, representing anything materialistic. It is an anti-thesis to its parents’ concerns.)

- ▶ The heart of a mother and a father are soft (towards the child) whereas the heart of the child (towards his parents) is hard.

#### *Advice specific to or from Kenzi Women*

So far most proverbs have been taken from the Dongolawi in Northern Sudan, adding the corresponding Kenzi proverbs. There are some unique gender-related Kenzi proverbs, talking about mothers kissing their children, women hiding their beauty, and the caring mother’s advice to her child.

One Kenzi proverb uses the metaphor of a woman giving birth to challenge the stereotype of a strong husband and a weak wife:

K19<sup>168</sup> ΜΕ̄ΩΓΟΝ ᾹΓΙ, Δ̄ ΟΥΣΚΙΔ ΕΡΚΟΝ ΜΑΡΙCΒΩ̄Υ.

*meewgon aagi, aa uskid erkon marisbuu.*

<sup>164</sup> From HX90.

<sup>165</sup> Ismā’il al-‘Abādi’s wife, p.c., 2006.

<sup>166</sup> Thābit Zāki, p.c., 2011.

<sup>167</sup> From HX109.

<sup>168</sup> From Kenzi students (45).

“While the pregnant woman gives birth, he [her husband] cries.”

- ▶ She is worried more about others than about herself.

A child, both daughter and son, needs the care of her mother; otherwise it will lack later in life:

Κ20<sup>169</sup> ΙΝΔΙ ΔΟΓΜΕΣΑΝ, ΕΝΕΝ ΕΚΚΙ ΙΝΔΙ ΔΟΓΚΟΜΝΟΥ.  
*inji doogmesan, eneen ekki inji doogkomnu.*

“They did not rise and kiss [you], [even] your mother did not rise and kiss you.” (*inji doog*: Previously Nubian little children were frequently taken up and kissed. If a child was not well behaved it was assumed that it was not kissed enough. Nowadays that custom is lost.)

- ▶ You have done something bad.

The proverb is said by women to a teenage child. While men know it, it is not said by men, and it is not said to little children.

Another proverb talks about hiding one’s beauty:

Κ21<sup>170</sup> ΑΩΙΡΚΑΝΕ ΨΑΡΤΙΝ ΤΟΓΟΡ ΒΟΥ.  
*ashirkanee shartin togoor buu.*

“The beauty is kept below the iron.”

- ▶ You are beautiful, yet you wear such ugly clothing!

As before, physical “beauty” is not regarded as negative. Instead, it can be increased through nice clothing. In one Kenzi man’s observation<sup>171</sup> Egyptian Nubians work hard, yet in the end they accumulate less money and other valuables than other Egyptians due to higher expenditure on food and clothes.

Before the *hijra* black clothing was worn for work and when fetching water.<sup>172</sup> Roth witnessed Kenzi women in the resettlement areas wearing colourful clothes outside of their home, especially “red, pink, orange and other” colors.<sup>173</sup> Due to Islamization that has

169 From Ramaḍān Muḥammad, Allaagi.

170 From Kenzi students (66).

171 Thābit Zāki, p.c., 2009’

172 Based on ‘Abd al-Raḥman ‘Awaḍ, p.c., 2014. He adds that 150 years ago a Kenzi Nubian girl’s clothing covered much less, mainly her private parts, using camel leather. Later with an increase of Nubians working in Cairo, women added to their wardrobe. Each of her brothers working in Cairo presented her with some clothing. A woman without brothers was considered poor. A divorced woman had to wear black inside and outside the home. Unmarried girls used second-hand clothing.

173 ROTH, *Nubier in Alexandria*, 57.

changed to grey and black as the most common colours in ladies' dresses even when relaxing.<sup>174</sup>

While social status is of lesser importance when choosing a marriage partner,<sup>175</sup> there is one proverb provided by a female Kenzi speaker talking about financial differences:

- K22<sup>176</sup> ΕΝΝΑ ΓΑΤἈΝ ΓΕΔΙΡ, ΕΝΝΑ ΟCЦИΓΙ ΜΙΔΔΕΕ!  
*enna gataan gedir, enna ossigi middee!*  
 “Fitting to the [winter] blanket<sup>177</sup>, stretch out your leg!”
- ▶ Do not marry a wife who is richer than you.
  - ▶ A wife of your financial status is sufficient, there is no need to look for a wealthier one.<sup>178</sup>

The Kenzi husband is encouraged to realize that his wife, as with other women, is different than the men he deals with. With some items a woman wants more than her husband. Whereas two *jallābiyas* satisfy a Nubian man, a wife may desire a lot more garments. In these cases he should be lenient to her:

- K23<sup>179</sup> ΩἈΙΕ, ΕΒΙΓΙ ΚΑΔΑΓΕΔ ἈCΜΕΩΕ!  
*waye, eecigi kadaged aasmewe!*  
 “Be careful, do not measure women with the *kada* measurement!” (*kada* is a Nubian measurement for grain, three *bar-ras*<sup>180</sup>)
- ▶ Women have and do things a man / husband does not understand.
  - ▶ Women have their own rules.

- K24<sup>181</sup> ΕΝΘΙΝ ΟΥΛΟΥΓ ΚΟΥCΒΟΥ.  
*eencin ulug kusbuu.*  
 “The ear(s) of women are open.”

174 “Sha’bān Berber” (p.c., 2014), who due to his cultural knowledge is highly esteemed among villagers of West Sehel, provides an alternative interpretation. He places the origin of the preference of a dark *jallābiya* in the Kenzi villages of Dabood, Dehmiit, and Ombarkaab towards the end of the 19th century. To him it is as a sign of sorrow after the Maḥdi’s troops had lost against the joint English-Egyptian forces.

175 Thābit Zāki (p.c., 2012) points out one difference between a Kenzi Nubian and a non-Nubian Egyptian marriage partner’s choice: “A non-Nubian Egyptian husband marries a woman of same status. A Nubian husband takes a wife from among his relatives whatever the social status or her personality.” HOHENWART-GERLACHSTEIN, “Field Research and Training of Autochthonous People,” p. 205, heard the same among the Fadja: “The Fadja often stressed ... that social rank and financial level meant nothing to them.”

176 From the sister of ‘Abd al-Qādir ‘Abd al-Raūf, Dakke.

177 In winter time Nubians use a longer blanket which covers the body and the head.

178 Other meanings do not deal with women.

179 From Muḥammad Šubḥi, Elephantine.

180 MASSENBACH, *Wörterbuch des nubischen Kunuzi-Dialektes*, p. 182. The research participants did not provide any further explanation, as that measurement is out of use.

181 From Kenzi students (49).

- ▶ Women meddle in all things. They engage in matters which are not their business.

Mothers in particular feel attached to their children, and vice-versa.<sup>182</sup> This feeling of attachment is reflected in Kenzi proverbs only, as in the following proverb, said by women only. One can imagine a mother saying at night:

Κ25<sup>183</sup> ΚΑΩΙΡΤΕ ΦΙΡΡΙΝ ΓΑΔΔΙΓΙ, ΟΥΓΟΥΓΙ ΨΕΓΕΡΡΟ ΝΑΛΟΥΓΙ Δ ΝΕΡΙ.  
*kawirte firrin gaddigi, uguugi sheggero nalugi aa neeri.*  
 “[During the day] a bird flies always, at night it sleeps sleeping on a tree.”

- ▶ One cannot run around without rest. In the end, every human being sleeps.

Another problem relating mainly to mothers is:

Κ26<sup>184</sup> ΖΑΝΟΥ, ΤΕΝΝΑ ΑΦΦΙΘΙΝΑ ΔΟΡΟ, ΜΙΤΤΑΡΡΟ ΔΙΓΙΡ ΤΟΪΟΥ.  
*hanu, tenna afficina jooro, mittarro digir toosu.*  
 “The donkey, because of its children, entered [jumped into] the spring.”

- ▶ A mother loves her children so much that she is willing to face danger because of them / to sacrifice anything.

Some Nubians are enthusiastic about their mothers. They were the ones who sowed love into their children’s hearts. Still today, in the Nuba Mountains when no medical help is available a mother rests her ill child next to her, offering her body warmth and supporting her child’s struggle against the illness.

A mother may voice certain opinions to her son that a wife would not dare to say to her husband:

Κ27<sup>185</sup> ΚΑΤΡΕΡ ΖΔΔΑ ΩΕΚΙ Δ ΚΟΛΛΙΚΙΡΙ, ΚΟΥΛ ΙΟΜ ΤΕΝΝΑ ΚΑΔΕΓΙ Δ ΓΑΪΡΕ.  
*katreer haaja weeki aa kollikiri, kul yoom tenna kadeegi aa ghayre.*  
 “If I fix one thing firmly to the wall, he [still] changes his *jallābiya* daily.”

- ▶ He changes his clothing frequently without any reason.
- ▶ He is a rich man.
- ▶ He changes his mind frequently.

182 In one instance a Kenzi man known to me did not have any regular job any more since his mother died.

183 From Umm ‘Umar Ḥasan, Dabood.

184 From Kenzi students (25). Alternatively the proverb’s metaphor can refer to a father, brother or sister, any family member, friend, any good man or woman.

185 From Sa’id Zāki, Awaad Island.

After losing her husband instead of remarrying a widow can stay unmarried:

K28<sup>186</sup> ΖΑΝΟΥΓΙ ΚΑΘΝΑ ΔΓΑΡΡΟ ΒΙ ΔΙΓΙΡΝΑ?

*hanugi kajna agarro bi digirna?*

“Do you bind the donkey at the place of the horse?”

- ▶ He gives up something valuable for something less valuable.
- ▶ Advice against remarriage.

The proverb can be said in different circumstances, like when a widow is pushed to remarry, resulting in not being pressured any more. It gives the widow in Kenzi society her own status.

In conclusion, while the number of unique Kenzi proverbs is limited, they add variety and slightly more positive nuances to the Dongolawi proverbs.

### **Classifying Proverbs according to Their Cultural Perceptions of Feminity**

Overall, there are more Dongolawi gender-related proverbs than Kenzi ones. All proverbs presented in this paper, including proverbs providing encouragement and giving advice on finding a marriage partner, which I have collected include 34 Dongolawi proverbs, compared to 28 Kenzi proverbs covering that topic.

Digging deeper the observer wonders: which proverbs define women without considering men? Which proverbs give women their own status? In order to answer such questions systematically and uncover underlying messages, I apply Hussein’s classification to proverbs which provide information about the perception of feminity. There are 13 categories:<sup>187</sup>

1. Proverbs that reveal society’s denial of women’s possession of separate psychological, material and social existence outside men;<sup>188</sup>
2. Proverbs that explicitly or implicitly convey objectification of women;
3. Proverbs that portray women as sexual objects;
4. Proverbs that convey the social, biological and psychological inferiority of women;<sup>189</sup>

186 From Kenzi students (13).

187 HUSSEIN, “The Social and Ethno-Cultural Construction of masculinity and femininity in African Proverbs,” pp. 65-71.

188 Ibid, p. 65: “Once married, a woman should exist in harmony with her husband, and what she does or thinks should not collide against her husband.”

189 Ibid, p. 67: “Women’s unfitness to assume important places in society and, by implication, emphasize the necessity of their social and emotional dependence on men.”



5. Proverbs that directly or indirectly emphasize hegemonic masculinity;
6. Proverbs that convey society’s view of women’s frustration, low self-worth and inadequacy;
7. Proverbs that express society’s doubt about the integrity and wholeness of women;
8. Proverbs that convey society’s view of women as indulging in idiotic (irrational) affairs;
9. Proverbs that portray women as an evil sub-species of humanity;
10. Proverbs that show society’s view that men and women belong to separate spatial dimensions of existence;<sup>190</sup>
11. Proverbs that encourage men to control women;
12. Proverbs that convey women’s expressive and supportive roles;<sup>191</sup>
13. Proverbs that show complementarity between men and women in Africa.

The following table distinguishes between Dongolawi and Kenzi proverbs, sorted according to language and Jeylan Hussein’s category:

proverb #	perception of feminity	J. Hussein’s classification
D12	husband helps wife to grow up	1
D17	depending on bride’s and groom’s origin	(1)
D11	oldest daughter as ripe harvest	2
D21	unmarried woman as leavened flour	2
D22	unmarried woman as jar	2
D20	unmarried woman as vessel	2
D16	good wife is like valuable fat - bad wife is like wall	2
D27	wife can be beaten metaphorically	4, 9, 11
Do3	daughter as guest in father’s house	5
Do9	woman needing shade / protection	5
Do6	woman’s clothing	7
Do8	wife as light rope	7
D26	two wives as snake and scorpion	9
D25	woman needs protection	11
Do1	wife as part of house / family	12
Do4/Do5	beauty	-

190 Ibid, pp. 69-70: “In a gendered culture, men and women are stratified along differential patterns of space. This spatial division of the sexes usually brings about difference in the structure of male and female power, access to property, and participation in social activities. [...] The spatial stratification more often than not excludes women from having access to prestigious public spheres.”

191 Ibid, p. 71: “One theme is the existence of strong emotional connection between mother and her children.”

D15	daughter is like mother	-
D30	mother teaches the first steps	-
Ko4	daughter defined by father	(1)
K10	unmarried woman as earthen bowl	2
K11	uncovered earthen bowl	3
Ko7	husband should be proactive	5
K13	wife as weak bed	7
K24	woman meddles	8
K23	woman is different	10
K12	wife needs protection	11
K26	mother willing to sacrifice for her children	13, partly 8
Ko2	wife part of house / family	12
K22	bride not richer than husband	12
Ko1	showing great love	12
K28	wife as valuable horse; widow having its own status	-
K19	woman is stronger than man	-
Ko5	daughter as guest	-
Ko8	daughter like paternal aunt	-
K21	hiding her beauty	-

Due to the restricted number of Dongolawi and Kenzi proverbs representing each category, a convincing conclusion based on a comparison of both languages and cultures is difficult to reach. Among Dongolawi proverbs there is more objectification of women (category 2) than among Kenzi proverbs. In contrast, in spite of the lower number of proverbs, there are more Kenzi than Dongolawi proverbs which convey women's expressive and supportive roles (category 12) articulated in an honouring way<sup>192</sup> and including strong expressions of motherly care. That may be one reason why one Fadija Nubian remembers his childhood in a Nubian village from the 1930s so positively:

All the Nubian village folk were very friendly. When they saw us children, they spoke good naturedly to us, hugging and kissing us. They had lots of fun with us, joked with us and spoke sweet words to us.<sup>193</sup>

<sup>192</sup> Connie Fegley (p.c., 2015) regards proverbs supporting a person's dignity as a means of conflict resolution while proverbs belittling a human being as conflict generating. Thereby some gender-related Kenzi proverbs would offer the Kenzi a strong incentive for keeping peace regarding gender relations.

<sup>193</sup> MOHY EL-DIN SHERIF, *Old Nubia*. The author was from the Fadija Nubian village of Abu Simbel. The Fadija and Kenzi Nubians were neighbors.

Nowadays that kind of atmosphere is less observed. When walking through a resettlement village Nubian parents are heard repeatedly and harshly scolding their children, copying many Egyptian teachers' behavior towards their pupils.

Only one Dongolawi proverb portrays women as an evil sub-species of humanity (category 9), however, with men partly responsible for it, especially when taking a second wife. Only one Kenzi proverb portrays women as sexual objects (category 3).

The number of Kenzi proverbs which cannot be placed in Hussein's classification exceed the Dongolawi ones, leading to a more diverse view of women in Kenzi proverbs. What could the reasons be for that slightly more positive view?

- a. Among the Kenzi I attract a different kind of speakers to work with, especially ones who are more confident towards women and therefore remember appropriate proverbs.
- b. Assuming that it is frequently men who form and use proverbs,<sup>194</sup> Kenzi men leaving their women at home and working in the Egyptian cities needed fewer proverbs to advise and scold them.
- c. Assuming that Kenzi women originate from Dongola they kept their traditions more closely and therefore resemble Old Nubian women more than their Dongolawi sisters, occupying a more prominent place in society until recently.

Regarding (a), Kenzi women are definitely more open than Dongolawi women to work with a foreign male researcher. That is shown by the number of proverbs I collected from female speakers after being introduced by a male advocate. Additional trust was built up as I visited the Aswan and the Kom Ombo areas more frequently than the Dongola reach.

Regarding (b), proverbs recommending that Kenzi men working in far-away cities marry relatives from their home village are not more frequent than corresponding Dongolawi ones where men were more likely to stay in their home village. Therefore more research as to which cultural aspects were especially influenced by migration to the cities is needed.

Regarding (c), there is not enough known about Kenzi history. Yet if the Kenzi, or at least the Kenzi women, originate from Dongola,<sup>195</sup> there is a likelihood that they clung to their customs, just as Germans who went to Russia or America.

194 OHA, "The Semantics of Female Devaluation in Igbo Proverbs," p. 94, regards "proverb use [a]s a male art."

195 Their origin is a common topic of discussion among the Kenzi. Some claim that their ancestors lived in Dongola, others that Arabs coming from the Arab peninsula married women from Dongola and moved northwards.

## Arabic Influence on Nubian Gender Perceptions

As this section's heading would require a paper on its own, I begin by discussing the differences between proverbial advice on gender and its reality and Nubian explanations offered for those differences. The underlying consensus is that while proverbs reflect a former reality, the status of women has changed due to Arab influence. From there the discussion leads towards gender perception in Arab proverbs, exemplified by proverbs from Western Sudan.<sup>196</sup>

Among Nubians, Arab influence is to a great extent blamed on television aired from stations in the Arab world. As in other countries, television definitely does not support the ethical attitudes, including towards female status, found in proverbs. However, an outsider, in this case Arabs and especially Arab television, is held responsible for anything bad happening in one's own society. Still that attitude does not lead to the television being switched off.

Already in the late 1980s the change in attitude was observed by an Egyptian non-Nubian who visited the Fadija Nubian village of Abu Simbel during his PhD research:

Women used to participate in parties and marriage festivals by dancing and singing. The young men were very upset with the interference of the conservative Muslims of the village who prohibited young women and girls from participating in any parties or festivals. Khamis [one of the villagers] said, "Teachers at school punish those girls who participate in a public party by giving them bad grades, that's why they do not participate in our parties any more."<sup>197</sup>

Some of the shifting attitudes are rooted in the Nubians' understanding of Islam as became obvious when some Dongolawi men paraphrased the Dongolawi lexeme *akres*,<sup>198</sup> whose meaning cannot be easily determined:

Women do more *akres* than men as shown in the story of Adam and Eve. Both were in paradise where they could eat what they wanted, apples, chicken, etc. Just one tree was forbidden. Satan hidden as a serpent came to Adam and attempted to convince him to eat from that tree. Adam resisted. Then he went to Eve. Eve ate from that tree. They had to leave paradise. Therefore all difficulties on earth

<sup>196</sup> As taken from SALWA AHMED, *Educational and Social Values expressed by Proverbs in Two Cultures*.

<sup>197</sup> YASSER OSMAN, *The Nubian Experience*, p. 54.

<sup>198</sup> ARMBRUSTER, *Dongolese Nubian*, p. 13, translates *akres* as "unlucky, having bad luck, unfortunate, bringing bad luck."

come from women, like *akres*, and in the fire/hell there will be more women than men.<sup>199</sup>

The shift is further exemplified when comparing Arab proverbs with Nubian ones:

[T]here are so many [Arabic] proverbs such as “A ghou’s proverbial cunning is not equal to that of women”; “When woman was created, the devil was delighted”; “Women’s tricks have defeated the tricks of the ghouls.”<sup>200</sup>

One Dongolawi man explained the main thrust of Arab proverbs related to gender as<sup>201</sup> (a) “a wife should honour her husband,” and (b) “the husband honours the wife as she is his children’s mother.” That puts the barren wife at a disadvantage, and the unmarried woman even more so.

Western Sudanese Arab proverbs dealing with women and their status exemplify these statements:<sup>202</sup>

Old shoes with holes are better than a woman who has a son.

Woman has broken wings.

Do not depend on women; their support is trilling and their weapon is crying.

Women are pregnant by Satan.

A woman’s hair follows the neck.

Punishing a female is like rubbing butter over the body.

199 Dongolawi men at Sajaana bus station p.c., 2003, Khartoum. Note that neither the Old Testament nor the Quran talk about Adam rejecting the fruit offered by the serpent. In the Old Testament (Genesis 3: 1–6) Adam accepts the apple from Eve, and in the Quran (sūra 7: 20–23) both Adam and Eve are tricked by Satan. The moral and mental weaknesses of women as understood by many Nubians need to be interpreted within the Quranic and hadith framework as set by the story of the prophet Yussuf (sūra 12) which talks about an Egyptian woman who tries to seduce Yussuf, son of Ya’qūb, and later invites her lady friends who are enchanted by the same Yussuf. This notion is rejected by contemporary feminist interpretations of Islām.

200 KANAANEH, “We’ll Talk Later,” p. 267.

201 HĀMID KHABĪR, p.c., 2016.

202 All proverbs taken from SALWA AHMED, *Educational and Social Values expressed by Proverbs in Two Cultures*. Western Sudan is an area also inhabited by Nubians and therefore fits well. The English translation is hers. I list all her proverbs dealing with women, except proverbs dealing with mothers. Of course, I could have added other Arab proverb collections such as BURCKHARDT, *Arabic Proverbs*. However, that would have stretched the scope of the comparison.

A woman is a leather bag full of blood; if you carry it, it pours out and if you leave it, it becomes pus.

Even if the woman were an axe she would not break the head.

Do not trust the cloud even if it has darkened and do not trust a woman even if she has fasted and prayed.

A woman is a burden whether she is married or stays at her parents' home.

Girls' marriage is a light in the house and their staying in their parents' house is oppression to the house.

Do not take your stick away from three things: a woman, a drum, and a female donkey.

Doing a favor to men brings you a good turn and doing a favor to women is water that has missed its stream.

Woman's opinion is like a leather bag full of water that has been punctured in the desert.

The above-mentioned gender-related Arab proverbs clearly have a different ring than the corresponding Dongolawi and Kenzi ones. The change observed by one Nubian<sup>203</sup> regarding some former gender-related aspects of Nubian behavior as (a) regarding one's mother and older sisters as nearly sacred, leading to strict obedience, and (b) a boy and a girl being able walk together to another place, could be explained by the above proverbs.

Could it be that my research participants presented a glorified picture of gender roles and withheld oppressive proverbs, as they assumed a Westerner would not receive them well? I do not think so. In Salwa Ahmed's extensive collection there is not a single Arabic proverb honouring women, with the exception of mothers, as in the Dongolawi and Kenzi proverbs. There is a high likelihood that such a proverb would have been listed. It cannot be refuted that Dongolawi and Kenzi proverbs have a somewhat more positive attitude towards women. While they do not plead for gender balance or emancipation within a Western mindset, some proverbs emphasize the important role women have in society. Therefore, when shifting from the Dongolawi and Kenzi Nubian languages to Arabic and replac-

203 'Abd al-Wahhab 'Abd al-Gabir, p.c., 2014.

ing the proverbs accordingly, it is no surprise that women's status is changing, too.<sup>204</sup>

There are voices from the Arab world who see a need for change, too: the recently deceased influential Sudanese Islamist political leader Ḥasan al-Turabi after reinventing himself in the early 2000s aimed to champion women's rights. In a table talk he said: "The Islamic movement in the Sudan took the lead [and] ... evoked religion against custom"<sup>205</sup> meaning Islam on the one side, and Arab patriarchalism and non-egalitarian customs on the other. Researchers like Salwa AHMED (2005) recognize a similar line in Islam.

It remains open whether such statements will be fruitful and swing the pendulum back in favour of women.

### Conclusion

There are Kenzi and Dongolawi proverbs which sound oppressive to a Western ear. Emancipation, with women getting the same rights and freedoms as men, definitely is not the aim of Nubian proverbs. In many proverbs women are not attributed a status on their own. Other proverbs show women as being different from men. Yet there are limitations to this kind of interpretation. Nubian women I talked with do not seem to mind being different from men. Instead they complement the other sex and make use of the opportunities their otherness provides. Also, as proverbs taken at face value can contradict each other, they have to be set within their context, acknowledging that they reflect wishful thinking or veil a reality which may be quite different.

In one Dongolawi family I noticed the wife, who is a home-maker and supportive of her husband (Hussein's category 12), keeping the purse with her husband's consent.

While the Shaygiya do not regard themselves as Nubians, they share some common ancestry<sup>206</sup> and similar customs. Therefore I consider the following observation during two visits to Karima in the Shaygiya area, southeast of the Dongola reach, in 2000 and 2001 as typical for other Northern Sudanese women:

The only remaining son still at home had received an offer for a five-year work contract in Malaysia. His mother tore the paper and

<sup>204</sup> Thus far I have not come across any research on the triangular relationship of language shift, loss of proverbs, and cultural shift. It would be worthwhile to investigate deeper.

<sup>205</sup> Quoted in HALE, "Alienation and Belonging," p. 35. Islam is presented as a movement liberating women. Hale puts the quote into the context of the needs of the Sudanese military: "[W]omen are now being reshaped to fulfil both gender specific and gender generalized roles: mothers, members of militias, students, social reproducers of Islamic values, political organizers, and citizens." Also many Sudanese Nubians would not trust Ḥasan al-Turabi's statements literally.

<sup>206</sup> Many Nubians regard the Shaygiya as Arabized Nubians. Their agricultural vocabulary consists of Nubian lexemes.

did not let him leave for such an extended period. When I was leaving for Khartoum the mother made sure that I would get enough rest until the bus came along to pick me up, waiting at the door herself. Really, the mother coordinated everything.

None of these actions were done in public; they were related to the domestic sphere. That fits a description of solving disputes: if there are domestic disputes, the ladies of the home solve them. If there are disputes between two people outside of the home, the “assembly of wise men” solve them.<sup>207</sup>

Before the *hijra*, Kenzi women were known for their active involvement<sup>208</sup> and independence from the other sex<sup>209</sup>, partly due to the men working in Egyptian cities. Setting the Nile-Nubian proverbs in such an environment minimizes any oppressive atmosphere.

While the life of a Nile-Nubian woman is centred around her home, in contemporary Dongolawi and even more Kenzi Nubian society women are not just passive objects. They become active in their own ways, not always conforming to gender models of Arab-Islamic societies, as confirmed by a researcher who lived twice for extended periods among the Kenuzi in West-Aswan and later returned frequently:

Nubian women, contrary to the popular stereotype, are not prevented from engaging in important decision making processes but are expected to contribute their knowledge and expertise to them.<sup>210</sup>

Proverbs and historical sources show that there is one foundational limitation for women and gender relations that has remained unchanged. Women may not act indecently or damage the family’s honour as defined by men.

There definitely is multi-faceted change based on redefinitions of what is decent and what is indecent behaviour. One kind of change is due to influence on gender from Arab proverbs and culture. Good and bad behaviour are defined in Arabic terms which, of course, are shifting, too.

Another reason for the shift in Nubian women’s status is that instead of working as equal partners in agriculture, women’s main sphere of responsibility became geographically separated from that of their husbands, as in the Funj kingdom described before.<sup>211</sup>

<sup>207</sup> Kamāl Ḥisayn, p.c., 2005.

<sup>208</sup> CALLENDER, “Gender Relations in Kenuz Public Domains,” p. 197: “[W]omen were by no means passive counters.”

<sup>209</sup> Goo-Grauer, p.c., 2015.

<sup>210</sup> JENNINGS, *Nubian Women of West Aswan*, p. 16.

<sup>211</sup> That does not mean that formerly within agriculture men’s and women’s work necessarily was the same; it just had more points of contact. Nowadays even in agriculture husband and wife seldom work together as Nubian women are less willing to take on agricultural work (Dongolawi farmer, p.c., 2015) or in the Kenzi resettlement villages live too far away from



Changes in work patterns resulted in a change in family structure, a split between the private (home) world and the public (work) world. While the husband is working outside the home or sitting in a teahouse, the wife stays mainly inside the home bringing up their children, or preparing for the husband's return from his outside jobs and responsibilities. Even when the wife is working, too, which while still less frequent among Nubian women than among Arab women, is increasing, she carries nearly all domestic responsibilities.

Nubian men who feel connected to Nubian history and language discuss who the initiator for culture change is: men or women? Among many men the fault is placed on women. However, why should a woman favor a development which diminishes her status? In the Kenzi language area it is two young women who are starting Kenzi language activities, and no men. Instead, girls and women seem to accept such opportunities as formal education and new work opportunities more quickly, which of course also change culture. The discussion carries on, among researchers and the Nubians themselves.

the fields (see YASSER OSMAN, *The Nubian Experience*, p. 59). Due to formal school education, which Nubian girls take seriously, they prefer an office job after graduating from school or even university. During my travels to the Nubian villages I also observed a decrease in women working in the fields during the last fifteen years.

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