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A Collective Gender Perception? Female Perspectives towards Resettlement in the Dar al- Manāsīr

Petra Weschenfelder

1. Introduction

The Merowe Dam has now drowned most of the villages in the Fourth Cataract area. Many members of the Manāsīr, one of the ethnic groups who lived along the shores of the River Nile in the Fourth Cataract, now live in the resettlement schemes al-Mukābrāb or al-Fidda, or are trying to re-arrange their lives along the new shoreline created by the Merowe dam.¹ As had been intensively studied, the environmental setting, specifically the scarcity of farming land in the cataract area, had greatly influenced the lifestyles of the Manāsīr people:² the need for wage work abroad to compensate for this scarcity was a major issue that, even though it influenced the lives of men and women in equal terms, was largely studied from the male perspective. Such perspectives either investigated different job opportunities in various countries and the means of Manāsīr men to return to their homeland in later life, or the limited possibility of cash crop cultivation, mainly organized by the men. Manāsīr women often remained in the Dar al-Manāsīr, contributing to the family income as well as raising their children according to Manāsīr customs. However, the contributions of women to the lifestyle of the Manāsīr remained largely neglected in these studies. Their connection to their home land and their fears and perspectives towards

1 HÄNSCH, "Chronology of a Displacement," pp. 179–228.

2 See for example JACKSON, "A Trek in Abu Hamed District," pp. 1–35; INNES, "The Monasir Country," pp. 185–191; BECK, "Escaping from Narrow Confines – Returning to Tight Communities," pp. 201–211; id., "Die Aneignung der Maschine," pp. 66–77; id., "Livelihood Is Agreement," pp. 153–172; id., "Crisis, Innovation and the Social Domestication of the New," pp. 5–48; SALIH, *The Manasir of Northern Sudan*.

the resettlement deserves equal voice.³ My purpose is to address this desideratum, and in 2006 I led a research team (consisting of Amel Suleiman Badi, at that time Assistant Professor at the Department of History of the University of Khartoum, and Rihab Khider El-Rasheed, at that time Inspector for the Sudanese National Corporation for Antiquities and Museums) to the village of Kirbekān in the Dar al-Manāsīr to focus on the social and economic roles of Manāsīr women and their perspectives on the resettlement before it actually took place.⁴ However, the research showed that such perspectives were not as easy to perceive as assumed.

2. The Locality

The village of Kirbekān – the focal point of my cultural anthropological field research in February 2006⁵ – was part of the archaeological fieldwork concession area of the Humboldt University Nubian Expedition (H.U.N.E.). During the time of the field research, the Manāsīr committee representing the Manāsīr inhabitants of the Fourth Cataract in their claims to stay in their home land or to get proper compensation for the losses directly connected the work of the foreign archaeological missions to the dam construction.⁶ This perception cannot be dismissed since archaeological interest in the Dar al-Manāsīr just started due to the threat of inundation to the previously unstudied prehistoric and historic Sudanese heritage site. The Sudanese government that had invited the international community of archaeologists to document and rescue this heritage also initiated the dam construction. Therefore several archaeological missions faced the threat of exclusion from their concession areas.⁷ These tensions on the larger political stage – several members of the Manāsīr committee resided in England – also affected my research. Due to gender roles in the Dar al-Manāsīr, my research team was mainly welcomed by Manāsīr women either alone or in the company of other women. When these women told their husbands about one of my research questions that concerned the number of

3 These issues have been studied in other areas of the Sudan, cf. GRAWERT, *Making a Living in Rural Sudan*.

4 WESCHENFELDER, "H.U.N.E. 2006," pp. 81–88; id., "Life and Tradition of Manasir Women in Kirbekan," pp. 207–214; id., "Manāsīr Women's Contributions to Economic and Social Life," pp. 75–88.

5 In addition to my field study the Humboldt-University Nubian Expedition supported several research projects recording aspects of modern lifestyles of the contemporary inhabitants of the Fourth Cataract area, cf. EIGNER, "Kirbekan," pp. 113–124; id., "Kirbekan II," pp. 71–80; id., "Kirbekān," pp. 127–160; HABERLAH, "Cultural Landscape of Dar al-Manasir," pp. 49–74; HABERLAH & VON DEM BUSCHE, "Das Dorf Atoyah auf der Insel Sherari," pp. 125–135.

6 KLEINITZ & NÄSER, "The Loss of Innocence," pp. 253–280; id., "The Good, the Bad and the Ugly," pp. 269–304; HAFSAAS-TSAKOS, "Ethical Implications of Salvage Archaeology and Dam Building," pp. 49–76.

7 NÄSER, "Die Humboldt University Nubian Expedition 2006", pp. 99ff.

their children, the husbands feared that we would get census data to evaluate the compensation claims of the villagers. The situation was mitigated by Amel Suleiman Badi, who translated during the interviews. Amel Badi is not only familiar with the local dialect but also has a research background as a specialist in Sudanese local history. Her presence not only created a situation that allowed immediate connection to the women, but also could explain our research interests in comparison to other ethnic groups in Sudan. Thus the fears of the villagers could be allayed through the creation of a transparent research outline.⁸

Such explanation might have encouraged specific answers which the interviewees might have expected from the researchers. To counteract such dynamics, neighboring women who often visited during the afternoons were invited to discuss statements from individual interviews and issues that were provoked by the research questions. Such discussion groups led to intense dialogues in which the women compared their individual experiences and views and thereby disclosed locality, age, and biography as important features of their perceptions.

3. The Issue of Locality in Female Perspectives: Land Rights, Property, and Education in the Dar al-Manāsīr and in Kirbekān

El-Kirbekān was situated on the eastern shore of the Nile. Cultivable land was, there and elsewhere in the Dar al-Manāsīr, divided into different categories: uplands, riverside land, and wadi beds. Uplands watered by diesel pumps were cultivated by the men mainly to produce cash crops.⁹ According to the practice in other parts of the Dar al-Manāsīr, women who were entitled to inherit that land according to Islamic law would transfer their rights to their brothers. In return they would be supported by their brothers in case of divorce or the death of their husbands.¹⁰ Due to limited research time, this practice of land transfer could not be observed in Kirbekān.

Usage rights over the riverbanks were inherited by both men and women. However, the men would transfer the land use to their wives.¹¹ Also in Kirbekān the women had had access to a plot of land at the riverside as well as in the wadi beds between the hamlets. There they used the inundated land to grow animal fodder for their small stock. Animal husbandry was an important activity in the

8 The question concerning the number of children for example referred to different habits or rituals in association with the first birth in contrast to further births; cf. WESCHENFELDER, "H.U.N.E. 2006," p. 83; id., "Life and Tradition of Manasir Women in Kirbekan," p. 210.

9 Salih, *The Manasir of Northern Sudan*, pp. 112ff.

10 Ibid., p. 219.

11 Ibid., pp. 115-118.

Dar al-Manāsīr, with several aspects to it.¹² The women who owned these animals supplied their families with dairy products and meat. Since the animals could be and were sold in times of immediate cash need, animal husbandry was also an important income generating activity. The women in Kirbekān stated they were free to sell their animals to buy personal items but also considered family needs within such transactions.¹³ Furthermore, sheep play a central role as a sacrifice in most Islamic ritual activities.¹⁴ Such activities strengthen family ties and by their inherent reciprocity assure the mutual support of community members. Therefore women's activities in animal husbandry contributed to social life in Kirbekān and provided an important share of the family income.¹⁵

So far this is a general outline of how Manāsīr customs influenced female village life with regard to land use and land rights in general. However, the local practice in this specific area differed greatly from that in other areas of the Dar al-Manāsīr. The women would hand down part of the inundated land at the riverside and in the wadis together with some of their animals to their daughters as soon as the daughters took over responsibility for their own little herds. This happened after the girls left primary school. The animals provided the start for their daughters' animal wealth, which they would contribute to their own families after their marriages.

The girls were married by the age of 13 to 15. One reason for marrying girls so young was for their social and economic security. In Kirbekān such arrangements were preferred to higher education for the girls. Local education provided only for primary school, and girls were not sent away to attend a high school. As the women of Kirbekān told us, the question of whether girls would receive higher education was not a question of distance since a high school was available on one of the nearby islands. The main aim of the families seems to have rather been the early marriage of the girls.

In the village this lack of higher education for girls resulted in a disadvantage for the women. Girls with higher education could learn the profession of a *dāya*, a trained midwife. These trained women usually return to their home area to practice their profes-

12 Husbandry was even seen as the most important income-generating occupation in the Fourth Cataract by SALIH, *The Manasir of Northern Sudan*, p. 44. However, in this statement it is not clear whether it refers to animal husbandry in general or the activities of the nomadic part of the Manāsīr population.

13 Yet, the restricted time for research did not allow for a visit to the local markets, so that we could see if women themselves sold their products and to what extent they controlled this income.

14 Cf. BOND, "Karama," pp. 276f.

15 Women furthermore participated in their husbands' cash crop production which they supported by weeding and harvesting. Participant observation involved accompanying the women of one family to their cash crop fields outside the village where they harvested *shammār* (cumin).

sion, but due to the lack of girls with higher education that was not the case in this village. Instead, tasks like assistance in childbirth were done by an older woman reputed for her knowledge in these fields instead of a properly trained midwife. Young mothers who recently had experienced giving childbirth emphasized this lack of a trained midwife as a disadvantage in Kirbekān.

Another reason to keep the girls in the village was to assure the integrity of the heritable land. By not sending the girls away, the possibility that they would find marriage partners outside of the family and share inheritance rights with people from a different family or even a different ethnic background could be avoided. Instead the local endogamous marriage practice avoided the fragmentation of inheritable land, since land rights were kept within the extended family.

In Kirbekān this resulted in the presence of several Manāsīr women – young mothers – from Kassala. A part of this city at the river Gash is mainly inhabited by Manāsīr from the Fourth Cataract region who had left the area with their families. In Kassala these families lived close together, so that the girls grew up with many Manāsīr customs. These younger women had married back into the village and built a family with their cousins. One reason could have been the problematic legal status of upland usage rights in the cataract area, where differences between Islamic law of inheritance supported by the government and the customary law of the Manāsīr were reported: according to Islamic law expatriated descendants would have their share in the inheritance whereas in Manāsīr practice they did not.¹⁶ Yet in the resettlement situation, claims for compensation of land had to be made to the government according to Islamic law. This not only led to Manāsīr women from Kassala marrying into their extended family in Kirbekān, but also Manāsīr families who had settled elsewhere returning home.

Their perspectives not only contrasted with the experience of the women born and raised in Kirbekān. When talking about their contrasting lifestyles they also influenced the expectations of the Kirbekān women. They for example went home to their families in Kassala for childbirth instead of staying in Kirbekān where they could not have been supported by a *dāya*. Because of conflicting statements we did not quite understand if the Kirbekān women had known about the existence of the profession before and seen this lack as a problem or if it just came up due to the differing perspectives from Kassala.

16 For legal details of this practice see SALIH, *The Manasir of Northern Sudan*, pp. 208–212, 219.

4. Breaking Down the Perspective Further: Local, Generational, and Individual Perceptions of Female Tasks and Roles and the Resettlement

Due to their differing geographic backgrounds, the women in Kirbekān had varying attitudes towards their social and economic roles, their upcoming resettlement and their prospects after the resettlement. One example of this concerns age as well as environment. Before the start of the Merowe dam construction, this area was only remotely connected to central areas in the Sudan. Public transport, by lorries and Bedford buses, was irregular and hazardous along desert trails; shipping was difficult due to the conditions of the cataracts, and trains and roads largely bypassed this area. With the dam construction, an asphalt road provided access for the construction lorries, and was also used by the Manāsīr people for direct access to the Sudanese capital or larger market areas. Women of the “grandmother” generation, who – due to past conditions – had mainly spent their lives in the cataract area, were largely attached to their homeland and did not want to leave it. The elder women gave their fear of strangers as the main reason for their opposition to resettlement, clearly favoring the close social relations they had in the village. They feared that they would have to deal with members of other groups in the resettlement area.¹⁷ In contrast, this was not seen as a problem by the younger women, since many of them had grown up in a bigger city and had already moved once from their home, or were used to the closer contact with the nearby centers due to the asphalt road.

These younger women were further used to varying degrees of access to amenities: the women coming in from Kassala had experienced a completely different lifestyle before they married and subsequently moved to Kirbekān. They had enjoyed a regulated water supply and had not been previously trained in the care of animals. As already stated for their first childbirth they returned to their mothers’ homes in Kassala and thereby got necessary medical treatment from a trained midwife. Their different experiences probably influenced the attitudes which the women of the young mothers generation in Kirbekān displayed concerning their upcoming resettlement. These women stated that they expected to enjoy benefits from the resettlement -- mainly concerning the availability of running water, medical treatment and higher education for their daughters.¹⁸

17 Cf. CALKINS, “Agricultural Encroachment in Wadi Mukabrab Area,” pp. 229–252.

18 Experiences within agricultural schemes realized during the Nasser dam project show that prospects are far from sufficient for the life styles that were available before the resettlement, cf. INTERNATIONAL FUND FOR AGRICULTURAL DEVELOPMENT, “Report and

However, this was a largely localized perception, as is shown by the contrasting example of Shīrrī Island, one of the islands in the Fourth Cataract situated in the H.U.N.E. concession area. There the women feared the loss of their individual freedom as a result of the agricultural scheme.¹⁹ This freedom was equally closely connected to the environmental setting of the Dar al-Manāsīr and the division of labor there: while the men were out in the fields during the day-time or even abroad for several months or years, Manāsīr women in Kirbekān acted as spokespeople for their families. These public roles as representatives were supported by the presence of the women in the house during the afternoon visiting time. The women would go to the other hamlets or even nearby villages without male company. Also the hamlets reflected this practice of a greater public role for women. Whereas Islamic building practice separates a male open sphere and a secluded female sphere, this was not true of the architecture in Kirbekān.²⁰ The rooms radiated from the inner courtyard accessible by the main complex door. There the women would receive their guests. These architectural features reflected the scarcity of building space in the cataract as well as the differing female social roles. Guests were most often other women from their village or from other villages in the vicinity but the research team as well. Thereby the women got news and discussed village matters but most importantly mediated between different branches of their families and promoted the aims of their family among other villagers.²¹ Women were thereby influential in social matters since their mediation was of high importance within village life. It could have been the loss of this position that the women of Shīrrī feared in the face of resettlement.

Another localized issue was that of women's work itself. Many of the younger women in Kirbekān saw benefits in their resettlement since they blamed their hard work on the inaccessibility of the cataract area. They had to carry drinking water on their backs and shoulders from the river to the house three times a day, and carry water from the channel and provide fodder for the animals three times a day in addition to cooking, cleaning, child care, farming,

Recommendation of the President to the Executive Board on a Proposed Loan to The Democratic Republic of the Sudan for the New Halfa Irrigation Rehabilitation Project," pp. 8ff. In the context of the Fourth Cataract resettlement the allocation of running water, health care and education were used in the propaganda of the Sudanese government as the major benefits the population of the Dar al-Manāsīr would gain; cf. FAILER, MUTAZ & EL TAYEB, "Merowe," p. 73. Since this study is based on research collected in 2006 the realizations of the promised allocation are not evaluated here, but cf. HÄNSCH, "Chronology of a Displacement."

19 Claudia Näser, personal communication.

20 EIGNER, "Kirbekan" p. 116.

21 Women not only represented their families by receiving guests in their homes but also at public gatherings such as wedding ceremonies; cf. SALIH, *The Manasir of Northern Sudan*, p. 44.

etc.²² In many areas of the Fourth Cataract, gold washing instead of animal care was an important off-farm activity practiced by the local Manāsīr women and girls.²³ Yet, in Kirbekān it had been abandoned a generation ago in favor of the intensification of animal husbandry. Another example is house building: while the women in Kirbekān stated that house building was a solely male task, women in the village of Atoyah on the island of Sherari took part in the construction of houses.²⁴ The great variability in habits and social practices in the Dar al-Manāsīr thus led to the different attitudes of the women towards their daily tasks.²⁵

In addition to geographic and generational differences in perspective, individual backgrounds also influenced the expectations of women. One woman owned the local shop in the village and another shop in the Sudanese capital.²⁶ This woman claimed that if she did not like the resettlement area she would move to Khartoum. Flexibility in working to generate additional income also accounted for the relaxed perspective of a local hennāna, a woman trained in the adornment of women, especially the application of henna on brides.

Another woman we met in Kirbekān was actually born and raised in Kabushiya in the Shendi Reach. She married a Manāsīr man from Kirbekān and had lived with him in Saudi Arabia where he worked.²⁷ To claim the compensation for their house and fields she came alone with her baby daughter to the village while her husband stayed in Saudi Arabia. She also did not like the conditions in the village and was happy to be able to return to Saudi Arabia after the flooding. Her background and approach towards female tasks, roles and perspectives also contributed to the young women's discussions of their perspectives of the resettlement.

22 For detailed descriptions of daily tasks of the women in Kirbekān see Weschenfelder, "H.U.N.E. 2006"; id., "Life and Tradition of Manāsīr Women in Kirbekan."

23 SALIH, *The Manasir of Northern Sudan*, p. 49. See also a photograph by David Haberlah, "Washing Gold at the Nile 4," *Flickr*, March 19, 2005, <https://www.flickr.com/photos/haberlah/41928474>.

24 HABERLAH & VON DEM BUSSCHE, "Das Dorf Atoyah auf der Insel Sherari," p. 134; pl. 10.

25 In other rural areas in the Sudan women combine the tasks in the household with work in the fields and the managing of herds as well; cf. HALL & ISMAIL, *Sisters under the Sun*, p. 125. Even though many women in urban areas may not go to the Nile to get the daily drinking water for their families, many women work outside the home, which they also combine with household tasks and childcare; EL BAKRI & KAMEIR, "Women's Participation in Economic, Social and Political Life in Sudanese Urban and Rural Communities" pp. 194–196.

26 Weschenfelder, "H.U.N.E. 2006," p. 85; id., "Life and Tradition of Manāsīr Women in Kirbekan," pp. 211ff.

27 For labor migration in the Sudan see GRAWERT, *Making a Living in Rural Sudan*, pp. 117–152; for labor migration concerning the Manasir see BECK, "Escaping from Narrow Confines."

5. Conclusion

This study showed that there was a wide variety of perceptions of their roles and prospects among the women in Kirbekān. Yet, this study was undertaken in the upcoming event of a resettlement program and one can argue that it was this particular event that led to the results of the research. That is, the dam construction led to the presence of women from a variety of areas with differing social and economic roles and differing living standards. This setting in Kirbekān therefore introduced an outside versus inside comparison from within the village community and influenced the women's notions of their social and economic roles in the Dar al-Manāsīr and their positions on the resettlement. Another aspect which influenced our findings is the perspectives of the different generations within the community who had experienced several changes to their roles and tasks, and reflected on those when describing their prospects. Furthermore, apart from their local origin and their age group the individual background of each of the women from Kirbekān attributed to their perspectives on their tasks and their prospects for the resettlement. In addition, the comparison with other villages in the Dar al-Manāsīr shows that social practices within each area differed greatly, and thereby provided for different views on the resettlement. Some saw the move as beneficial, due to local amenities such as running water, medical treatment and higher education, and others saw it as disadvantageous due to a diminishing of social influence, a loss of income opportunities, and the loss of individual freedom.

This discussion shows that a collective perspective of "the Manāsīr women" on their daily life in the Dar al-Manāsīr did not exist, even within one single village, and less so compared to other areas in the Dar al-Manāsīr. The social and economic roles of the women and their perspectives, hopes and fears in the advent of the resettlement project cannot be presented as representative of the whole population of "the Manāsīr women", but should be studied from localized, generational and biographical backgrounds instead.

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