



Fig. 1. A Nubian woman in the Nubian village of Gharb Sohail, 2013. Image by Zeina Elcheikh.

## OUTSIDE THE WALLS OF THE NUBIAN MUSEUM

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*The “good old days” of the pre-Dam life appear in the section of the diorama at the Nubia Museum in Aswan (Egypt), with the aim of showcasing Nubians’ culture and way of life. However many of the aspects of the showcased Nubians’ daily life, if not all of them, do not exist anymore in the displaced Nubian villages, or at least not in the romanticized image presented in the museum. It is quite challenging to pass judgment on a successful tourist attraction such as the Nubia Museum in Aswan, yet the aim is not to criticize. Based on accounts from Nubians in the displaced village of Ballana, this paper tries to discuss how presenting selective aspects of the way of life of a group of people, creates a risk of freezing them in a snapshot, and that the experience offered in cultural tourism would not be authentic without the involvement of local communities in the way they are presented.*

### Keywords:

Nubia – museums – local communities – Aswan – authenticity

### 1. PUTTING CULTURES ON SHOW

Cultural tourism has been developed to fulfill the desire of encountering the culture of other societies, their way of life, and their achievements through history. Ethnic communities have been of scholarly interest for cultural anthropologists, and have also attracted tourists with their distinctive lineage, language and customs. As a result, ethnic tourism has become a particular part of cultural tourism, and has been increasingly developed in several parts of the world: from visiting native Indians in America to exploring homes of African tribes.

Although tourists seek authenticity and direct understanding of the new culture, they search to see everything in a short period of time which makes their experience often transient, and occurs in museums where artefacts are housed away from their original locations (Prentice, 2001: 12). With the successful traditional role of museums in presenting artefacts and objects, a dilemma has been argued regarding the representation of living cultures. Many living traditions such as dance performances, storytelling, and culinary arts cannot be displayed in the conventional context of museums, given that intangible heritage is “living, vital and embedded in social relationships” (Kurin, 2004: 7).

Showcased objects and relics of the past may not be stand-alone entities, as they depend on

clarifying narratives that accompany them. Yet, in museumification as an explanatory medium, everything is a potential artefact, including villages, ethnicities and nations (Dellios, 2002: 1). Museums have long collected artefacts which show the past of a particular group of people, and which reflect their achievements through history. However, they have shaped a possible risk of creating a gap between a past reduced to archaeology and present represented in terms of eternity (Rivera-Orraca, 2009: 32; Vaglio, 2013: 4). Moreover, they have been to many extents connected to a look backwards to the past and with a process of freezing entities in time and place. In the case of ethnographic museums, Förster (2008: 19) argues that they: “are not museums about the other, they are at most museums about the history of the other, or even more accurately: about our past encounters with and perceptions of the then contemporary other”.

Museums are a product of historical and social circumstances, and the construction or reconstruction of history is affected by its social, political, cultural and institutional context (van Darteel, 2008: 34; Rivera-Orraca, 2009: 32). Although they can support heritage connection through cultural resources and imagination, “not all museums will want to do this, nor should they” (Kurin, 2004: 8). In cases of contentious, divided, complicated and uneven history, museums could show different versions of the past with its painful events. Interpretation does not need necessarily to be a faithful representation of historical facts and events,



Fig. 2. Nubia Museum in Aswan by Zeina Elcheikh, 2013.

especially when “that history” is already open to process of bias, selectivity and distortion (Smith, 2003: 84). In view of that, heritage tourism does not present a version of history that is controversial, and it is difficult to offer the tourists a truly objective depiction of historical reality in interpretation (Crokern, 2004: 10; Smith, 2003: 84).

Tourists in their travel to new destinations, look for authenticity, and for experiencing new cultures and ways of life by interacting with indigenous people and ethnicities, rather than being lectured only about history. Authenticity has always been an intense concern, however assessing it is extremely ambivalent (Lowenthal, 1990: 18). It could be promoted through the communication of a specific image by “place-branding or place-myth”, however “problems can occur for museums and other attractions if they do not fit comfortably within such overall destination themes” (Prentice, 2001: 18).

## 2. THE NUBIA MUSEUM IN ASWAN

The building followed the architectural design of Dr. Mahmoud el-Hakim from Egypt. Dr. Leila Masri (Egypt) was involved in finalizing the landscaping of the project initiated by Dr. Werkmeister, and the museum displays were designed by the Mexican architect Pedro Ramirez Vázquez. The building is composed of three main levels. The ground floor, with the entrance hall, shops, lecture theatre, and service room. The administration offices, meeting room, cafeteria and library are located in the first floor. The basement level hosts the main exhibits, the diorama, restoration studios and laboratories, in addition to the electrical and facility rooms.

The concept was inspired by the Nubian traditional architecture, and the main entrance was oriented



Fig. 3. The ethnographic exhibit at the Nubia Museum showing scenes of traditional Nubian life by Zeina Elcheikh, 2013.

towards the Nile in the same way used in the traditional Nubian houses, although the use of sandstone has been questioned in the light of the use of mud brick in the traditional Nubian architecture (Aga Khan Award for Architecture, 2002: 1-11). The total area of the site is 50,000 square meters, consisting of 7,000 square meters for the museum’s ground floor area, and 43,000 square meters allocated to the outdoor exhibit amphitheater and green areas. The museum was opened to the public in November 1997, and captured the attention of tourists and scholars who wanted to explore the rich history of Nubia. Moreover, it has become a main attraction in Aswan, not to be missed by any visitor. For gathering an educational institution dedicated to Nubian history, and a museum designed to preserve cultural artefacts for the future, and for the high quality of its construction materials and details, the Nubian Museum was awarded the Aga Khan Award for Architecture in 2001.

The establishment of the Nubia Museum was decided by the Egyptian Government, in order to preserve excavated artefacts and significant findings during the International Campaign for Saving the Monuments of Nubia. This Campaign described as the greatest archaeological rescue of operation of all time, was an international response to the appeal made by Vittorio Veronese, the Director General of UNESCO, on 8 March 1960 to save the Nubian monuments in Egypt and the Sudan, stressing the fact that the treasures were part of the heritage of all mankind (Mohamed, 1980: 7). The Government of the United Arab Republic at that time, joined later by the Sudanese government, approached UNESCO and sought help for saving the heritage of Nubia, given that when the decision to build the High Dam in Aswan was made in the late 1950s, it became clear that with the 500 kilometers of land to be drowned in Egypt and Sudan, the magnificent heritage of Nubia would disappear forever. As a follow-up to the campaign, the call for the establishment of the

Nubia Museum was made by the Director General of UNESCO (Amadou-Mahtar M'Bow at that time), to allow present and future generations, and the larger international public, to get a better understanding of Nubia's history. It was intended to house some of the most outstanding items discovered in the course of the rescue campaign, and to become a valuable center of Nubian culture (M'Bow, 1982: 1-2).

The museum's collections host artefacts excavated during the campaign, from the site which now lay underneath the waters of the Lake Nasser/Nubia. These artefacts range in time from prehistory, Egyptian domination, Christian and Islamic periods. The more modern part representing Nubian culture is found in the ethnographic exhibit, which will be discussed hereafter. The outdoor area includes a sample of a typical traditional Nubian house, with its architecture and decorations. The estimated length of a tour in the museum is about two hours. Apart from being a must-visit for tourists coming to Aswan, the Nubia museum has a role in teaching history. Schools arrange visits to the museum, which hosts handicrafts workshops and training sessions for tour guides in Aswan. According to the current director, Dr. Rageh Mohamed, the Nubia Museum has been affected by the sharp decline in the tourism sector in Egypt in general following the revolution in January 2011, and consequently the numbers of visitors, as well as its revenues, have noticeably dropped (personal communication, March 2013).

### 3. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND SCOPE

This paper is part of a thesis written on the topic of cultural tourism and Nubian culture, in which the



Fig. 4. The ethnographic exhibit at the Nubia Museum showing scenes of traditional Nubian life by Zeina Elcheikh, 2013.

image of Nubians in the Nubia Museum in Aswan has been discussed. Firsthand data was collected through structured and semi-structured interviews with Nubians in the village of Gharb Soheil and the displaced village of Ballana in March 2013. Ballana has been chosen among the other villages in the displacement area in Kom Ombo, for being the nearest village to Aswan. Interviews included as well administrative servants, tourist guides and anthropologists.

### 4. BETWEEN A SNAPSHOT AND A MOTION PICTURE

Museums have traditionally been a focus of the social and cultural life of communities, and of the presentation of their communal pride. Heba, a Nubian young woman, reflecting a younger generation of displaced Nubians in the village of Ballana shared her opinion about the diorama in the Nubia Museum when she first visited the museum: *"I was curious to know what the government would say about us: we Nubians. I do not like how it shows us on TV, but in the museum the life in Old Nubia was presented in a wonderful way: just like the stories told by my mother and grandmother. I really felt proud"*.

The diorama, made in various sections, represents scenes of life in Old Nubia: waterwheels and irrigation, a bridal scene, a Coranic School, dance performance, Nubian women in their traditional clothing and handicrafts, and boat construction, in addition to jewelries and pictures of trade and fishing. Dr. Osama Abdel Meguid (former director of the Nubian Museum) has explained that hundreds if not thousands of photographs were taken for Nubians, to better shape the figures in the museum, as Nubians were sometimes mistakenly portrayed with features



Fig. 5. The ethnographic exhibit at the Nubia Museum showing scenes of traditional Nubian life by Zeina Elcheikh, 2013.



Fig. 6. The ethnographic exhibit at the Nubia Museum showing scenes of traditional Nubian life by Zeina Elcheikh, 2013.

from Central Africa. Furthermore on this, Nicholas S. Hopkins' (personal communication, 29 March 2013) shared his thoughts: *"The makers tried hard to make the dioramas authentic, but they are referring to a bygone way of life that cannot be checked, and that can be very controversial when the images in the museum no longer correspond to the desired image"*.

The depiction of a long-gone lifestyle is more or less accurate, yet the majority of Nubians –if not all of them- do not live in this way anymore. Many Nubian traditions have changed, including clothing and customs, as well as their architecture.

For instance, wedding traditions and ceremonials underwent major changes, and on this Awada from Ballana says: *"The bridal scene and the section of the jewelry in the museum were the ones I liked the most. They took me back to those days when I used to attend weddings in our old village and see women wearing the same bracelets, necklaces and rings. But we do not do things the same way now"*.

Nubians' way of life started to encounter changes, decades before the High Dam, mainly through the labor migration of Nubian men to urban centers to seek their livelihood, due to a shortage of resources in Nubia. However, the forced displacement experienced by the majority of Nubians during the construction of the High Dam, was the sad story behind the scene of the greatest achievements at that time. On the dawn of the High Dam's construction, about 120,000 Nubians in Egypt and the Sudan were confronted with the obligation of totally abandoning their homeland. They were resettled in Egypt in ready-made dwellings



Fig. 7. Traditional Nubian house at the Nubia Museum by Zeina Elcheikh, 2013.

at Kom Ombo, 50 km north of Aswan. In the Sudan, Nubians were resettled in Khashm el Girba, near the Eritrean borders. Inevitably, the Nubians "sense of loss" was something to be expected, especially since they have always been a community known for its isolation. In both countries, Nubians were displaced away from the River Nile, which was an essential part of their lives, not just by being the only source of water, but by being the center of many of their daily activities: communication, ceremonies of marriage, death, birth, circumcision and many other private and community rituals celebrated in close association with the Nile. A Nubian lady who experienced the forced displacement as a child recalls: *"They showed in the Museum lot of pictures of how the monuments and temples of Abu Simbel were rescued, as well as the construction of the High Dam. Why they did not show how Nubians were displaced and were taken away in boats and buses?"*.

On the other hand, her 33 year-old son mentioned that he had never been to the Nubia Museum and that he is not planning to do so, saying that *"Nubia was lost, and the Museum will never be a compensation for what had been taken from Nubians"*. Nubian culture underwent a major, and irreversible disruption due to the construction of the High Dam. The dominant opinions of interviewed (Egyptian) Nubians, when facing the exhibits of the pre-Dam life, is mainly seen among those who experienced the displacement; as some believe it is a sort of distorted image given to tourists. Marwa, a Nubian lady from Ballana stated: *"If tourists want to see Nubians and not antiquities, they should ask where we live and come to see us. We are more alive and more real than the statues in the museums"*.

<sup>1</sup> Emeritus professor of anthropology at the American University in Cairo, and co-editor of *"Nubian Encounters: The Story of the Nubian Ethnological Survey 1961-1964"*.

#### 4. DISCUSSION

At the time when the Nubia Museum was under consideration, opinions of some Nubians revealed that putting Nubian history and culture in a museum might well hasten Nubian assimilation (Fernea, Rouchdy, 1986: 379). Osama Abdel Meguid, former director of the Nubia Museum and himself a Nubian, quoted a view of a Nubian in Egypt saying that the Museum could be the beginning of Nubians gaining their rights from the government, “because a museum like that once opened, doesn’t close”. The location of the Museum was addressed in the interviews mainly with administrative servants: why in Aswan and not closer to the displaced Nubian community in Kom Ombo and New Nubia? Would not a closer location be more positively affecting from social and economic perspectives as could have brought tourists to their areas and lessen their isolation? The choice of the location was based on “pragmatic” criteria, which were gathered from informants (mainly administrative servants and tourist guides) as following:

1. Aswan is much closer to Old Nubia than New Nubia.
2. The location itself was an ancient quarry.
3. There is a Nubian community also living in Aswan.
4. The archaeological artefacts excavated during the Campaign used to be stored in Aswan.
5. Facilities of such significance should be connected to tourism-related infrastructures (hotels, paved roads...) which are not available in the displacement area.

The name of the museum has also been addressed in the interviews, as it was acknowledged that it has caused a dispute in the past. There was a contention before the opening in 1997 on the name of this long-awaited monument was supposed to have. Many

proposals were put on the table such as “Museum of Aswan” or “South of the Valley Museum”, which were meant to quell the effects of any possible ethical sensitivity, and to emphasize that Nubia and the Nubians are an essential part of Egypt. However, and due to the fact that the call was made by the Director General of UNESCO in 1982 who argued in favor of a “Nubian Museum in Aswan to house some of the most outstanding items discovered in the course of the rescue campaign”, the name of Nubia Museum finally put end to all debates.

During the field trip to the south, the question of how the submergence of Nubia is communicated to the tourists during their visit to Aswan or to the High Dam? An Egyptian tour guide said that “tourists come to enjoy their time, and there is no need to go into details of the past that could be annoying, perplexing or which could give any negative impression”. Another tour guide from Aswan said that his work is like a diplomat; one should present his country in a good way without exceeding the drawn limits. Such statements open a debate on a contested topic related to the consent of ownership, interpretation and transfer of history, and about the authenticity offered in tourism products. Anne M. Jennings<sup>2</sup> (personal communication, 11 April 2013) shared her thoughts about authenticity in the Nubian context: “What is authenticity? At what point in history can we say “okay, that was authentic Nubian culture, but this is not”? I have yet to read a good definition of the word “authentic”. Does it mean “old fashioned”? Does it mean “unchanging”? But cultures are always changing, so how can we use that word about culture? Perhaps we should only use the word when talking about museum displays, or perhaps we should retire the word”.

If one would be in agreement that “every relic displayed in a museum is a fake in that it has been



Fig. 8. Current Nubian houses in the displaced village of Ballana by Zeina Elchelkh, 2013.

<sup>2</sup> Cultural anthropologist and author of “Nubian Women of West Aswan: Negotiating Tradition & Change”.



Fig. 9. A model at the Nubia Museum showing how the Temples of Abu Simbel were rescued during the Salvage Campaign by Zeina Elcheikh, 2013.

wrenched out of its original context” (Lowenthal, 1990: 17), Nubians were wrenched out of their original context twice: firstly when they were uprooted from their historical homeland, and secondly when their picture in the museum dates back to the pre-Dam times. It could cause disappointment for tourists to only see in museums the traditional Nubians’ mud-brick houses, clothes and accessories, while finding out that Nubians in the real life live in modern houses made of concrete and wear more westernized clothes.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The establishment of the Nubia Museum was of major importance to acknowledge Nubians and their heritage in Egypt. However, its role as a tourist attraction in southern Egypt has some disadvantages in terms of authenticity, given the fact that Nubians nowadays live their lives differently. The interpretation of Nubian history for tourism purposes shows that the past can

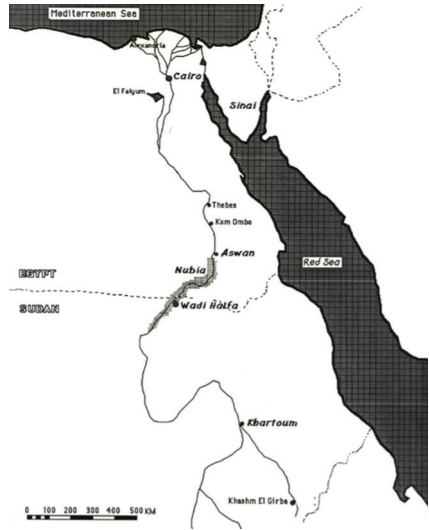


Fig. 10. Map showing the location of Kom Ombo, Aswan and the original location of Nubian villages in Old Nubia (Mahgoub, 1990: 31).

be partially glorified, partially shown or even partially omitted in order to highlight specific events in a more constructive way, with the intent of making the subject more pleasant and less controversial to visitors. Seen by many to be set up only for tourists, some Nubians –especially in the displacement area- have not yet visited the Museum in Aswan, and others consider it as another governmental imposition and opportunism at their expenses, as it had been the case of the High Dam. Finally, as long as there are still Nubians who did not yet visit the Museum, and some who do not want to, the main task to fulfill is to involve the community, for whom the museum was supposedly built to at the first place.

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<sup>3</sup> Cultural anthropologist and author of “Nubian Women of West Aswan: Negotiating Tradition & Change”.

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