

Reflections on lost traditions since the 1960s Nubian diaspora

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Introduction

This research note refers to interviews that were conducted in 2014 with elderly Egyptian Nubian people who had lived in Old Nubia. It discusses the interviewer's experience with conducting oral history interviews in Egypt, along with extracts from the key discussions. Participants were keen to share their memories of Nubia as it was before they had to leave their homeland in the 1960s, and explained how different life was for them now they lived alongside their Egyptian neighbours. The following traditions formed part of their past culture and are now either lost completely, or are significantly altered.

Oral histories in practice

Some oral history studies are conducted to collect memories of the same event from many people, to gather as much detail as possible from various angles, which could become crucial to understanding the situation. The purpose of this project's research was to collect as many diverse memories as possible of different aspects of life in Old Nubia, in order to create a bigger picture of life before the creation of the Aswan High Dam. The discussions then continued around how previous traditions were now lost, due to having to absorb the lifestyles and language of the new villages where they were being housed in Egypt. The intent was, therefore, to avoid duplicating memories where possible.

Being conducted across just two short visits in 2014 as part of a wider project,¹ recruitment of the interviewees was handled swiftly. The resulting meetings (seven) means the study was too small to provide an analysis of the content, and serves purely as a record. Although the number of participants was low, it should be remembered that the base cohort was declining, given that it was based on Egyptian Nubian people old enough to have memories of living in Old Nubia. Census figures were not available to indicate the numbers of elderly Egyptian Nubians living in the Aswan, Kom Ombo and Abu Simbel areas, but the average life expectancy for Egypt in 2014 was 69 for a man, and 73 for a woman (Worldometers 2020). Given that the research was being conducted some 50 years after the diaspora, the likelihood of finding many people who were available for interview was reduced. In addition, only people who were willing to be recorded on video and audio could be selected, so that a full and accurate record could be made of each session.

The intention was to follow ethical and recognised oral history practice; however, the UK-centred guidance did not allow for issues encountered in Egypt. The recommended practice assumed the interviewer had total control over relevant aspects, which was not the case in the following scenarios. Experience there indicated the professional advice needed to be adjusted as shown below:

1. To accept an audio permission, instead of getting a form signed;
2. To prepare for distractions rather than avoid them;
3. To obtain absolute permission for using the material on the day of the interview, as distance and lack of postal/electronic communication would severely hinder further travel and contact;
4. To respect and follow our hosts' protocols, and not be diverted by our own priorities.

Since this research was conducted, Data Protection law concerning the collection and processing of personal data has now become effective in the UK under GDPR, which Egypt is similarly following under their own Privacy Law, so both would also need to be applied to such studies.

Although only a handful of interviews were conducted, the participants came from a variety of villages, had differing backgrounds and represented two Nubian tribes. Each visit to our host's home entailed other locals attending.

The interviews were conducted by a small team. Claire Nicholas (CN) was the project manager, lead researcher and conducted the discussions, assisted by two Nubian people from Aswan. Mustafa Osman had acted as her research assistant for some years and, in this part of the overall project, was guide, camera-man, interpreter from Arabic to English, handled the introductions and organisation of the interview recruitment, and offered general background

¹ Another part of the project was to consider the feasibility of adding audio to the dioramas in the Nubian Museum at Aswan by using the voices of people involved in the diaspora.

information together with technical expertise. Sara Helmy provided additional assistance, and translated into Arabic from two Nubian dialects, reflecting the Kenuz and Fedija tribes. Sara's involvement was particularly useful because she gave an additional perspective when the field research was being prepared.

Details of the interviews with Egyptian Nubians

During the five years prior to this particular study, the team held many discussions with Nubian people in Egypt, which enabled good background knowledge to be formed about their lives and hopes for the future. These earlier talks in person have been supplemented with conversations via social media, all of which combined to help form a structure for the oral history interviews.

Interviews conducted formally in 2014 with full permission were with:

1. Abd Allah Hassan-blana, Kom Ombo *
2. Fikry Kachif, Abu Simbel *
3. Ali Hassan Mohamed, Abu Simbel
4. Kafer Abdo Bakry, Abu Simbel *
5. Rahma Mohammed Abdule Latif, Abu Simbel *
6. Hassan Abd el Fassar, Kom Ombo
7. Host and hostess at Kom Ombo

Excerpts from those highlighted with an asterisk are included in this article. Those who agreed to be interviewed, and those who attended as onlookers, were predominantly male. This did not come as a surprise as previous meetings with Nubian people were similarly dominated by men, either as the head of the family or head of the community in general. During the prior field research, the only female Nubians met in the discussions were: a wife with twin babies, whom the gentleman was clearly very proud of; another was a hostess who was brought into the room to serve some refreshments, and on the other occasion the female was a young child.

The role of the woman in Upper Egypt is to care for the house, the family and the animals, but usually not in a materialistic way. A step towards equality between the sexes is being enjoyed by the younger generation, but today's mature woman is less likely to be as educated as her male counterpart (Hopkins and Saad 2004, 11). Those not living in large cities will have had less opportunity for paid work, or to have taken part in major discussions with people outside of their close circle.

The impact this aspect of Nubian culture had on the oral history interviews was that the men were very much in control of their part in the discussions. Although there was no expectation of any women to attend, it was a pleasure to witness one being included amongst some friends invited by one of the hosts, and on another occasion the hostess was asked to come into the room at the request of the interviewer. Both women were accompanied by their husbands.

On the first of these occasions, the woman spoke fairly freely, the husband, and other guests, listened attentively as they all did when it was another's turn to talk. However, in the other interview when the hostess was asked to join in, it was clear she was uncomfortable with taking part, and was much more relaxed when serving refreshments. It should be noted all discussions avoided any topic relating to personal feelings or political issues, out of respect for the hosts, the local people and particularly those agreeing to be interviewed.

Extracts from the interviews

Abd Allah Hassan-blana

The first memory recorded in this research was from a gentleman in his 80s who lived in Kom Ombo. He was a particularly good recruit as he had the pleasure of knowing Robert Fernea (Fernea and Gerster 1973), who had stayed at his house whilst conducting research in the area. Abd Allah stated that he looked after Professor Fernea's boat while he was back in the United States, and in return the Professor sent books over to him.

Abd Allah produced a photo of himself as a younger man being presented to Princess Alexandra. It was taken when the gentlemen were returning home by plane from Abu Simbel temple. He asked that Princess Alexandra be contacted upon the interviewer's return to the UK. A letter was subsequently sent to her Private Secretary, informing her of the meeting, together with a very brief introduction to the project, and Abd Allah's wish to be remembered

to Her Royal Highness. A delightful response was received, which was forwarded to a contact in Egypt for onward transmittal to Mr Hassan-blana.

The interviewer had taken a selection of photos to the discussion to act as prompts, should they be needed, to help the interviewee talk about certain subjects. The photos were taken earlier that week at the Nubian Museum in Aswan and contained images of the various dioramas. However, Abd Allah Hassan-blana was blind, so referring him to visual aids was not appropriate. He responded instead to a series of questions and verbal reminders.

Initially, controlling the interview was not very successful. The gentleman who acted as the go-between and who introduced the team to the hosts took it upon himself to conduct the talk, leaving the team's guide feeling unclear when he should begin the translation. It took a while to successfully manage the conversation and intermittent translation into a comfortable rhythm.

Abd Allah explained that they only went to school for four years, therefore much of the time was spent playing. Here are the games he described:

Game 1: (for boys only)

'This game was called *Handak keeh*. They made two teams of five boys each, plus another that they named "the boss". Each team would take it in turns to hold their legs [despite Abd Allah's age and lack of sight, he demonstrated hopping] and take the boss to the other side. The other team would try to prevent them. If the boss was safely delivered, that team would earn a point, and then it was the other team's turn to try to return him.'

Game 2: (for boys only)

'This game was played at night under the light of the moon. It involved creating a big team, a rope and the bottom jaw from a sheep. One person had to throw the jaw away and the others had to find it, with no light other than that created by the moon. The person who found the jaw shouted 'I found it, I found it' and used the rope to slap the others. Then it was the finder's turn to throw the jaw, so the game started again.'

Game 3: (for boys only)

'This game was called *Warawed (Warjay)*. Two children would sit on the ground, putting their legs and feet onto each other's, and placing their hands on top of their feet. A third boy would run and jump over their legs. If he touched the hands, it was his turn to sit on the ground, and the child whose hand was touched would then take a turn at jumping.'

Game 4: (for boys and girls)

'In this game, the children sit together in a circle, with their legs outstretched and place their hands to their chests. They all look as though they are holding something, but only one is, which can be anything small such as a stone or a ring. They all pretend to be showing the object to the person who has to guess who actually is holding it. This game also involves a rope (*foldomeh*) which is used for slapping the person who makes an incorrect guess.'

Game 5: (played during the date season)

'This game was called *Setta*. During date season, the children take a leaf from the palm tree itself and cut it into four pieces, providing two green and two white parts. [It was not clear how the game progressed from this opening explanation, to the following part.] If you were holding two green and two white parts, you got slapped and missed a turn. If you were only holding two green and one white part, you did not get slapped.'

Abd Allah then talked about education in Old Nubia. He went to school for four years, the subjects including Maths and Arabic. He believed the quality of education to be better in those days than now, citing the example of writing a letter. In those days, he said, children were taught how to write one without any errors, but less importance seemed to be given to letter writing now. Abd Allah reminded the interviewer that the period of his schooling happened before the Egyptian Revolution of 1952, and when Egypt was still a monarchy.

Fikry Kachif

Fikry Kachif is a Nubian musician whose work can be found on YouTube. The interview took place at his hotel in Abu

Simbel city, initially just with him but he was soon joined by three of his friends from Old Nubia, who were also keen to share their memories. Aged 59, Fikry was the youngest interviewee in the project. Although he was just a young boy when the family moved away from Abu Simbel to Kom Ombo, memories of the old traditions had clearly been kept alive in his mind.

Two discussions were held with Fikry, the first one concentrating on villages in Old Nubia that were submerged, with the other reflecting music and dancing. The interview with Fikry was conducted in English, with no need for a translation on the day.

Villages in Old Nubia:

'I was born in February 1955 in Abu Simbel. ...My village's name is Abu Simbel, just here. And then after Abu Simbel it was Village of Ballana. You visited Ballana I think yesterday. Yah Ballana it was the first village before the border with Sudan. Ballana is on the west bank of the Nile. The first village in the east was Adendan. This border did not exist before the English occupation of Egypt, which was from 1882. In 1889 they created the border with Sudan but it is not a natural border, it is just a political border. So Ballana was in the west, Adendan in the east and from the east after Adendan it was Gostoon, Abu Simbel, Armin, Toshka. We are talking about people moving from more than 44 villages. You know, just before I was to start school for example, in 1960, I had the chance to go with my mother to Alexandria to see my father who had been travelling to Europe and was returning from Athens to Alexandria. Well, he brought my mother from Abu Simbel when I was four or five years old and we went to Alexandria by boat, two nights from here to Aswan and by train from Aswan to Cairo and then to Alexandria, before returning. What I mean is that I saw the most of these ancient villages by boat when moving from Abu Simbel to Shalal, Shalal this is the cataract Shalal in Aswan and after one year or so I just came back in the 1960s with my mother also, you know to do the same, boat from Aswan or from Shalal to Abu Simbel two nights and you know I had chance to see the ancient villages from the boat. You can't, you know, remember everything now but childhood memories stay....'

The music and dancing at wedding celebrations:

'A concert started to take place. That's what I'm going to talk about – playing music and dancing. There were some bands in the village, called *Sharigiah* or *Alshiran*. What is *Alshiran*? A band of musicians and singers. They played tambourines, mainly. Three tambourines. Each of such tambourines made a certain sound. In other words, you can hear some sounds sharper than others, so there are three different sounds. The three tambourines made the same rhythm in three different sounds.

Afterwards, the artists went into the groom's house where the women were celebrating after putting on makeup and gold and such things. Then, *Alshiran* accompanied the woman from the groom's house to a public square in the village. After that the women and girls got in lines. Each group of women had certain dances. Unmarried girls held one another by the hand and danced in a group. Married women, or elderly women, formed other lines. Aged women wore a certain garment and danced as well.

The singers accompanied the women from the groom's house to a public square. Then men caught up with them; old men and young people. Then the artists moved in a circle...Right behind them, the three tambourines were placed. So the artist in the middle of that circle was the singer. The others repeated the lyrics after the singer. Behind such singers stood men who sang with the singers. Women stood at the front. They had special dances. They sang and repeated. There were men and women singing with the singers together.

As in Nubia, the only thing that is considered to be a kind of art is...singing songs and playing music...over time. Unfortunately, we did not have any other arts in Nubia; such as the theatre and cinema... or any other arts. Maybe there were a few, but the main art was singing and music. Hence, all women and men learned all our songs. So all of them were singing such songs together. There were different types of dance and music.'

Dances are discussed by Samha al-Katsha (in Kennedy 2005). Three principal dances comprise *Kumba Gash* (a group dance providing most of the entertainment at weddings, performed by men and women in rows of 10 or 12); *Ollin/Kaff*, which is the clapping dance performed by only a few women and only lasted for about 15 minutes; and *Firry Aragid*, another dance involving men and women in long lines facing one another, with the elderly women of the immediate

families in the marriage dancing in the space between the rows. The steps were similar to the clapping dance, but danced to a faster beat (al-Katsha, in Kennedy 2005, 186-187). Al-Katsha concurs with Fikry's statement about dancing and singing being the most important forms of entertainment in Nubian life, particularly in village festivities (al-Katsha, in Kennedy 2005, 186).

Ali Hassan Mohamed

Ali Hassan Mohamed was born in 1941 at Adenden, and was 23 years old when the Egyptian Nubian people were moved to their new homes. He was already working as a teacher in Cairo by then. Before the diaspora, schooling involved six years at the primary level, followed by four years at the preparatory level. Ali Hassan enjoyed playing table tennis and basketball, but football was his real passion. He became a football referee, and supports Zamalek.

Ali Hassan described the scene of the wedding party from one of the photos, which he was encouraged to do in Arabic so that it could be used as audio in the museum, should the project receive such approval. There was therefore no translation on the day, and remains untranslated because Ali Hassan's involvement was an unsuccessful attempt at getting a group discussion going to emulate the scene in one of the photos of a crowd at the wedding.

Kafer Abdo Bakry (KAB)

This gentleman was born in 1936 in the village of Qostal. He is from the Fedija tribe.

Use of Nubian language:

CN – 'Okay, which language did you speak when you were in Old Nubia. Did you speak Arabic or did you speak Nubian?

KAB – I spoke Nubian since I could talk until I got into the school same as Mr Fikry, and when I got to the school they spoke in the Arabic language. But the mother tongue was Nubian.

CN – So did you only speak Arabic when you were at school, and did you then speak Nubian when you got home?

KAB – We used Arabic just in school but in the house it was all Nubian, because all Nubian in the house. In the house we don't use Arabic, just Nubian.

CN – And is that still true till today?

KAB – After we emigrated, we were forced to use Arabic language for daily life because we were mixed with the Egyptians who don't speak Nubian. So we started to use it in the house and while working in the farm and fishing because we are with the Egyptians and that also affected our children. They also talk with them in Arabic in the house before they started going to school.

CN – So that means that your children and their children don't speak Nubian because they don't know the language?

KAB – My children were raised and grew up speaking Nubian and Arabic, so they know Nubian and Arabic. But most of my grandchildren right now don't know how to speak the Nubian language, yet at the same time we don't want them to lose the Nubian language. So you can say that my children speak good Nubian and my grandchildren don't speak Nubian well.'

Kafer Abdo also described his work as a teacher.

Rahma Mohammed Abdule Latif (RMAL)

Rahma Mohammed Abdule Latif is the wife of Kafer Abdo Bakry. They were married about three years after the emigration. She was born in 1952 in Adenden, and speaks a different dialect to her husband; occasionally in the interviews they disagreed about certain words due to their different backgrounds.

Wedding costumes and celebrations:

CN – 'Can you describe the dress the bride might have worn on the day of the wedding?

RMAL – Before the wedding, the groom has to come by boat to the house of the bride. The bride's dress was like a *galabeya* underneath, and over it she wore the *gelgal*. It is like a big *galabeya*, transparent like what she is wearing here [referring to one of the photos of the dioramas in the Nubian Museum]. This is a *gergar*. And over it she gets a cover or scarf. It is so colourful. There is a *sardhan*, which covers like a big sheet, very full of colour, it covers the

bride from her head all the way down....

And they decorate her with full make-up.

CN – And is that what you wore on your wedding day, even though you had moved by then?

RMAL – Because of the emigration, I couldn't wear the *sardhan*, the big long scarf. I just wore the normal scarf. And that's one of the things that was changed by emigration.

CN – About how long does the wedding party go on for (in Old Nubia)?

RMAL – The wedding is between one or two weeks. Sometimes the groom has to come from Cairo so they have to celebrate him on one or two days, just dancing, celebrating and also there is another day for the perfumes that they have to go to Halfa to bring back for the bride. Halfa is the first city in Sudan, between the borders of Egypt and Sudan. There is also a whole celebration day for the perfumes, and another celebration for decorating the women with henna. So if your family is wealthy you can make it about two weeks and if you have a normal family it is about one week.'

Rahma is a member of the Kenuz tribe, whose marriage traditions are described in detail in Callender and el Guindi's 'Life-crisis Rituals Among the Kenuz'. The book confirms the use of brightly coloured dresses and headscarves, as worn by female guests (Callender and el Guindi 1971, 55) and that the bride's dress was bright, preferably red which was the colour associated with marriage, covered by a white *shogga* (Callender and el Guindi 1971, 62).

Funeral customs:

CN – 'If it is OK with you, I would quite like to talk about funerals and how people mourned. Is it OK to talk about that? [Agreement given]. OK, so about how long would people generally mourn for?

RMAL – In Old Nubia, before the emigration, the mourning was for about 15 days, and the families just stayed at home, receiving people who visited. The neighbours served the food for the house of the funeral. After the emigration it started to reduce to five days maximum, or three days and even there is right now or nowadays sometime of some families changed it to just one day.

CN – Who would have been involved in the mourning in Old Nubia? Would it have been just the husband or wife, would it have been the children, would it have been friends?

RMAL – If the deceased was a woman, they get women to mourn them, but they have to know about the Islamic rules for mourning. It's the same for the men and it is not a problem if he is from the family, he is from the village because the whole village was one family, so they're all together.

CN – And who looked after the deceased? Who would be responsible for preparing the body?

RMAL – It is the same, because they have a group from the men, about four or five men to prepare the body.'

John G. Kennedy discusses burial customs (2005), and explains that in Old Nubia a death ended all but the most basic activities in a village. The women initiated the mourning through their ululating wails, which passed from house to house and resulted in people running to the relevant house to help out. Women changed into black clothes, removed all jewellery and other adornments, smeared themselves with mud and applied a blue dye to their faces. During the burial, the women would blacken their faces and hands with ashes from a container, and then take part in a funeral dance. Activities slowed after the burial to a more respectful pace, involving restrictions throughout the mourning period (Kennedy 2005, 224-225).

All of the participants at Abu Simbel also recounted stories from their childhood.

Group discussion at Kom Ombo

The visit to Kom Ombo in November 2014 served a different purpose. The main aim was for the project to be discussed and to talk to the younger generation about their interest in the Nubian Museum, suggesting they asked questions when there and to make it obvious that they are keen to learn. It was explained that this could be the founding step to getting better access to wider information. The young men who were at the session agreed with the logic and said they would do this, also mentioning it to their friends so that the interest in the museum would develop and, more importantly, the interest in Nubian history would be seen to be increasing.

Although the intent of the meeting at Kom Ombo was not to continue with the personal interviews, several elderly people attended the session so it was seen as an opportunity to try and record more memories. Permissions were obtained orally and captured on video from the group, even though the only discussion that could be construed as an oral history interview was with the host and hostess, discussed next.

Host and hostess at Kom Ombo

At the same visit in November, the hostess was invited to join the session. She was very generous with her hospitality, and prepared a local dish for her English guest to taste. Talking with her was an interesting experience in that, although it was made clear the purpose was to know about life from the woman's perspective, her husband dominated the answers. It is likely he would have been a strong influence on her answers even if she had done the speaking herself, and there was no opportunity to speak to her on her own. None of the questions were personal, they were all about life in general, so it was hoped they would provide a good reflection on life in Old Nubia.

The host's body language throughout the meeting indicated support of the project, by nodding in agreement to all of the explanation about its purpose and requests for permission. Although the discussions were delayed at the beginning while waiting for him to finish his telephone conversations, for the rest of the meeting he listened respectfully to his friends.

The discussion centred on the role of the woman in Old Nubia, but was difficult to get a flow of information. Producing a useful transcript was not possible.

In closing

The short extracts included in this article give a good introduction to the overall discussions, whether conducted as part of the structured interviews or as part of informal chats. Without exception, the elderly people spoken to over the six years of intermittent research in Upper Egypt conveyed a wistfulness over their past and a sadness at the permanent loss of their homeland and customs. The younger people showed more of an eagerness to get on with their lives, but there was also an interest in learning more about their modern heritage, relating to their parents' and grandparents' lives in Old Nubia. There did seem to be less interest in learning about ancient Nubia, but that aspect did not form part of the main discussions.

Mention needs to be made of the Nubian Ethnological Survey (NES) conducted from 1961 to 1964. NES was a major project to record the culture before the Nubian population, now in Upper Egypt, were moved to their new homes. Some of that work has since been updated, and reflects how life has changed for the Nubian people. It would be interesting to revisit yet again in 30 years' time, to further document the lifestyles of Nubian people who by then are likely to have all been born and raised outside of Old Nubia. Our knowledge of the various cultures would be brought up to date, by studying individual tribes across the relevant areas of Egypt and Sudan.

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