



Abandoned With the Spread of Islam and Lost With Repeated Displacement: the Nubian Language



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إقرأ باللغة العربية:

تخلّى أهلها عن كتابتها عندما جاءهم الإسلام وضاعت مع موجات التهجير... اللغة النوبية

With the extinction of the Pharaonic and Coptic languages, the Nubian language is one of the longest surviving spoken languages today. Nubian is categorised as a Nilo-Saharan language belonging to the family of Afro-Asiatic languages.

Ever since its early days, the Nubian language cohabited with other local and languages, notably the Beja language in east Sudan, Egyptian hieroglyphics, Roman (Latin), Greek as well as Arabic.

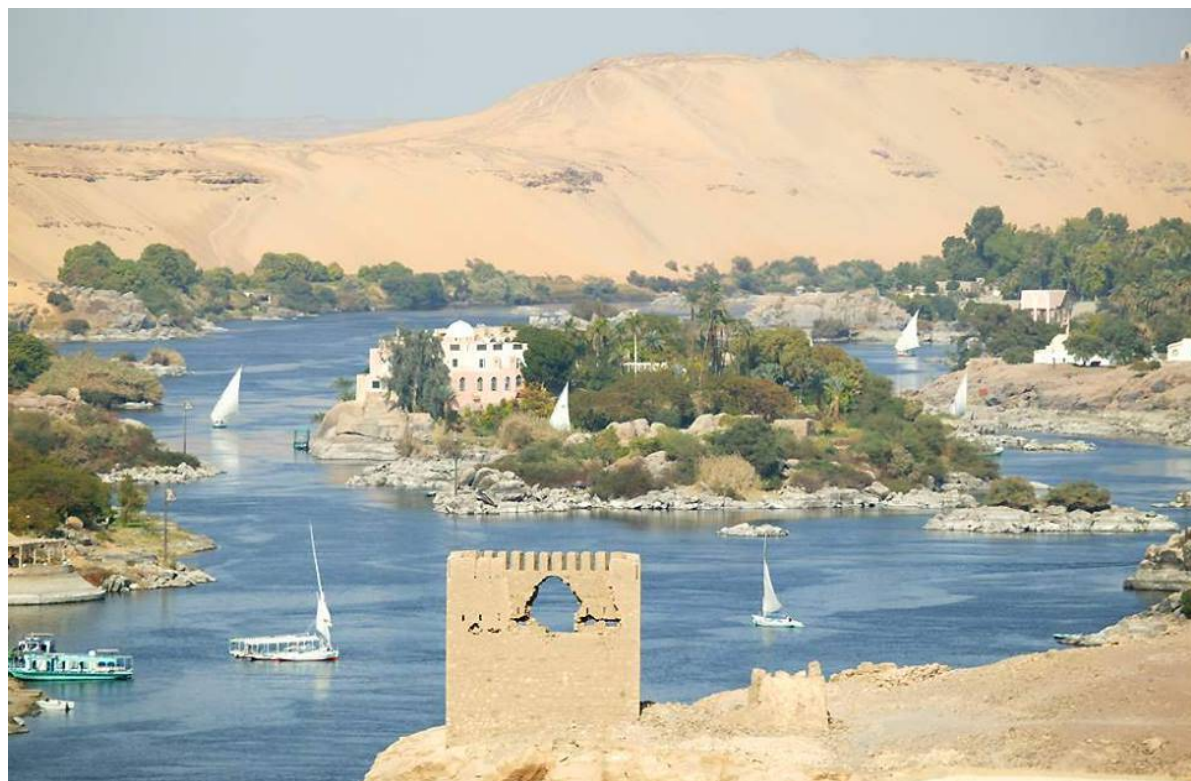
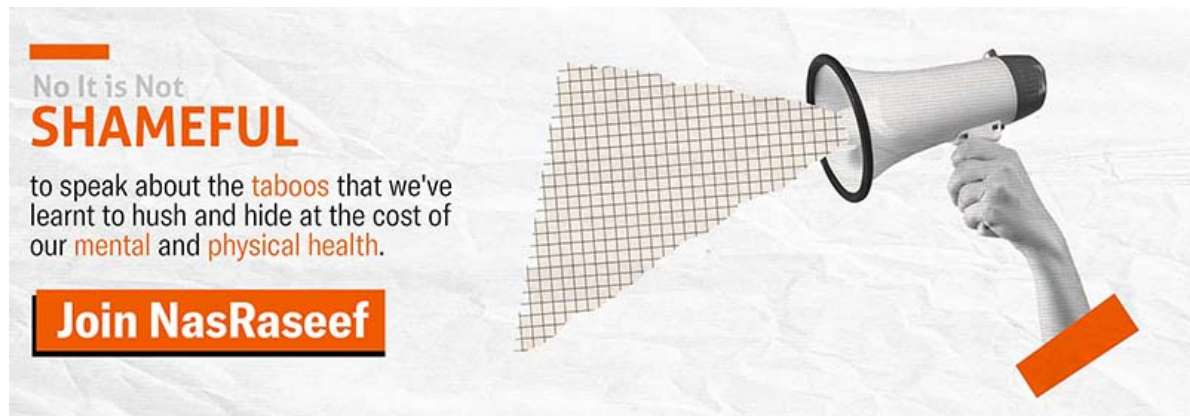
The Nubian people adopted Christianity for more than a thousand years, during which they continued to write in their own language; after Islam's arrival however, they abandoned the writing of the language because it was derived from ancient Greek – yet nonetheless preserved it as a spoken language through verbal communication, as well as through engravings on the walls of temples going back to the Meroitic era, the Bible and religious rituals engraved on the walls of churches during the Coptic era.

The Nubian language appeared to have become extinct until the deceased professor, Mukhtar Khalil Mukhtar Kabara, rediscovered it with his work on a project investigating the ancient Nubian alphabet in the mid-1980s.

Kabara was born in 1952, and lived in Nubia and experienced the tragedy of displacement that befell its people (following the building of the Aswan High Dam and the flooding of Nubian towns and villages). He acquired a passion for the Nubian language during his studies at the Faculty of Archaeology in Cairo University, and his interest was accentuated with his pursuit of a doctorate degree in Egyptology from the University of Bonn in 1985 in West Germany.

After his return to Nubia, Kabara published his book "The Nubian language: how to write it?", in which he pointed out that the beginnings of the

discovery of the writing and documentation of the Nubian language took place in the year 1906, when the German Karl Schmidt visited Egypt and purchased a manuscript written on a patch of deer skin from a local trader. When Schmidt returned with the manuscript to the Berlin museum, he initially believed the language written in the manuscript to be Coptic – only to soon discover following research that the origins of the written letters were in fact found in Nubia.



According to Kabara's research, the Nubian language consists of 24 letters – including 4 vocalised letters unique to the people of Nubia – 17 consonants, 5 vowels and 2 semi-vowels.

According to a 2017 report by the 'HRDO Center to Support Digital Expression' titled "The Nubian Cause and Cultural Rights", there are approximately 4 million Nubians in Egypt as well as 3 million residing outside the country.

Nubians have long sought to preserve their language and heritage and pass

it on to their children; however, according to the 'Border Centre for Support and Consulting', only 30% of Nubian villages in the province of Aswan in south Egypt speak their native language now – a reality that has prompted widespread fears amongst Nubians that their language is on the verge of extinction, spurring broad initiatives to attempt to revive it.

The Nubian Cause and Cultural Rights

The Nubian region has been subject to many waves of forced displacement during the twentieth century, after dozens of its villages were drowned following the construction of the Aswan Dam.

According to Nubian researcher Hassan Ibrahim Dawud: "The migration of the Nubians from their original areas south of the Aswan reservoir, to find themselves in a new environment amidst the migration of many to the large cities, had a large impact in the decline of the Nubian language... however the rich Nubians retained the largest influence in preserving the language" he told Raseef22.



In addition to the Nubian music, there have been broad initiatives to revive the language through launching Nubian-speaking television channels, establishing museums that speak of Nubian customs and language, as well the intensification of research efforts and studies on the rules and grammar of the written language and the ways of teaching it.

Nubia Tube

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The channel 'Nubia Tube' is considered the most professional Nubian outlet, launched in 2016 to preserve the Nubian language and identity.

Raseef22 spoke to the channel's Nubian lawyer Mohammed Azmi, who said that the platform represented "a project derived from the 'Border Centre for Support and Consulting' with the goal of supporting cultural pluralism in Egypt."



According to Azmi – who is a human rights' defender and the Nubian representative in the Permanent Forum at the United Nations, which is concerned with the causes of indigenous peoples – the channel was launched on YouTube in the Nubian language, with Arabic and English subtitles. He adds: "The channel is not seeking profit, and broadcasts for two hours daily, airing content preserving the Nubian heritage and language, and spreading it with modern technology."



The channel would continue broadcasting for a year and half, during which it produced 300 videos, before being shut-down by officials because of harassment campaigns conducted against it. On this, Azmi says: "The channel had all the capabilities; we had a full studio and a team for filming and editing which worked live from Nubian villages. We stopped work out of concern for the team of the channel which numbers 25 people, as the danger was high."

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Azmi goes on to state: "We conducted surveys on the Nubian villages in the Aswan province, which showed that only 30% of the Nubian villages have natives who can speak Nubian, while almost 70% know only some words in a province inhabited by 1.5 million people."





It should be noted here that it is not permitted to speak Nubian in official circles or ministries – despite this being an unofficial diktat – while the state takes no interest in spreading the language or preserving what remains of it. Indeed, Azmi notes that the "Nubian language is termed a 'dialect' in Egypt, and is not recognized as a language even though it had been written for ages and had its own distinct letters."

"Animalia"

The 'Animalia' museum was born out of a personal initiative. It lies on the island of Elephantine – also known as the "island of Aswan and Swan Narti" in Nubian – lying opposite the Aswan Nile cornice.

'Animalia' is owned by the Nubian researcher Mohammed Sobhi, who converted his home into a museum. Sobhi talked to Raseef22 of the motives that moved him to do so, saying: "My love of Nubia and my desire to acquaint visitors and tourists from all over the world with correct information on the history of Nubia and its identity drove me to [undertake] the project."





Sobhi began his work on the museum in 2004 – at the time focusing his work on taxidermy (the preserving of an animal's body via stuffing), before adding drawings and paintings of sea and land creatures and animals that had distinguished Nubia throughout the ages, in addition to the different herbs and cultivated crops present in the region.

Sobhi explains: "I found that there was very little information [available] about Nubia and its history, even with the tourist guides themselves, and so I decided to open up the huge Nubian library I owned for everyone, and with time the [tourist] guides began visiting the museum to listen to true Nubian stories and then transmit it to visitors, instead of repeating discourses which resembled myths."



The Reasons Nubian Was Abandoned

Sobhi lays out the reasons for teaching the Nubian language to Nubians through the museum, outlining: "Firstly, because the new generations no longer speak Nubian especially after the displacement of the Nubians to [the village of] Kom Ombo and their dissolving within a large Arabic society; secondly, because the loss of the language and its extinction is like the fall of a part of the body of humanity; and thirdly after I read that UNESCO [the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation] will try to preserve five African languages from extinction, including Nubian, and so my wife and I began our attempt to teach the language in the traditional methods such as letters and writing, and

through recording songs and explaining their meanings."

Sobhi attributes the main reason for the abandonment of the language to racism, declaring: "There was a sort of racism from the Egyptian population to the Nubians on the basis of their colour, and they used to nickname the Nubian language 'Ratana' [meaning "gibberish"], while the weak Arabic that the Nubians spoke was subject to mockery and ridicule."

// f X How to kill a culture: The Nubian language is termed a 'dialect' in Egypt, and is not recognized as a language even though it had been written for ages and had its own distinct letters.

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Language Lessons

Through his personal effort and with the support of Nubian cultural societies and associations in Cairo and Alexandria, the researcher Mohamed Omar Taha began his journey to teach the Nubian language both to Nubians and to other interested Egyptians.

On his experience of trying to preserve the language, Taha told Raseef22 that the first lesson he gave was in 2005 in the Nubian "Armana" society.

Before that, Taha had attained a diploma in writing African languages in Arabic script, before continuing onto a Master's degree specializing in the role of Nubian sayings (expressions) and poems in the preservation of the language.

"I found unfortunately that the books that were available did not satisfy the thirst of the beginner who needed to learn the Nubian language" Taha says,

"and I am now preparing a simple book for those who want to learn it, while the courses that I teach are aimed at saving the language from extinction... our leader, spiritual father and veteran teacher Mohammed Sulaiman Jadokap – who we pray for his speedy recovery – was the first one to establish a group of twelve individuals – and I was one of them – to establish the rules of the Nubian language; this workshop resulted in two books. There were those who worked hard in this field but could not finish the task before age caught up with them, such as the late Mohyi al-Din Saleh and the late Omar Idabodi, and before them the late Mostafa Mahmoud Taha."

Taha continues: "The preservation of the language will not be accomplished except by making it a second language in Nubian schools, and placing it primarily on the map of faculties and African studies in the Universities of Cairo and Aswan to teach them and to support research to establish its [grammatical] rules and phonetics."

Nubi: a Language Application

The internet app "Nubi" – which teaches the Nubian language in its two dialects, Kunuz and Fadicca – moved the battle of identity from the realm of cultural associations to the wide expanse of the internet.

Kunuz is the language of the natives of ancient north Nubia, stretching from the region of Qarri and the ancient waterfall islands in Aswan south to the borders of the villages of Dongola and some of the villages of Walfa in Sudan; Fadicca meanwhile is spoken by Nubians inside the Egyptian borders from the north of Halfa to the waterfall region.

The final version of the app was released in December 2018, managed by a group of Nubian youth who independently took on the task through their own personal efforts. The app contains sections for traditional Nubian songs supported by Arabic translations, as well as another section promoting handiwork which is considered one of the most important elements of Nubian heritage.

The executive director of the 'Nubi' project, Mo'men Talush, spoke to Raseef22, saying: "The goal of the Nubi application is to communicate the Nubian language to millions of Nubians inside and outside of Egypt" – while again calling on authorities to reconsider its incorporation into educational curricula and to preserve the language from extinction.

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It should be noted that there are estimated to be more than 2,000 endangered languages in the next century, according to UN statements – which recognised "2019 to be the year of endangered languages in order to increase awareness of the issue."

Talush adds that there is a section in the app that is aimed at Nubian children, through cartoon characters, songs and a variety of everyday expressions and sentences – while affirming that the app also encompassed a "heritage and cultural dimension in the states of Africa and targeted approximately 8 million individuals."

Irkoni

Another online Nubian platform is 'Irkoni', which broadcasts on Facebook and aims to preserve Nubian identity while also raising and discussing the issues of Nubians in both Upper and Lower Nubia.

Lower Nubia encompasses the south of modern-day Egypt and northern Sudan, while Upper Nubia lies between the second and sixth waterfalls of the Nile river – that is, in north and central Sudan. However, the term 'Nubia' today is often used to describe a smaller region that lies in southern Egypt and northern Sudan.

On his experience launching the online channel, translator Muhannad Tuwandi told Raseef22: "I am one of the founders of the Irkoni channel, to be a Nubian-speaking media platform that of course reflects the culture, as well as our hope to create further connections and cohesion between Nubians in Egypt and Sudan."

He adds: "We also release some videos in Arabic in order to reach non-Nubian speakers with the aim of rectifying wrong conceptions they may have, for there is a stereotypical generalisation of Nubians as only one faction that is part of the Arabs and Sa'idis [Upper Egyptians], despite the fact that they have their own culture and civilization." He warns: "The Nubian language is facing a war and we must defend it."

Tuwandi goes on to complain about the pressures of finding funding, stating: "Unfortunately most attempts to launch channels or even radio stations to defend the Nubian language and identity start work and then close because they rely on independent personal efforts and require funding

in order to continue."

Khayriya Musa: an expert in teaching Nubian

Khayriya Musa is considered one of the most prominent female names defending the Nubian language, customs and traditions. She participated in many forums held by Nubian cultural associations, as well as setting up the Facebook page 'Salhab Bru (a Nubian icon).' Musa narrated her story to Raseef22: "I worked as a teacher for many years, and after my retirement I wanted to utilise my educational experience, my upbringing in a Nubian village, my experiencing many events and occasions and my proficiency in the language – and so I decided to teach the Nubian language in Cairo, as well as teaching handicraft and writing some theatrical scenes in the Nubian language, training young men and women to act them out." Musa adds: "I also decided to prepare delicious Nubian foods and drinks during occasions and public celebrations, as well as organizing some competitions about Nubian words, customs or occasions [events]."

Musa concludes by stating that her main goal is to make sure that the new generation of Nubians are acquainted with the Nubian language and identity, for in her words "the people of Nubia are the heirs of the first civilization to be established on earth and the grandest civilization witnessed in the city of Kerma, the metropolis on the shores of the Nile and capital of the first kingdom in the world – as was affirmed by Swiss archaeologist Charlie Bonay."

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