

**(Mis)Representation, Hegemony and Counter-Hegemony: The Production of Nubian  
Displacement and Resistance Historical Narratives in Egypt (2007-2017)**

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## **Abstract**

For more than a century, Nubians efforts to go back to what remains of their dispossessed lands accumulated by the Egyptian state and receive proper compensations for their submerged lands after the construction of Aswan Low Dam in 1902 and Aswan High Dam in 1964 are still being neglected by consecutive Egyptian governments. This thesis questions how Egypt is exercising hegemony over Nubians through enforcing hegemonic historical narratives using popular culture representations to silence the Nubian displacement and resistance history. It also questions how Nubians offers counter-narratives that challenge the state's hegemonic narratives.

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To Giulio Regeni, may you continue to inspire us to believe that the freedom of academic research in Egypt is a long battle we all have to fight. To my informants in Nubia, thank you for teaching me that there is always a margin to resist and do what I really believe in.

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## Chapter 1- Introduction

“As a child during elementary school, I was really confused about what my family taught me before school and what Egyptian school books often said. As with any child, the parent’s lullaby will remain with you forever and cannot be easily forgotten, but in my case, this process was distorted through miseducation. While my parents sang to me about the greatness of “the Kush Kingdom” and the legendary Nubian leader King “Tharka,” extolling the greatness of my ancestors, history books in Egyptian schools commonly dressed Nubians as prisoners of Northern kings. Images showed Nubians handcuffed by chains, ran over by the Pharaoh’s Chariot, or cursed on the walls of the ancient temples. As an impressionable ten-year-old, all of this left me with so many questions. Why are they telling me such things? If we were such unwanted group of people, why are all the monuments are in my hometown? And why then do the Pharaohs look like me and my people?”

- EXTRACT FROM AN ARTICLE WRITTEN BY ARKMANNI, A NUBIAN ACTIVIST, AND RESEARCHER<sup>1</sup>

For more than a century, Nubians’ efforts to go back to what remains of their dispossessed lands accumulated by the Egyptian state and receive proper compensations for their submerged lands after the construction of Aswan Low Dam in 1902 and Aswan High Dam in 1964 are still being neglected by consecutive governments. This thesis questions how Egypt is exercising hegemony over Nubians through enforcing hegemonic historical narratives using popular culture to silence the Nubian displacement and resistance history. It also questions how Nubians offers counter-narratives to challenge the state’s hegemonic narratives.

Attempting to answer the main research question, several questions emerged while I was conducting my fieldwork in the light of the political, economic and social changes that Egypt is

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<sup>1</sup> To read the full article: <http://www.telesurtv.net/english/opinion/Memory-and-Resistance-Black-History-Month-in-Egypt-Nubia-20160228-0014.html>

undergoing. The representation of Nubians' displacement and resistance history in the popular culture throughout the last ten years ignites the question of how certain representations enforces certain historical narratives, either by celebrating it or by silencing it. The question of how the state is controlling popular culture and therefore how popular culture act as ideological apparatus for the state also emerged. At the same time, looking at the Nubians' attempts to produce counter-narratives, made me question the situation of the Nubian resistance, and how the political, economic and social environment is shaping the Nubian political identity, especially before and after 2011 revolution. It made me also question how Nubians are actually producing these counter-narratives to challenge the state's hegemonic narratives; are they using the same means used by the state? Are they using alternative tools?

Attempting to address all these questions, this thesis is divided into four chapters. The first chapter, the introduction chapter, sets the stage for the other chapters. In this chapter, I present a brief on the situation of minorities and subalterns within the Egyptian national historiography, the Nubians' displacement(s) and the methodology used in this thesis.

The second chapter explores how popular culture representations of Nubians' displacement and resistance history contributes to the state hegemonic narratives of the Nubian history, which enforces silence on their displacement and resistance. Using Gramsci's conceptualization of hegemony and counter-hegemony, I argue that these representations contribute to othering Nubians and marginalizing their histories of displacement and resistance.

The third chapter explores Nubians' efforts to challenge the state's hegemonic narratives. Through looking at the Nubian political identities before and after the 2011 revolution and the situation of their resistance within the power dynamics, I present how Nubians' offer counter-narratives to challenge the hegemony of the state.

The last chapter, the conclusion chapter, presents the main findings of this thesis and the concluding remarks.

### **1.1 Minorities and Subalterns within Egyptian Historiography**

The development of Egyptian historiography in the past century is a product of a complicated interaction of political, cultural and social factors; the academia, the state, and the civil society forces acts as “sites of struggle” in the establishment of a hegemonic nationalist historiography. The interaction between historical scholarship and politics has endured several changes in the past century. Before the emergence of a modern university system, the state was cultivating “individuals, learned societies and institutions to produce sympathetic history”. The emergence of the modern university system, along with the changes in the political situation at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century added to the complexity of the relationship between the academia and the state in determining the boundaries of the national historical discourses. Academia, the state, and the political society became all active players in the field of the historical scholarship, however, the role of the nation-state became prominent (Gorman 2003, 196; Cronin 2008, 1)

The study of minorities in the modern Egyptian historiography has been, until recent years, neglected. The focus on the visible political institutions, diplomatic official events and the intellectual/elite culture rather than the popular culture contributed to the degrading of the subalterns and minorities positions in the historical narratives. In addition to that, Egyptian modern historiography concentrated for some time on the political and literary aspects, and it was only very recently when studies started tackling the socio-economic history of Egypt. (Tucker 1983, 321; Landau 1973, 143)



Several researches have been conducted in the field of the subaltern histories in Egypt, challenging the hegemonic colonial and/or nationalist discourses of the state. (Mossallam 2012, 22)

Through working on the historical narratives of Muhammad Ali's army soldiers to challenge the dominant nationalist discourse of his ruling time, Khaled Fahmy argues that the state, back then, managed to forge, impose and dictate "the essential truth of the Egyptian nation" through "a process of violence, silence and exclusion" (K. Fahmy 1997, 314; Mossallam 2012, 22)

Another study looking at a nationalist movement beyond elites is Juan Cole's study on the social and cultural roots of the 1882 Urabi movement. Cole's account challenges the colonial British narrative of the Egyptian chaotic situation back then and the "growth of national resentment against Turkish rule that justified the British invasion". The main contribution of Cole's work is his assertion that Urabi movement was a revolution, challenging the dominant narrative of the revolt. " (Mossallam 2012, 23; Juan Cole 1999, 14)

Beinin and Lockman's (1987) work on "the development of the workers' movement 1882-1954" explored the development of "the class consciousness, organization and collective action in a political and economic context structure by foreign domination". They situate the workers' role in the national political sphere and the nationalist movement, and they explore the effect of the socialist, communist and Islamic movements on their formation. (Mossallam 2012, 23)

While most of these researchers depend mainly on archival sources, focusing mainly on soldiers or workers' consciousness, few studies explore the subaltern histories as a form of political struggle and not as documented forms of protests. Reem Saad's work (1988) on the experience of the peasants of land reform policies explores how they experience land reform through the transformation of power relations through peasants and feudalists. In her work, Saad explores

how temporal concepts are used to identify certain communities, relate or differentiate them from the larger nation and its hegemonic discourses of historiography and argues that the peasant's perceptions of history (on the 1967 and 1973 wars) cannot be separated from the nationalist histories. (Mossallam 2012, 24) In addition to Saad's work, Alia Mossallam (2012) work on the popular politics behind the main national projects that shape Nasserist Egypt explores how members of the resistance in Suez and Port Said and the Dam Builders experienced new identities of their own under Nasser, through looking at the songs, idioms and experiences of this period. She argues that socialism, Nasserism and Pan-Arabism were re-articulated and appropriated to the extent that they became part of their identities and everyday lives.

## **1.2 Nubians in Egypt: A History of Displacement between Two Dams**

### *I. Nubians in Colonized Egypt: Creating Governed Subjects within the Discourses of Modernity*

The peripheralization of Nubians from the modernity and nationalism discourses in colonial Egypt was a result of the British administration interest in the cotton industry in Egypt and the creation of an alliance between the national cotton plantation owners and the colonial administration.

The British administration supported the formation of a modern nation-state in Egypt based on the European model of nation-state through envisioning its homogenous secular identity to fully detach it from the remaining influences of the Ottoman Empire. (Abul-Magd 2010, 689–702) This model of nation-state reinforced the dichotomy between the North and the South, as its main beneficiaries were the Northern bourgeois; who were presented as the model of modern citizens engaged in the cotton industry and the nation-building project against the Southern population who are exploited as cheap labour for the cotton implementation in the North. (Abul-

Magd 2010, 701–2)

The national-colonial coalition around industrialization led to the formation of another coalition which aimed at controlling the Nile for the benefit of the cotton industry.(Shokr 2009, 11; Mitchell 2002, 10,28) As a result, the construction of Aswan Low Dam started in 1898 by the colonial administration and the national elites, to provide water for perennial irrigation for the cotton plantation. The Dam which was celebrated as a great national project was expected to radically transform the seasonal patterns of the Nile in the North (Cook 2013, 2–3)but meant more alienation for the Nubian Southern population. The effects of the construction of the Dam in 1902 and its elevations in 1912 and 1933 were not transitory; as the Nile water flooded the Nubian lands and tens of thousands of Nubians underwent economic and social changes as they were displaced from their villages in 1902, 1912 and 1933.

The Nubians, who inhabited the banks of the Nile in the South of Egypt and the North of Sudan for thousands of years, in 44 Nubian villages, were distinctly different from the Northern population as they had a different language <sup>2</sup>from the Arabic spoken in the North and a semi-independent history from the ruling centre of Egypt. (Fernea 2010, 239)According to the national census conducted by the Egyptian national elite and the British administration in 1882, the total number of the Egyptian population was 6,715,495 people (Mak17 ,2012 ) and the Nubian population was recorded to be around 45,708 people. (H. Fahim 1974, 21)

Before the construction of the dam and its two elevations, Nubian males were engaged in urban labour migration, where they travelled to the Northern cities, worked there in the private households for small wages and then returned to Nubia after the accumulation of some savings,

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<sup>2</sup> The language spoken at Nubia in the North of Sudan and the South of Egypt is the Nubian language. The most spoken two dialects in Egypt are: The Kenouz and the Fadika.

others were involved in agricultural activities. Nubian women and children stayed in Nubia during the period of the male labour migration, with a primary role in leading the households and conducting agricultural activities. The dam and its two elevations led not only to the flooding of more than 19 entire Nubian villages but also to the spread of disease, famine and warfare as a result of the unplanned relocations of entire families in the North. Not only that but the Nubians had to deal with the linguistic and cultural differences in their new homes, they were also excluded from the labour industrial market <sup>3</sup>that mainly revolved around the cotton industry. (Geiser 1973, 188–90) Although the Khedive of Egypt issued in 1902 a decree to compensate the Nubians for their submerged lands, this decree was never implemented as the estimation of the distance of the submerged lands was impossible, as there was no proper documentation. (El Zein 2010, 134; Allen 2014, 33)

In the light of the Nubian unplanned forced migration, creating a discipline over the migrating population became a priority for the colonial administration and the National Northern elites to maintain the modern nation-state project, and ascertain the subjugation of the Southern Nubians to the industrial North. This discipline was created through using social scientific modes of inquiry such as conducting censuses and racial maps. (Saleh 2013, 5) Although European and Egyptian anthropologists were involved in conducting censuses and racial maps in colonial Egypt, they had different agendas. European anthropologists were concerned with constructing the Egyptian identity as inferior to their own “modern” identity while the Egyptian anthropologists used local subjects to draw conclusions about the uniqueness of their own national collective, dismissing peripheral groups who were not part of the national collective.

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<sup>3</sup>The Nubians who lived in old Nubia practiced farming while Nubians who lived in the major urban cities worked in private households; neither of them worked or had been trained to work in industrial projects.

(El-Shakry 2007, 72) Adopting this viewpoint of modern census marked a transition from seeing the population as an “*agglomeration of disparate people consisting of different religious, racial and ethnic groups —Upper Egyptian peasants, Bedouins, Nubians, foreigners*” to seeing the population as “*a homogenous entity whose quantitative features could be studied.*”(El-Shakry 2005, 357)

## *II. Nubians in Postcolonial Egypt: A Peripheralization between the Discourses of Modernity and Nationalism*

The peripheralization of Nubia remained evident in the modernity and nationalism discourses of the post-colonial state starting from the Nasserist Pan-Arab and socialist discourses, moving to the development discourses during Mubarak’s era.

While the new post-colonial government in Egypt focused on establishing an economic development regime based on central planning and the expansion of the public sector, it started subverting the monopoly system of the Northern capitalists and replacing it with a bureaucratic state that had its headquarters in the North and acted as a catalyst for industrialization. Aiming to centralize its control over resources through undertaking massive state-led development projects, the new government adopted the same colonial view of the Nile as “a single political entity” and a source of economic modernization. Therefore, it finished the construction of Aswan High Dam by 1964 (Shokr 2009, 9–13) The construction of the Dam led to the relocation of 50,000 to 70,000 Nubian Egyptians as their original lands were completely submerged, which was considered the largest forced displacement process in Egypt’s modern history. (Sampsell 2014, 53)

The High Dam was a product of Nasserism. Anzavur Demirpolat (2009, 87) defines it as an Arab nationalist, Arab socialist, Pan-Arabism and secular ideology that opposes ideologically the

Western colonial capitalism and communism. Nasserism espoused an end to the neo-colonial Western interference in the Arab affairs through supporting modernization, nationalization and industrialization. Nasserism was not only manifested in the way the political, economic, cultural and social spheres were constructed and restructured in Egypt and the Arab World but in the way, the Egyptian regime started forging a single coherent nation and enforcing a unified single culture by defining what should be a 'national'. In this sense, nationalism could be seen as a hegemonic movement that used a combination of force and persuasive self-evidence ideology. (Demirpolat 2009, 87)

The resettlement of the Nubians in new places, which were drastically different from old Nubia, did not involve any Nubians in the planning phase, which was exclusively a national and Northern responsibility. The estimation of the compensation for the submerged lands was not easily carried out and implemented, as a few pieces of lands were not fully submerged, and the Nasserist government promised the owners that they could go back to it once the Dam is fully constructed. Under the slogan of homogenizing the society, surveys were conducted with schoolteachers in order to introduce new educational plans in the new Nubia, which would be free and adopt the "advanced post-revolutionary curriculum" to decrease the fragmentations in the society. The new free education plans were introduced to the Nubians- as what the Ministry of Education quoted back then – as "plans that would make their community prosperous and stable, but they have to be aligned with the Egyptian and Muslims heritages which the majority of the Egyptians are defined with". The same discourse was used when the resettlement houses were actually built, the government completely ignored the Nubian demands to have houses similar to the ones they had in Nubia, to preserve their kinship and social organization. The new houses were clustered in rows depending only on family sizes to reduce the cost, to ease the

construction process and to provide similar house models to the Northern Delta houses.(H. Fahim 1974, 48–65)

The economic integration was an important component in the resettlement plan. Controlling the northward migration of the Nubians remained a challenge for the post-colonial state. To ascertain that the Nubian labour is for the favour of the industrialization of the North, the government started training the Nubians in the new resettlements on new agricultural techniques and handicrafts, which would subjugate them to the new national industrial projects in the North. (Abu Wafa 1963, 267–68)

### **1.3 Methodology**

The methodology used in this thesis is divided into ethnographic observations and interviews in two Nubian villages, secondary literature on media representations, Nubian resistance and Nubian songs and literature, news items and official decrees.

My observations took place in two Nubian villages in Aswan which were affected directly by the construction of both the Low and the High Dam: Heissa Island and Al-Dekka Village. Heissa is the one of the few surviving Nubian islands, located in the east of Aswan, right in the middle between Aswan Low Dam and Aswan High Dam. Heissa's inhabitants had to relocate themselves three times, by moving up to the island's hills, the first time was in 1902 after the construction of Aswan Low Dam, the other two relocations were in 1912 and 1933 respectively after the two elevations of the Dam. Heissa's inhabitants speak Arabic and Kenouz Nubian.

Al-Dekka village is located in the North of Aswan city. The village carries the name of the old Dekka village in Old Nubia, from which most of the inhabitants originally come from. Currently, the inhabitants of the village are not only Nubians but also Upper Egyptians and some Bedouin tribes. The majority of the inhabitants of the village were displaced from their old Dekka village

after the construction of Aswan High Dam in 1964.

Before moving to my field sites, I was expecting that participant observation would help me with array of data collection methods, which include observations, natural conversations and structured, semi-structured and unstructured interviews with local activists. The main challenge that I faced in my fieldwork was the current political situation. In the aftermath of bombing two churches during the celebrations of Palm Sunday in Egypt<sup>4</sup>, a three-month of emergency state was declared in April. According to the emergency law articles in the constitution, the President, and those acting on his behalf, is granted the power to refer civilians to State Security Emergency Courts and extends his powers to monitoring and intercepting all forms of communication and correspondence, imposing censorship prior to publications and imposing a curfew. The sensitivity of the Nubian case at the moment and how it relates to the national security and the borders issues – as per the presidential decrees- was a challenge while conducting interviews with local activists in Aswan, Heissa and Al-Dekka. Many activists refrained from meeting me, while others refused to answer specific questions regarding the historical production of their resistance history by the current regime. The unanswered questions and the vague answers for some specific questions add more weight to the analysis of how local historical narratives are shaped and affected by the national hegemonic narratives.

I spent fourteen days in the field, ten of them were dedicated to interviews and the rest were informal chats and observations. I had in total 35 interviews with “local activists” and “Nubians who are actively advocating for the Nubian case”, as they described themselves; 20 of them were structured interviews and recorded. I had from another 15 other semi-structured and informal

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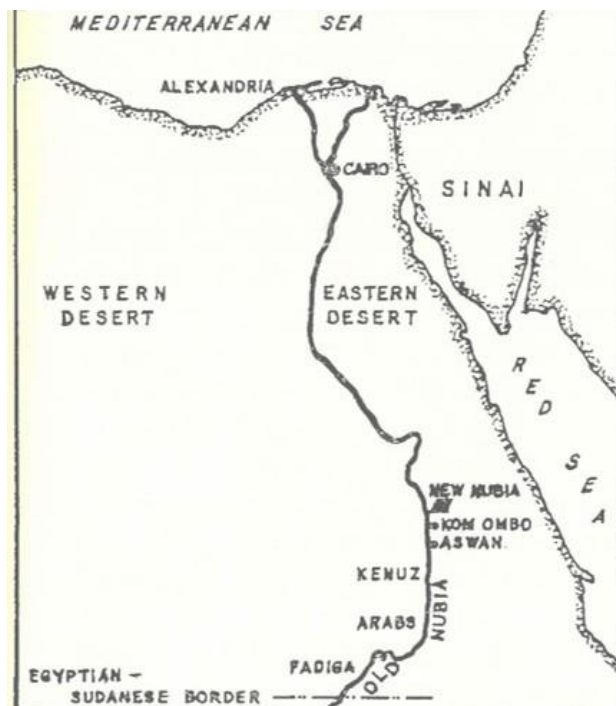
<sup>4</sup> More on the terror attack: <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/egypt-church-attacks-easter-not-celebrate-palm-sunday-bombings-minya-coptic-orthodox-diocese-a7679631.html>



interviews, where my questions were spontaneous and I didn't use the recorder.

For most of my informants, I used fake names as per their requests and for some of them, they requested me "not to use any names at all" as they fear to face any security issues.

To be able to study and analyze the role of the media in the production and reproduction of the hegemony enforced on the Nubians, I utilized a critical discourse analysis which helped me in examining the structures, strategies, interactions, communications and events which play a vital role in the mode of production of hegemony. (Djik 1993, 149–50)



*Figure 1- Sketch map of Egypt showing the locations of New and old Nubia (H. M. Fahim 1981, 81)*



*Figure 2- An archival photograph from the Nubian displacement process. A boat taking Nubian families to their new houses. Source: Al Gomhoria Online*



*Figure 3- A view from Heissa Island*



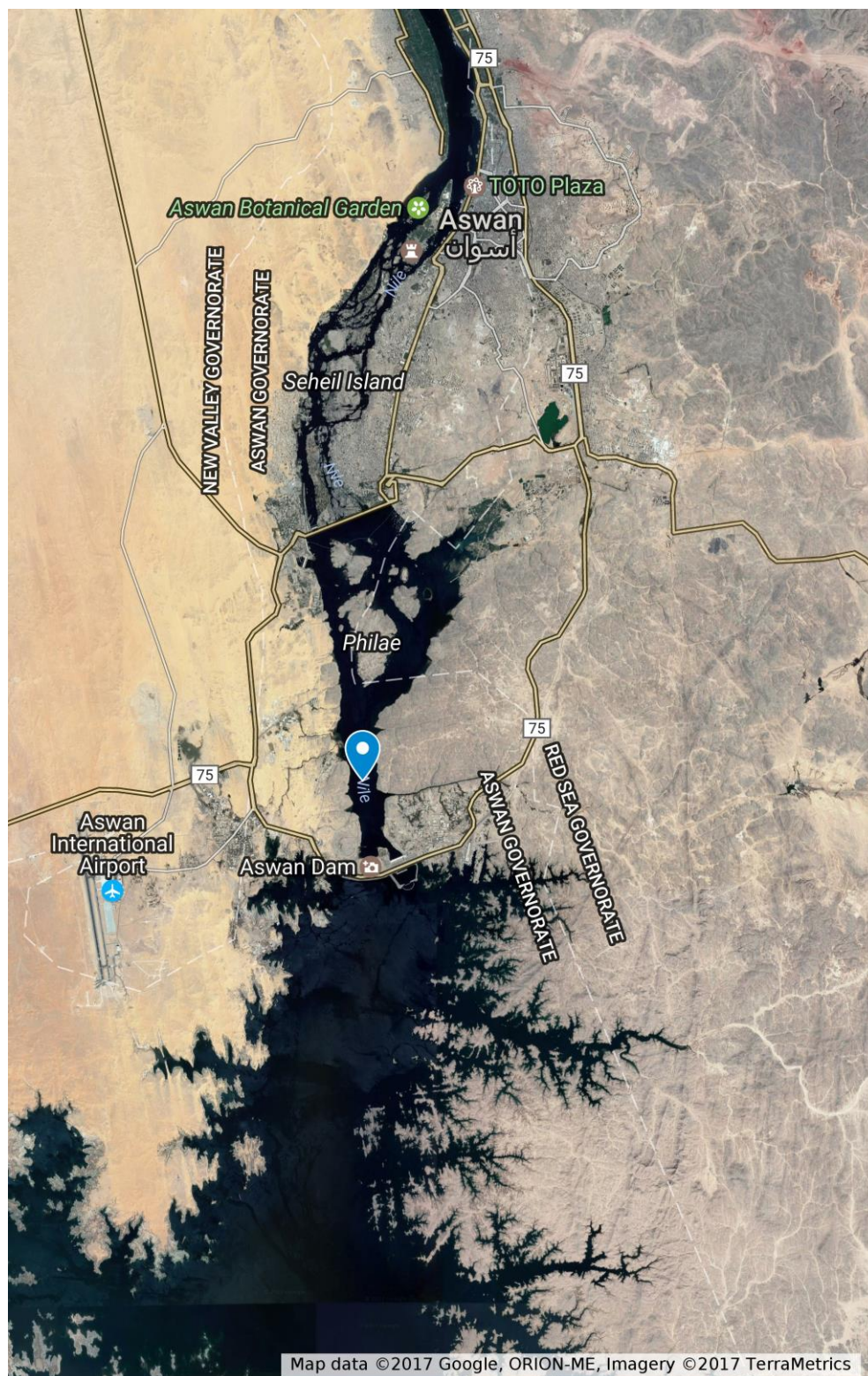


Figure 4- Location of Heissa Island on the map



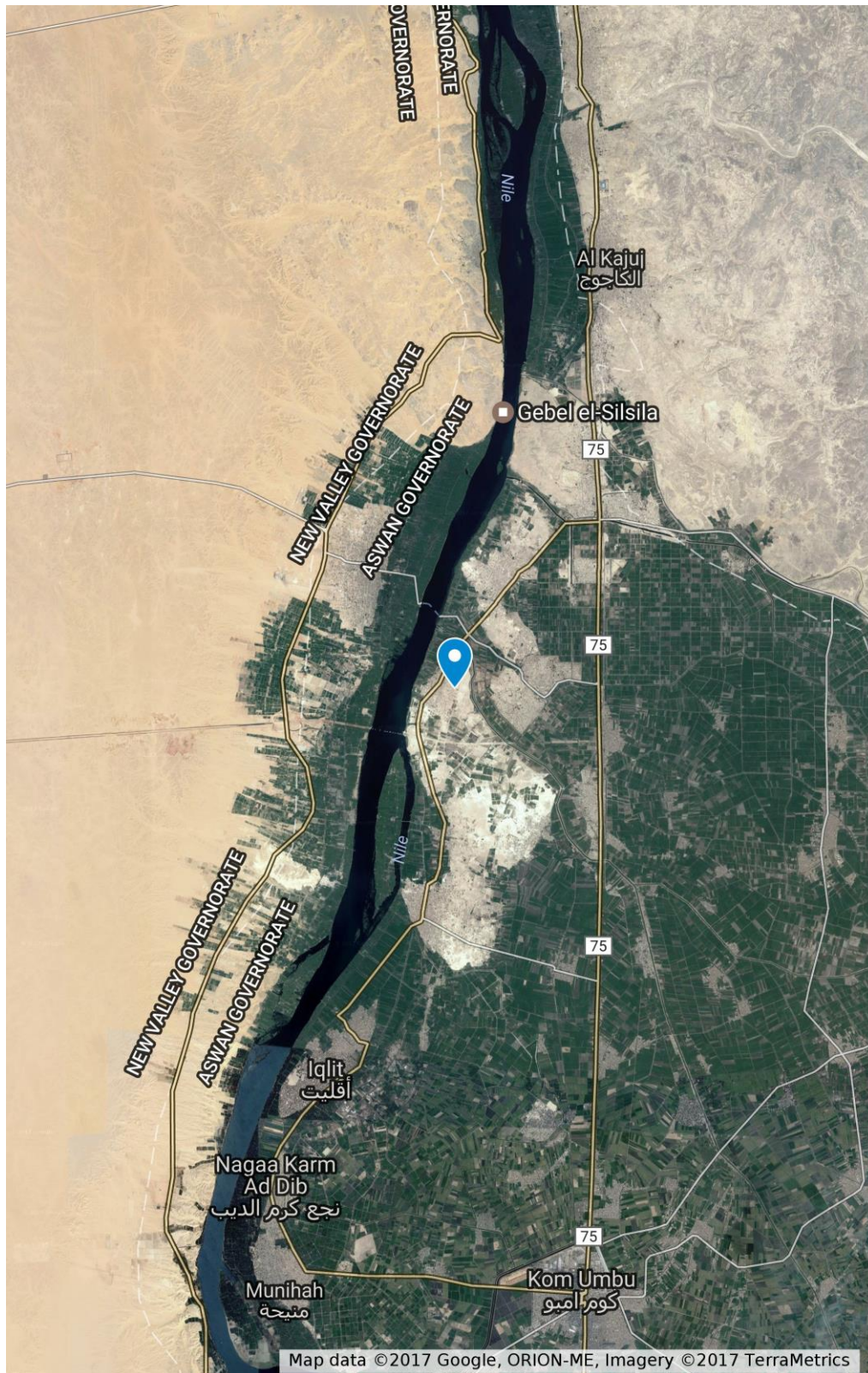


Figure 5- Location of Al-Dekka on the map

## Chapter 2- Nubian Representations in Popular Culture between Misrepresentation and Neglect

### 2.1 Gramsci and Popular Culture: The Production, Reproduction and Transformation of Hegemony

#### I. Gramsci's Concept of Hegemony: consent, coercion and power over subaltern groups

In modern societies, any ruling class uses a combination of consent and coercion -or what Gramsci described as *hegemony*- to maintain their power over subaltern groups. To sustain the consent of the various subaltern classes, the dominant class uses multiple subtle techniques. Thus, hegemony is not based on building alliances with social groups identified with the societal project of the dominant class. On the contrary, the main task of the dominant class is to suggest discourses that forces homogeneity on the subaltern classes and alter their subjectivities. In this process, the ruling class does not only produce appealing narratives for specific subaltern groups, but it produces new identities by interpellating various social groups. (Munif 2013, 203–4; Thomson 2009, 161)

According to Gramsci, the state is composed of two separate yet complementary spheres: the civil society and the political society, and hegemony is the production of the dialectical relationship between the two spheres. While the civil society includes the cultural practice institutions such as the educational system, the family, the media and the religious institution, it appears to be independent from the political sphere which is composed of repressive apparatuses such as the police and the military and uses violence and coercion to enforce the will of the ruling class. The civil society institutions propagate the dominant culture that is masked in the form of common sense. (Thomson 2009, 167–70) This struggle to separate the interdependent

relationship between civil and political societies through transforming the popular consciousness created what Gramsci called a “counter-hegemony” or “war of position” which can be defined as a cultural struggle waged within civil society using platforms suitable for “cultural transmission,” such as parliament, education and religious institutions, professional associations, media, and courts. (Boggs 1994, 160–61)

Gramsci’s concepts of hegemony and counter-hegemony can provide an analysis on how the Egyptian state maintained its hegemonic historical narratives of Nubians in the past ten years, not only by coercive power but also by enforcing hegemony without falling into the problem of economic reductionism. While traditional Marxists think that the economic sphere is the main founding element of all social formations dismissing the ideological sphere, Gramsci uses the concept of hegemony to examine the complex relationship between the ideological and the economic fields. (Munif 2013, 203) Ideology for Gramsci is more than just a system of ideas; it is embodied in the collective and communal modes of living. Ideologies have material existence as they are embodied in the social practices of individuals and in the civil and political societies and institutions which within these social practices occur, and play part in elaborating, sustaining and spreading ideologies. (Simon and Hall 2002, 59–61)

Gramsci believes that ideologies are crucial tools in counter-hegemonic strategies as they provide “a concrete fantasy which acts on a dispersed and shattered people to arouse and organize its collective will.” (Gramsci 1971, 125–26; Kandil 2011, 44)

## *II. Popular Culture as an Institution Subject to Production, Reproduction and Transformation of Hegemony*

While there’s no consensus about the definition of what is popular culture, there have been many

efforts to offer definitions for it. Peter Burke argues that popular culture can be defined in ‘a negative way’, as the unofficial culture, the culture of the non-elites or of the subordinate classes. However, recent theorists began to give popular culture more expansive definitions, such as Harold Hind’s definition, in which he defines popular culture as the ideological, social and/or material aspects of culture which are widely spread and consumed by a number of people. (Z. Fahmy 2011, 3) and hence, it can be subject to ‘production, reproduction and transformation of hegemony’.

In the last few decades, Egypt has witnessed an unprecedented growth of mass-mediated popular culture productions. Hundreds of books and periodicals were published, new theoretical plays, films, television series and songs were produced. As the majority of these productions are created in Cairo, it enhanced the capital’s political and cultural control and contributed to the formation of a homogenous Egyptian national culture that eventually reached the national periphery. (Z. Fahmy 2011, 4) which means that they are used subtle mechanisms for the ideological integration within the Egyptian state.

Media production does not only reflect and sustain the consensus but they help in producing the consensus and manufacturing consent in order to establish hegemony. (Gramsci 2001, 46) Attempting to demonstrate how media institutions could be articulated to the production and reproduction of the dominant ideologies, while at the same time remain “free” and “independent”, Stuart Hall (1982, 86–88) analyses media through a ‘hegemonic framework’, and he argues that media institutions powerfully secure consent because their claim of being politically and/or economically independent is ideological; as it offers a partial explanation as if it were a comprehensive and adequate one. Therefore, the legitimacy of these media institutions depends on that partial truth, which is being mistaken by the common people as the whole. Thus,

media can be described as an ‘ideological state apparatus’ that is used to mediate social conflicts and its role is to interpret and make sense of the world to the mass public, and during this process, it tends to reproduce the hegemonic ideology. (Curran 1982, 227)

Until the 1990s, as argued by Yushi (2012, 47), media production in Egypt was regarded as a propaganda tool by which the authoritarian consecutive regimes maintained their power. However, after the appearance of satellite television in the 1990s, it was believed that this new media could abolish the state’s control over the media and act as a sweeping power for democracy.

But this is not the case as media production in Egypt- whether governmental<sup>5</sup> or private- is not fully independent and heavily controlled by a variety of legal provisions and laws – even after the 2011 revolution- that prevent Egyptian journalists, broadcasters, film and television producers from operating freely. (Issawi 2014, 18)

Gramsci sees that the production of hegemonic ideology can be explained in regards to its professional communicators who are essential to ‘amplify systems of representation that legitimize the social system’. Thus, as Gramsci argues, these professional communicators can be described as ‘intellectuals’ who are responsible for ‘the production and the dissemination of ideas and knowledge’. Even, when there is an assumption that these communicators are independent, they are bounded by the hegemonic system and they – unconsciously- frame the news in a way that keeps with the ‘institutional arrangement of the society’ or the hegemonic

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<sup>5</sup>Egypt has two national terrestrial channels, six regional channels and a network of satellite channels (The Nile Sat). The main channel, Channel One, provides the flagship programme for the government. Channel Two inclines more towards entertainment-oriented programs. Local stations, from Channel Three to Eight, provide local news, religion, cultural and entertainment programs.



ideology. (Strinati 1995, 171; Gitlin 1980, 256) In a country where more than 25% of the population is illiterate as Egypt<sup>6</sup> (The Cairo Post 2014), television anchors remain to be considered as public opinion leaders and influencers. Although television anchors and journalists openly criticized the government and the military during the months of the revolution in 2011, now their role becomes more complicated. While there is an unspoken rule among national, partisan and private media producers, they can criticize everyone except the president and the defence and interior ministers. When Nour Youssef (2015) interviewed some of the prominent journalists and television presenters for the Guardian, they mentioned that although they realize their influence on the millions of the viewers, they would always “censor” and “police” themselves when they are tackling any issues or decisions taken by the president or the army as they are afraid ‘they might hurt the national security’ or ‘stir public opinion against the army’.

Harpole (1980, 22) underlines the link between the cinema and Gramsci’s concept of hegemony as hegemony can be defined in that sense as “the belief, values, cultural traditions and myths which create a consensus that perpetuates the status quo”. The way censorship worked in the first part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when Egypt was under British occupation, was articulated by Jacques Pascal (1947) as “*inhibiting the communication of anything that agitates the public, like battle scenes in times of war, or patriotic novels that evoke emotions in downtrodden nations.*”<sup>7</sup> The British administration banned all artistic works tackling issues related to challenging occupation, protests and even any work that presented a negative image of the Egyptian state such as portraying the poor or using working or rural classes as a theme. (Ali 2016)

After independence, censorship continued to be dictated by political and social concerns, films

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<sup>6</sup> According to a statement issued from the Central Agency for Public Mobilization and Statistics (CAPMAS) in 2014

<sup>7</sup> The censorship of films was added in 1904 to the laws concerning censorship of publications issued in 1881 (“Censorship,” n.d.)

tackling contemporary political issues or criticizes the government continued to be banned. The Nasserist regime established several councils aiming to enhance the quality of the cinematic art and strengthen the national cinema industry. As an extension to the state-controlled public sector of nationalized industries, the Nasserist government established the public sector in cinema in 1963. This sector was mainly seen as a continuation of the process of reshaping the state's sectors in parallel with the new Egyptian Arab socialism character Egypt was adopting. (Samak 1977, 12–13)

The 1970s witnessed a new approach adopted by the censorship board which was to edit scenes out instead of banning films in parallel with Sadat's effort to "de-nasserize" the state.<sup>8</sup> Cinema was the first industry to be denationalized, opening the doors for private production companies. (Samak 1977, 15)

Egyptian filmmakers started to express their disagreement and frustration in their internal meetings about all these bans. However, this was subject to change in the 1980s, under Mubarak's regime. As articulated by Film critic Samir Farid (2002), many Egyptian journalists and filmmakers started to side with the censorship body and break the filmmakers' community ties. He reports several incidents in which journalists, film directors and actors approved the censorship of some films: *"It's the censorship authority's duty to stop the production of banal films, setting standards like the health standards the Ministry of Health sets for restaurants to control disease"* as stated by one of the directors to the press. (Ali 2016; Malkmus 1988, 32)

By the end of the 1980s, censorship process took a new form: instead of banning films or cutting scenes, it was left to the media to campaign for banning films. Severe media campaigns started in

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<sup>8</sup> Sadat's efforts to de-nasserize the state (Known as the Open Door Policy/ Infitah) was mainly de-nationalizing institutions and companies, encouraging privatization and allying with US instead of USSR.

the 1990s and onwards to ban films that were described as “*disturbing national security*”, “*presenting an inaccurate image of Egypt that affects its international image*”, “*contributes to the Western conspiracy on Egypt*” or “*implies a war on religion*”. Several films were banned from participating in national and international film festivals based on this, and some filmmakers were sued because of these campaigns.(Ali 2016)

Gitlen (1980, 258) suggests that when the dominant class controls what the media feeds the public, the ruling elites are infusing a false consciousness among them, which limits them in acting for change. However, if we are following the Gramscian conceptualizations, it is important to note that hegemony is not a constant thing, it is always changing by challenging, resisting and endorsing the ‘dominant hegemony’. There is always a room for a counter-hegemony. ‘Traditions, institutions and formations’ are the three cultural processes for hegemony. The traditions are always ‘invented and reinvented by the national state’ and these newly formed traditions depend on institutions like media for transmission in order to establish a ‘dominant consensus in the society’. In this regard, we may consider that hegemony provides space for critical reasoning, so that a new class may contest the existing ideology and resist change from the hegemonic ideology.(Stevenson 1995, 181) However, we have to put into consideration the importance of the ‘informational and cultural powers’ as important key players in governance and they play a crucial role in enforcing social control. (Stevenson 1995, 5)

### III. The Limitation of the Concept of Hegemony in Explaining the Role Played by Popular Culture

Hegemony cannot be always used to explain the role played by the media in a society; it is reductionist because of the way it understands human subjectivity. While hegemony argues that the dominant class through the mediation of mass culture controls the class-consciousness in a

society, it assumed the unity of thought of the human subject, and the way they conceive what Hall labelled as “the partial truth”. Hegemony, in this sense, totally neglects the autonomy of the people as people are different and they have different thought capacities, as the homogeneous human subjects do not exist. (Gottdiener 1995, 982)

In addition, when we talk about the false consciousness from the perspective of hegemony, we tend to neglect that consciousness and ideology are two separate entities, as ideology is not consciousness; it is the representation of the ‘imaginary’. Ideology cannot be fully controlled and the struggle to control it will always continue. (Gottdiener 1995, 983,978)

## **2.2 Nubians in Popular Culture: (Mis)representation, Othering and Neglect**

The Egyptian cinema and television representations of Nubians plays a crucial role in prolonging Nubian stereotypes; Nubians are portrayed as “the black other”, influencing the public, and Nubians themselves. (Hussien 2014, 35)

Elizabeth A. Smith uses the “slip of a pen” of a prominent journalist and writer, Khairy Shalaby, who referred to a Downtown café popular among the Nubians in Cairo as “*Barabra<sup>9</sup>café*” in one of his articles, to explore the othering “Africanness” of the Nubians in Egypt. The debate over the Barabra café can be situated within the context of citizenship, race and rights. Prevalent stereotypes of Nubians in the media situate them in a subordinate urban class position within the nation or as secessionists, playing on the fact that they live on the Egyptian-Sudanese borders and that they speak a different language. The exclusion of the Nubians from the dominant concept of the Egyptian identity is done by associating them with either “a slave from the past”

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<sup>9</sup> A controversial term, which is used as an insult to someone, based on his or her skin color. In the Egyptian slang language, it was historically used to refer to the Nubian Egyptians and Sudanese migrant laborers in Cosmopolitan cities of Egypt.

or “a contemporary African”.(Smith 2006, 400–401) Eve Troutt Powell (2003, 169) argues that the history of the media representations of Nubians intersects with the relationship between Egypt and Sudan, when both were under British Colonial rule and its post-colonial implications, which affected Egypt’s relationship with the rest of Africa and contributed to the image of the modern Egyptian versus the ‘ primitive’ African Other in the Egyptian mentality.

While there are no cinema theatres in either any of the Nubian settlements or in any of the Nubian islands, whoever prefers to go to the cinema, would visit the cinema at Aswan city. The majority prefers to watch the films when they are aired at any of satellite channels. In the majority of the houses in Heissa, there are televisions connected with satellites. While in Al-Dekka, there were fewer houses with televisions, but there was no single television without a connection to the satellite.

Many female informants in Al-Dekka told me that they gather in the evenings at one of the houses with a satellite television to watch the news, talk shows and films. *“We watch mainly the satellite channels; the most famous talk shows to know what is going on in the rest of Egypt.”* Khairy, 45 years’ old who works at the Ministry of Irrigation told me. *“We, sometimes, watch Channel 8<sup>10</sup> because it is dedicated to the South of Egypt, so there should be more specific news, but it only focuses on the Upper Egyptian governorates. When they air something about Nubia, it is about the folklore, nothing else”.*

Yasser, a fisherman in his mid-thirties in Heissa told me that he watches Channel 8 most of the time. *“But it pisses me off when they say it is entirely for the South of Egypt. They speak with*

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<sup>10</sup> Channel 8 is local TV channel dedicated to the Southern Upper Egypt

*Upper Egyptian accents all the time! No Kenzi, No Fadiki! As if we don't exist! They assume we know Arabic, yes we do! My children do! But what about my old father who only speaks Kenzi?"*

Am Jalal said that he watches television with "a critical eye". He told me that he did an interview once for a program on Channel 8 about Nubian art. He fought with the editor as he insisted on talking in Nubian and asked for a translator. *"Although I agreed on talking in Arabic at the end, they never aired it! They replaced me with an Upper Egyptian voice-over talking about our art."*

Mahmoud Ayman, one of the youngest coordinators of "the Right to Return" campaign <sup>11</sup>told me that the younger Nubian generations are not big fans of Television nor "mainstream films". He said: *"I don't watch TV myself, neither the majority of my friends. My family stopped even watching Channel 8 as it is all lies and government propaganda. I only depend on social media to know the news. You know, talk shows lie even. I depend on social media: Facebook statuses and tweets to know what exactly happened, as it is more credible. I only watch specific films; the mainstream films are not my taste"*

Based on my conversations with my informants, I began to think how media, as a hegemonic tool, is being used by the Egyptian state to control the production of historical narratives. From a Gramscian perspective, media, as part of the civil society, acts as a tool for the transmission, production and reproduction of the dominant ideology. While the dominant nationalist historical narratives impose and endorse a homogenous Egyptian identity, whoever don't fit in this homogenizing category is constructed as Other. In this case, the representation of the other is often caught between a representation of the Other as "naive", "underdeveloped" or "alien" or

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<sup>11</sup> A Nubian campaign that works on advocating Nubians' rights to return to what is remaining from their original lands

the Other is neglected and “silenced”.

*I. The Construction of the Black Other: The Representations of Nubians – As Racially Different- in the Egyptian Cinema and Television*

By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, putting “exotic” people on display became a practice in Europe when European explorers travelled around the globe and brought people from their newly discovered areas. These “exotic people” were exhibited at public fairs as a representation of the exoticism and the wealth of these newly discovered countries.(Dreesbach 2012, 2) In 1878, 32 individuals from Sudan travelled to Germany, France and UK to perform. They were billed as “Nubians” to distinguish them from the Arabic-speaking population of modern Sudan. As Sudan was under Egyptian administration, the exhibition’s organizers assured the Egyptian government about their return to Sudan.(Zimmerman 2012, 20)This orientalist discourse, as argued by Said, implies a systematic difference between the Orient, which is often portrayed as irrational and underdeveloped, and the West that is often portrayed as completely the opposite, as rational and developed. Non-western cultures were seen as one large entity, disregarding the differences among them which led to the emergence of a generalization among the West to view the Orient as incapable of defining itself (Said 1978, 301; Khatib 2006, 64–65)

The portrayal of the modern Egyptian, who follows the modern themes of the Western life in oppose to the naïve irrational Nubian was a common theme in several films in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century where Nubians were represented as “servants”, “doorkeepers” and “slaves”. The first Nubian principal actor was performed by the Egyptian comedian “Ali Al Kassar”, who even when he was not a Nubian himself, he was referred to as “*the Egyptian Barbari*” in the majority of the media outlets back then. Al Kassar performed the character of the Nubian

servant/doorman named *Othman* in the 1930s and the 1940s several times in many films. Using a “fake” dark skin colour and a funny Arabic accent, most of these films had several “funny” encounters between a Pasha and Othman his servant, portraying Othman as a naïve, stupid yet kind-hearted servant. (Shafik 2007, 68–69)



*Figure 6- Ali Al Kassar as a Nubian doorman in one of his films (on the right)*

The same representations of the Nubians continued to be reproduced after independence. The same attitude of portraying the Nubians as servants “*Khadam*”, door attendants “*Bawabeen*” and slaves “*Abeed*”, and of using their skin colour and accents as jokes continued in many films in the 1950s and onwards. Using the name “Othman” to refer to servants, slaves and workers in degrading jobs continued as well.

Faten, who is doing her masters in humanities, at one of the Upper Egyptian universities, while she still lives with her parents at Al-Dekka told me that she, and her family, gets very angry



when these films are aired. *“The problem is that, these films are performed by famous actors, so everyone watches them. Top comedians, whose films are ranked on the top of the box offices such as Adel Emam and Muhammad Heneidy, use Nubians and black people as jokes in their films. All of the Egyptians see these films and think that we only work as Bawabeen or Khadam. Not a single movie about Nubian doctors or engineers”.*

*“How they can forget the word Oshrya! Oshrya!”<sup>12</sup>* Her father said. *“In the 1973 war against Israel, the Nubian language was used instead of Arabic as a secret language. It was amongst the reasons why Egypt won this war! You know, they employed Nubians who used to live in old Nubia to teach army officers the Nubian language, it was used on the 6th of October and Israel never knew that language before, so the Egyptian army tricked them! But there’s no mention about this in the films about this war or any of the TV series.”* Faten’s father story was mentioned to me several times in Al-Dekka and Heissa. *“How can they use our language when they needed, and then force us to forget afterward?”* said Haj Abdou, the founder of one of the Nubian cultural centres in Aswan.

Since 2007, there has not been much difference in the way Nubians were represented in the Egyptian media. The figure of a Black man who works either in a downgrading job or acts naive remains in most of the Egyptian television series and films. In films such as *“Haha and Tofaha”* (2007) *“Alrayes Omar Harb/ The leader Omar Harb”* (2008), and *“Alf Mabrouk/Thousand congratulations”* (2009), Nubians are still portrayed as naive servants, who the main actors in each movie start joking about their skin colour and their naiveness. Nubians do not play a crucial role in any of the films, and their insertion is only meant to enact jokes randomly. While

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<sup>12</sup> A Nubian word that means “Fire”

*“Qodarat Gheer Adeya/ Extraordinary abilities”* (2015) movie had an important Nubian role and there were no jokes about his colour, the Nubian was still a doorman and not smart enough as the rest of the actors in the movie. Not all the actors who portrayed these roles were Nubians; they were Upper Egyptians or they were putting on make-up.

Television series like *“Nekdb Law Olna Manhbash/ We lie if we say we are not in love”* (2013) and *“Masrah Masr/ The theatre of Egypt”* (2014-2017) followed the same approach of enacting colour-based jokes by portraying Nubians as naïve door attendants or servants. In the first television series, a Nubian man proposes to marry a girl, so her mother tells him “to bring his Barabra family along”. The actor who portrayed this role was Nubian; he was subject to criticism by several Nubians whom I spoke about this series. Ramzy – whose dream is to act in a Nubian movie- said: *“We know that they will never make a Nubian actor, the main actor in any of the films or TV series. If you want to act, then you will have to abide by the rules, you have to agree to be a joke and this is why Nubians never agreed to play such roles.”*

*“Nawara”* (2016) might be an exception; the film portrays the life of a Nubian-Caucasian couple. While the movie shows r in several scenes, the discrimination the Nubian husband’s father faces in a public hospital based on his skin colour, the focus of the movie remains the life of Nawara, the Caucasian house cleaner’s life working in one of Cairo’s gated communities.

The only exception to the Nubian exclusion from the mainstream media is the first Egyptian animated cartoon *“Bakkar”*. *Bakkar*- 5-minute daily cartoon stories- was broadcasted on the Egyptian Television Channel One since 1998 and continued for nine years, before being resumed in 2015. The series was broadcasted during the holy month of Ramadan. The creator of the cartoon series, Mona Abu El-Nasr stated that *“Bakar* was inspired by the Egyptians’ authorities’

labelling of 1997 as ‘the year of the Nubian Child’ which the intention of developing Southern Egypt. The cartoon series were very popular across the Arab region as it was well received at cultural festivals and it was distributed as cassette tapes, video tapes, DVDs and as printed books. (Galal 2017, 165–66)

According to Abu El-Nasr, *Bakkar* was a 10-12 years old Nubian boy, who lives along with his mother in a Nubian village in the New Valley in the South of Egypt. *Bakkar* is portrayed as “an authentic well-mannered and naive Nubian boy” as described by the creator. *Bakkar* contributes to “inscribing the Nubians into a united Egypt, as ‘authentic’ Egyptians who are close to nature and represent original and non-corrupt Egyptian values”. She mentioned that *Bakkar*’s accent – speaking Arabic with a Nubian accent- helps in filling the gap between the inhabitants of the Northern cities and those of the Southern cities. (Galal 2017, 166–69)



*Figure 7- Bakkar- a Nubian character in the first Egyptian animated cartoon*

The demonstration of the integration of *Bakkar* as a Nubian into the united Egyptian society can be even spotted at the show’s opening song, which is performed by the Egyptian Nubian singer *Muhammad Mounir*, a prominent singer across the Arab region. The opening song says:

“From an early age he knows what it means

That in his heart and soul he is Egyptian,  
And the Nile flows through his veins.  
The history of his land and country  
Flows in his blood,  
In his heart and soul, he is Egyptian,  
And the Nile flows through his veins”

While the first season of *Bakkar* had a Nubian animator, actor and music director, there were no Nubians in subsequent seasons. Even the writer of the cartoon series, Amr Samir Atef, who was picked by Abu El-Nasr was from North Egypt. (Smith 2009, 130) According to an interview made by Elizabeth Smith (2009, 131) with Atef, he never visited Aswan before and “*he didn’t know where Nubia exactly existed*”. It was only after the success of the first season when Atef decided to visit Aswan for 10 days to learn more about Nubia and the Nubians. He visited Heissa Island and learnt a few Kenzi Nubian words aiming to use some of them in the show.

However, the tension between using the Nubian specificity and the uniqueness of *Bakkar* as a distinctive mark of difference at one hand and between constructing him as any other Egyptian child, on the other hand, favoured the latter. In one of the seasons, there is one episode which tackles the Nubian displacement of 1964. *Bakkar’s* great grandmother tells him brief details about the displacement in Arabic. She says that the Nubians were displaced from their lands “but they were content as they did this sacrifice for Egypt”. She uses few Nubian words, some of which what Atef learnt at Heissa. Despite that Amr planned to use a few Nubian words in every episode, Dr. Abu El-Nasr translated them into Arabic, stating in many interviews that *Bakkar’s* goal is to teach national belonging to Egyptian children through a character with whom they can relate to, and this is why she is “in favour of *Bakkar’s* universality, rather than his Nubian specificity.” *Bakkar’s* character is also mobilized as “a marker of otherness”. While in the

cartoon series, Nubians symbolize the essence of belonging to the nation, *Bakkar* is racially marked his skin-color and his Nubian otherness. The name *Bakkar* is being used as an insulting term that refers to blackness and/or Africanness. (Smith 2009, 135)

While I was spending an afternoon with Ramzy and his family at Heissa, Ramzy was telling me that his brother, who works as an accountant in Cairo, is being called “*Bakkar*” by his colleagues and friends at the company, “because he is a Nubian and black”, he said. Ramzy and his family were very positive about *Bakkar* and they saw it was “a good step” for the “other Egyptians” to know about Nubia. His sister said: *“It was on Channel One and not Channel eight, and during Ramadan, it means that all the Egyptian see it and not only Upper Egyptians. My late grandmother told me once that the houses and the landscape in the cartoon looked like old Nubia, she couldn’t understand the show as it was in Arabic, and she only understood Nubian Kenzi”*. However, the famous Nubian novelist Idris Ali (Khallaf 2000) stated in an interview that he thinks that *Bakkar* is an inauthentic character *“which have nothing to do with reality: Upper Egypt is not full of armed gangs. The Nubian lifestyle is completely different.”*

When I met Am Jalal, a 50 years old local activist from Heissa, he had a different opinion as well. *“My children used to watch it and I used to wonder, are they making a Nubian cartoon for their children or our children? Why are they using funny Arabic accent and not Nubian?”*

One of the founders of the Black in Egypt blog<sup>13</sup> mentioned that when he and other activists staged a protest in front of the national Egyptian television and radio headquarters in Cairo in 2009 asking for a better representation for Nubians and coloured people in the media, a

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<sup>13</sup> The blog: <https://blackinegypt.wordpress.com/>

governmental official approached them saying: “*What is your problem, slave? There is no problem! I even watch Bakkar every Ramadan!*”(Lambert and Ramadan 2015)

Constructing Nubians as “authentically” Egyptians- like in *Bakkar*’s case- contributes to ascribing them into the national dominant discourse, which rejects the existence of minorities, and accordingly, promotes the discourse that Egypt does not have racism, ethnicities or minorities. The promotion of the homogeneity of the Egyptian national identity and ignoring the details of the Nubian displacement(s) in the 20<sup>th</sup> century was not only what *Bakkar* potentially aimed at. The rest of *Bakkar*’s opening song goes as:

“An exercise after an exercise,  
Still another question I have in mind  
When will I grow up, my country?  
When will I touch the palms?  
When can I harvest Toshka’s flowers?  
And make you an alabaster necklace?”

*Bakkar*, as a famous Cartoon series, aired on the main TV channel in a critical timing in Ramadan, started in 1997, the same year Mubarak inaugurated his infamous Toshka project<sup>14</sup>. The show stopped at 2007 when the project was doomed to fail. The revival of the series again in 2015 was in parallel to Al-Sisi’s decision to resume the project.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> “Toshka” project was inaugurated under Mubarak’s regime in 1998. Its main aim was to create a new valley in the Western desert of Egypt parallel to the Nile Valley. The project was cancelled in 2005 due to legal problems regarding the delivery timeline and the number of feddans included.

<sup>15</sup> President Al-Sisi passed decree no. 335, designating 922 feddans of state –owned land to the new Toshka development project

In an interview with Atef, he mentions that the series stopped in 2007 “due to some production problems”, however, it resumed after one of the satellite channels decided to produce it. (Daily News Egypt 2015) The cartoon series avoided tackling any political events of 2011 or 2013, however, it continued with the same nationalist themes. The cartoon – which was created by 3D technologies-, was directed by the late Abu El-Nasr’s son.

Am Jalal was being quite critical about *Bakkar* and the Toshka project: *“They made the boy live there, and that it resembles old Nubia. Why? Because they want to believe themselves that the project would be successful. They tried to deceive us too, with a cartoon! They want to deceive our young children that they cannot fight back for their lands because they want to start a new project that will develop Upper Egypt. However, I always tell my children, it is our lands and not theirs. They can’t decide for us.”*

## II. The Representations of the Nubian History and Resistance in Egyptian Popular Culture

In the past decade, there was almost no representation in the Egyptian films or television series of the Nubian displacement history or resistance. While there were several films and television series that placed the history of some minority groups in Egypt and their resistance to marginalization as its core story, and were produced by mainstream big media production companies; such as the Copts in “Bahb El Cinema/ I love Cinema” (2004) and “Awan El Ward/ The Season of Roses” (2000), South Desert tribes in “Arak Al Balah/ Date Wine” (1998) and Jews in “Haret Al Yahoud/ The Jewish Alley” (2015), this is not the case with the Nubians. The silence enforced on the Nubian resistance narratives comes as a continuation of the construction of the Nubian other as naïve, silent and incapable to resist or offer their narratives.

In the comedy film, *“Al Thalatha Yashtghlonha/ The three are deceiving her”* (2010), a young

girl who falls in love with a revolutionary, decides to start aimless protests. She brings students protesting for more vacations, workers presenting for more wages and less work and Nubians protesting for secessionism. The way the Nubian were presented asking for secessionism is how the Egyptian talk-shows portrays and adopts the view that Nubians, whenever there's any ongoing activity that rejects their marginalization and demands their lands, would ask to secede from Egypt.

*“This movie was a disaster, like putting poison in honey, because it is a comedy movie”* one of the Nubian activists stated who used to actively organize conferences for the Nubian demands during Mubarak's era. *“While we never organized a huge protest, and we depended only on alternative methods like organizing conferences and trying to speak with the media and the government, this is how they summarize our resistance, as secessionists!”* Another activist who was present in Tahrir Square in 2011 added: *“the media portrays our demands this way because we are asking for a legal right. When we say that the internationalization of the case can help both us and the government to solve the problem, we are being accused of demanding a separate Nubian nation.”*

Several television anchors and political analysts advocate this view, seeing borders areas such as Nubia and North Sinai as “national security” issues that the government should deal with urgently. TV anchors would label any Nubian activist, who would bring the Nubian issue up, or ask for the internationalization of the case as “a secessionist” or as a “traitor”.

A lawyer and one of the founders of a recent social media campaign advocating Nubian rights said: *“the security and the border card is the weapon they use against us. When we try to tell our story anywhere, when we try to resist, they use this weapon. Several Nubian prominent writers,*



*such as Haggag Oddoul, are accused of being traitors because they carry the Nubian burden on their shoulders.” Another activist from the same campaign adds: “this is the mental image endorsed by the media now of any Nubian activist”.*

In 2016, the famous Nubian pop-singer Muhammad Mounir produced a TV series “*El Moghany/The Singer*”, narrating his life story and his movement from his Nubian village to Cairo, and his journey to become one of the leading singers in Egypt. The series was aired in Ramadan on one of the famous Egyptian satellite channels. The first five episodes tackled Mounir’s childhood in Old Nubia. While the majority of the Nubians did not speak Arabic before displacement, the language used by the Nubians in the series was Upper Egyptian Arabic. In the 5<sup>th</sup> episode, there was a scene about Nubian displacement. The scene showed the Nubians, being content while they were being displaced and holding Nasser’s pictures. The scene indicated that the Nubians were satisfied with the displacement process. The boat that took the Nubians from Old Nubia to the train station to be resettled in the new resettlements appeared to be different from the photographs taken back then.



*Figure 8- The displacement scene from Al Moghany series*

Mounir, who gained his fame from being a Nubian singer, who sings about old Nubia, the displacement and the alienation that the Nubians face in their new settlements in his songs, did not tackle any issues regarding their new resettlements of the Nubians. There was no representation of the living conditions, nor the problems, they were facing. Ameen, a member of a Nubian music band and one of the participants of “the Right to Return” campaign said: *“Mounir, in some songs like “Al Madina” (The city), “Ya Leila Oudy Tany” (O Night, Come Again!) and “Law Kan Lezam” (If it was obligatory) tackled issues related to the Nubians problems, their nostalgia for old Nubia and how they resist every day to keep their culture remembered. Now, when he got the chance to be on the mainstream media, he did not mention the case he advocated for. In his songs, he encouraged us to resist, to keep our history remembered and to remember our lands. Now, he only replicates what they want to hear.”* Several informants from Al-Dekka told me that they boycotted the series. *“We are tired of lies;*

*imagine when it comes from one of us!”*

The enforced silence on Nubians' history of displacement and resistance is directly linked to the construction of Nubians as black Others, naïve and underdeveloped compared to the modern developed Egyptian in popular culture. In this sense, popular culture serves as an ideological apparatus to the state where it reproduces the hegemonic ideology and historical narratives that the state wants to introduce to the mass public.

## Chapter 3- Challenging Hegemonic Narratives: Situation of Nubian Resistance and the Production of Counter-Narratives

### 3.1 Situating Nubian Resistance Within the Social, Economic and Political

#### Transformations: to resist Within or Against?

The majority of the Nubian activists I interviewed in Al-Dekka, Heissa and Aswan, always described the Nubian resistance as being “different”, “reflects the Nubian cultural norms” and “peaceful”. Am Hamid, who is the founder and the head of a Nubian cultural centre, that has been one of the most important hubs that hosted several Nubian activism forums told me: *“We resist differently and on daily basis. Our resistance depends on the spaces we are given, let me tell you something, I support the 2011 revolution, but in Mubarak’s era, we had more freedom, it was our golden period of resistance. We organized conferences, we spoke to the media and we founded organizations. We are accused of being traitors and secessionists, but we did all of that with pride and determination. However, nowadays, we do not have this freedom, so we have to be smarter. Nowadays, everything is in the hands of the military intelligence! We have to continue the fight, but we have to see how”*

If the Nubian resistance has not been isolated from the political, economic and social transformations that have been taking place in Egypt, then how the Nubian political identity transformed (or remained as it is) in the light of these transformations and especially the 2011 revolution? In the following section, I present the development of the Nubian political resistance before and after the 2011 revolution aiming to answer this question.

*I.      The development of the Nubian Political Resistance before the 2011 revolution*

Before the 2011 revolution, Nubians had rarely taken the streets politically. The forms of resisting varied from forming unions and organizations and individual activism. In 2005, the renowned Nubian activist and poet Haggag Oddoul<sup>16</sup> attended “the Washington Conference on Freedom and Democracy in the Middle East”<sup>17</sup>. He drew attention to the Nubian case as he compared the treatment of the Nubians in Egypt to ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity, asking for the trial of the officials responsible for their displacement. He compared the Nubian displacement to the expulsion of the Palestinians. These statements resulted in great criticism in the Egypt media, as they started to accuse Oddoul of being a secessionist.(Antoun 2013)Soon after the establishment of the Egyptian Centre for Housing Rights, it became a leading actor in the mobilization of Nubian rights. The head of ECHR, Manal Al-Tibi, herself of a Nubian origin, started advocating for the use of the international indigenous peoples’ rights framework in respect to Egypt’s Nubian case.

Following the bread crisis in April 2008 and the organization of a large general strike in response to low wages, several Nubian organizations were established such as the Nubian Democratic Youth Union which aimed at defending Nubians’ rights in Egypt<sup>18</sup> (Janmyr 2017, 721) and the Egyptian Association for the Nubian Lawyers<sup>19</sup> which aimed at providing the needed legal assistance for the Nubian communities.

This political mobilization resulted in the opposition of many Nubian activists to the General

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<sup>16</sup> Oddoul, a renowned Nubian novelist among other Nubian novelists were part of Nubian cultural movement known as Al Sahwa Al Nubiyya (the Nubian Awakening)

<sup>17</sup> A conference organized by the Egyptian Copts in Washington with the aim of discussing issues related to minorities’ rights in the Middle East

<sup>18</sup> Check the foundation statement of the Union: <http://y4nubia.blogspot.hu/2010/01/blog-post.html>

<sup>19</sup> The association’s founding statement: <http://www.mohamoon.com/montada/Default.aspx?Action=Display&ID=95316&Type=3>

Nubian Club (GNC)<sup>20</sup>, saying that its statements did not represent the Nubians demands. *“As Mussad Heraky was part of the National Democratic Party, the GNC discourse was replicating the same discourse the government wanted the Nubians to believe in”*- Al-Tibi to several media outlets. (Morshedy 2009)

In 2010, Nubian activism was dragged into the political conflict resulted from Al-Baradie’s decision to run for the 2011 presidential elections. Heraky accused the National Organization for Change<sup>21</sup> of “forging his signature on the foundational declaration of the organization”. This led to a huge division between Nubian activists. Al-Tibi stated that Al-Baradie did not state his position regarding the Nubian case and therefore she can’t support him *“in her capacity as a Nubian activist, as long as the Nubian case was not placed on his agenda”*. However, Al-Tibi said that there were many other Nubian activists who supported Al-Baradie in their capacity as Nubian activists, *“everyone has the freedom to support whoever they think he/she is the best.”* (Allam 2010)

On the other hand, Mounir Bechir, the head of Egyptian Association for the Nubian Lawyers, stated, *“Supporting Al-Baradie publicly will harm the Nubian case, and will erase all the Nubian resistance efforts. We are currently in continuous negotiation about our rights with the government. If we supported him, then we might be subjected to the government’s violence and we might lose our case.”* (Allam 2010)

Ahmed Isaq, a Nubian activist and a member of the Nubian follow-up committee<sup>22</sup>, mentioned

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<sup>20</sup> A club founded in 1969 which works on uniting the Nubian efforts to solve the problems within the Nubian communities. The club’s assembly contains all the chairpersons of the Nubian organizations, who are delegated legally to represent the Nubians in Egypt to speak to the government.

<sup>21</sup> The organization which united the efforts of the activists and organizations supporting Al-Baradie’s decision

<sup>22</sup> A civil committee formed by Nubians in different governorates in Egypt and outside Egypt, advocating for the Nubians rights and solving problems related to Nubians. It was formed in early 2000s

*“We couldn’t support Al Baradie against Mubarak, as Mubarak has been a great supporter for our case, so how can we simply oppose him? The problem is always with who is around Mubarak and not him personally.” (Allam 2010)*

## *II.     The development of the Nubian Political resistance after 2011*

The 2011 revolution paved the road not only to for the establishment of several Nubian activists’ organizations that advocates for the Nubians’ rights, but for political mobilization and organization in the streets as well. In April 2011, a protest infront of the Ministries Council was organized with three main demands: firing the current governor of Aswan, giving Nasr El Nuba as a separate election seat in the Parliament and developing the remaining of the Old Nubia.<sup>23</sup> This protest was not the last in the series of protests and sit-ins that took place in 2011 and 2012. Azzam, a lawyer and one of the main organizer of the Nubian caravan told me *“The political atmosphere back then was tempting for any kind of mobilization. However, when it came to us, the media and the government framed it as “Matlab Fa’away/ Special needs”, a term they used whenever the protests’ demands didn’t satisfy them”* Am Hamid told me that *“People looked at the Nubian resistance as a separate resistance from the overall struggle in 2011 and 2012, I don’t understand why? They accused us of forgetting the main goals of the revolution and focusing on our demands. The goal of the revolution is that everyone gets rid of injustice and corruption. We were doing this too but on our way”*

Yasmine, a member of several Nubian organizations told me *“The response to the Nubians*

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<sup>23</sup> The demands as presented: <https://www.facebook.com/notes/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AC%D9%85%D8%B9%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%B5%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%84%D9%84%D9%85%D8%AD%D8%A7%D9%85%D9%8A%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B5%D9%81%D8%AD%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B1%D8%B3%D9%85%D9%8A%D8%A9/%D9%85%D8%B9%D8%A7-%D9%84%D8%AA%D8%AD%D9%82%D9%8A%D9%82-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%B7%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A8-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%86%D9%88%D8%A8%D9%8A%D8%A9/171598396228649>

*demands in 2011 and 2012 resembled the responses to any kind of political, economic and social demands. We only received promises, but there was no execution.*” Her sister, Ayat, a member also of several organizations added: *“We were accused of betraying the revolution by presenting our demands, but now we are all equal: we received promises and nothing else.”*

While there were ongoing negotiations and conversations about the constitution that was supposed to be voted on and issued in 2012, before the presidential elections, some Nubian activists formed “Constitution, O Nubians”<sup>24</sup> initiative which aimed at starting a conversation between the different races and ethnicities in Egypt to influence the constitution committee to declare Egypt as a multicultural country.

The situation was not different with the Muslim Brotherhood’s government. *“Promises and nothing else,”* said Am Hamid *“What was funny is that the Muslim Brotherhood government dealt with the Nubian case with ignorance. I wouldn’t say with neglect but with ignorance.”* Ayat told me. In 2012, while Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated president, Muhammad Morsi met Nubians in Washington; he told them that their demand to return to their lands was impossible “as their lands” had drowned. Not only that but also when he met a Nubian delegation in Cairo, he said in a press conference “that he met the Nubian Diaspora in Egypt.” (Muhammad 2013)

In April 2013, Tammarud or “Rebel” movement started to collect signatures calling for the overthrow of Muhammad Morsi and organizing early presidential elections. Several Nubian activists announced publicly that they support Tammarud back then. However, what followed Tammarud was what divided the Nubian activists among themselves again. *“No one was sure of anything,”* said Azzam *“We wanted Morsi to leave, but we didn’t want a military rule again.*

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<sup>24</sup> Their founding statement and Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/nubian.Constitution/>



*The scene was chaotic.”*

In early 2014, several Nubian activists, along with the “Constitution, O Nubians” campaign started advocating for Nubian rights in regards to the potential constitutional amendments. After fierce campaigning, Oddoul was chosen among the 50-member committee to draft the amendments. Oddoul formed a consulting team and started working on advocating the Nubian issue within the constitution. (Sakory 2013) A Nubian triumph was achieved when Article (236) passed. It states “The state ensures drawing and implementing a plan for a comprehensive economic and structural development for the border and deprived areas, including the South, Sinai, Matrouh and Nubia.” It further specifies the “participation of residents in development projects in accordance with the local community’s cultural and environmental patterns,” which should be carried out within 10 years of the constitution’s passing. (Shams El-Din 2013)

However, in August 2014, Al-Sisi passed decree no. 335, designating 922 acres of state –owned land to the new Toshka development project. This decree was preceded by another decree no. 444 in December 2014 which designated certain border areas as military zones that are not to be inhabited, including 16 Nubian villages. (Shams El-Din 2017)

Several social media campaigns were launched to ask for demolishing these decrees. The social media campaigns on Facebook and Twitter garnered a lot of attention, and the hashtags used such as #لا\_444\_لقرار<sup>25</sup> was trending on Twitter.

Both Yasmine and Azzam stressed the importance of social media as alternative space where *“they can voice their narratives”*. Yasmine told me: *“the traditional media won’t pay attention*

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<sup>25</sup> The translation of the hashtag is: No for Decree no. 444

*to our case unless we are trending on social media. Since the 2011 revolution, social media became a very important source of news, and it gave us the space to express our disagreement with the decrees.”*

In November 2016, a caravan <sup>26</sup>of 25 cars started moving from Aswan City in under the slogan of “the Nubian Right to Return” protesting the inclusion of the Nubian Forkand Village in a state- backed development project in Toshka. 200 KM before its final destination, the caravan was stopped by the Egyptian police and as a result, Nubians started blocking the main railway line in Aswan. As an official response to contain the situation, a former commander in chief of the Egyptian army, Field Marshal Tantawy, headed to Aswan and met with the governorate officials and the Nubian parliament member to resolve the issue. The Prime Minister held two meetings with parliamentary delegations to act as intermediaries between the government and the protesters. During the meetings, the government pledged to implement the Nubian demands, but the activists who participated in the caravan remained sceptical. (Aman 2016)

At the beginning of 2017, six activists gathered to protest the decree and they were caught by the Egyptian police on their way to the protest location. They were charged with carrying banners against a presidential decree and insulting the police. The six activists were later released by the prosecution on a bail. (*Mada Masr* 2017)

Azzam, Yasmine, Ayat, Ramzy and Am Jalal were part of the Caravan, but each played a different role. Azzam, Yasmine and Ayat were among the activists who were in the Caravan, Ramzy was smuggling food to the Caravan when the police stopped it and Am Jalal was assisting in mobilizing Nubians to support and join the Caravan.

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<sup>26</sup> I use the word “Caravan” as it was used by the local activists I interviewed and by several media outlets as well.

*“We broke the cycle of fear in the country this year. While we are under this authoritarian regime, we managed to organize the Right to return Caravan. We used the social media to draw attention to our resistance movement as we knew that the regular media won’t pay attention.”* Azzam told me. *“ The Right to return Caravan was not a protest or a sit-in, it was a moving Caravan. This different form of resistance is what made people support us. We changed the perspective as for the past years, only elder generations were the spokespersons for the Nubian case, not the youth. We managed to make the government worried as they didn’t know how to deal with us; we are not blocking the roads, and we are youth, a category they can’t deal with.”*

Ramzy had a different perspective, though *“I think we gained nothing, we left without any concrete results. They played it well, and made us do what they want at the end; leave”*

Yasmine and Ayat’s role started from the second day when the police stopped the Caravan from moving forward and prevented the access to water or food. *“We (a group of female Nubian activists) gathered and we tried to access the Caravan, but we were denied access by the police. We insisted, and mobilized people on social media, exposing the situation.”*<sup>27</sup>

During the monthly youth conference held in Aswan in the second half January 2017, Al-Sisi laid out a number of decisions affecting the Nubian case. The most notable decision was that Forkand is now excluded from the wider Toshka development project and that the state would develop a plan to develop the village within three months. In addition to that, the president announced a number of development projects in Nasr Al-Nuba and Wadi Karkar, both of which

<sup>27</sup> My questions were gender neutral and I haven’t specifically asked about the gender roles in this Caravan. However, it is worth mentioning that the gender component was essential in this Caravan as women were denied access because they are women, and women are not allowed to “stay out of their houses for the night.” This paper produced by Nazra for feminist studies tackle the issue from a gender perspective: <http://nazra.org/2017/05/2016-22-خوفمبر-19-العودة-النوبية-على-قافلة-العودة-النوبية-19-22-خوفمبر-2016>

are inhabited by Nubians but not a part of the Nubian historical land. Al-Sisi also promised to launch an authority to develop the southern area of the Nile Valley. (Shams El-Din 2017)

Although many Nubians activists mentioned to several media outlets and on their social media accounts that the Forkand exclusion is a breakthrough, they said that the authority for the southern area of the Nile Valley does not satisfy the obligations of the constitution, as the authority has to be specifically for Nubia. They also mentioned that there was no mention of the Nubians' resettlement on their historical lands around Lake Nasser. (El-Din, 2017) (Shams El-Din 2017)

*“We were reciting the call of prayers in Malta”*<sup>28</sup>, Ramzy told me while he was laughing when the issue was brought up in our conversation. Azzam, who was always more hopeful, said, *“At least we achieved some progress, we lost one battle and not the war.”*

Resistance and power cannot be conceptualized as opposing to each other. Power operates through discourses of knowledge, classification and discipline that shape logics of the Nubians' resistance. (Abu-Lughod 1990, 42; Urla and Helepololei 2014, 433–34; Foucault 1978, 95–96, 1980, 211) Human agency is never autonomous from power and the human subjectivity is constituted through multiple power relations. The Nubians' subjectivity does not oppose power, but is constituted by it. Because “Power” sets the terms of resistance, analyzing the resistance without the “power” hinders us from understanding the non-elite subjectivities. Power relations has to be as a predictive process; where power, resistance and agency are constituted. (O’Hanlon 1988, 189–224; Kozma 2011, xviii–xix) The Nubian political identity is constructed by the power discourses and the political, economic and social trajectories. The political mobilization of

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<sup>28</sup> An Egyptian expression which is equivalent to “fighting windmills” expression

Nubians “to take the streets” during 2011 and 2012 came within the space that was made available within the power discourses and dynamics back then.

### **3.2 The Hidden Transcripts: How Do the Nubians Offer Alternative Narratives of their Resistance History?**

#### ***1. Narrating the Story: Oral History as an Everyday Resistance Tool***

In his book “Weapons of the Weak, Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance”, James C. Scott studies the everyday resistance of peasants in a Malaysian Village. He argues that the peasants usually participate in small acts of unorganized and hidden resistance, leaving the organized forms of resistance are mostly restricted to the middle classes. The resistance of the weaker classes is usually hidden from the more powerful classes; they take the form of small meaningful yet invisible acts of resistance. Scott problematizes the dismissal of the individual acts and applying resistance only to collective or organized actions. He claims that the individual acts of resistance are effective for peasants as they are anonymous, easily initiated, unplanned, depends on informal networks and they avoid any form of direct, symbolic confrontation with authority. (Scott 1985, xvi,297)

In his other book “Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts”, Scott examines the relationship between the dominators and the dominated in Europe, Asia and USA. He argues that the relationship between the oppressor and the oppressed has both public and private transcripts, which are the patterns of spoken and unspoken interactions between and within different groups. While the public transcript is the official discourse constituting of those interactions that are openly shared between the oppressor and the oppressed, the dominant class to support its legitimacy constructs them. On the other hand, Scott claims that the private or the

hidden transcripts are those discourses that are apparent only internally within each group. The private/hidden transcript is unrevealed and hidden. The private transcripts of the oppressed include narratives, which deny the legitimacy of the oppressor often in the form of gossip, fantasies, prophesies, and trickster narratives. (Scott 1990, 286–87)

The first question that I brought to the field was how Nubians deal with the misrepresentation of their case and their resistance history or to be more specific; how would they correct this misrepresentation and tell “their own story?”. The Nubian displacement issue, the resistance movements and the demands to go back or to receive proper compensation were always part of the everyday conversations and interactions in Heissa and Al-Dekka. These topics would always emerge to the surface while I was there, even if my recorder was turned off. While I was at Heissa, I used to join Am Jalal, his family and some of his friends for *Wannasa*<sup>29</sup> nights to drink *Jebba*.<sup>30</sup> The majority of the nights had the same sequence; Am Jalal and his friends started by repeating the stories “of the grandparents who lived in old Nubia, the lost paradise, the lands where they solely depended on their lands and the Nile and didn’t near *Jurbattyah*<sup>31</sup> to bring them anything”. The nostalgic stories of what was before the displacement seemed to be almost the same, in any of the *Wannasa* nights<sup>32</sup> I spend among women in Al-Dekka and among both men and women in Heissa; it reflected the beauty of the lost lands, the preciousness of the Nile and the independence of the inhabitants of Old Nubia. Later on, they would move to the incidents of the displacement; the horrific stories of the grandparents leaving their precious belongings, the last time they looked back at their lands while they were in the boat and the pain

<sup>29</sup> The term refers to the gathering of family/friends/neighbours during the night to chat, share stories and sometime sing (or read Quran if it is Ramadan)

<sup>30</sup> Nubian coffee, which is roasted over coal. It takes a lot of time to be prepared, so it is usually served for guests who are staying longer than usual.

<sup>31</sup> A Nubian term that refers to non-Nubians. It is mostly used as a downgrading term.

<sup>32</sup> Usually during the *Wannasa* nights, all the conversations are in Nubian. But as I was there, it was in Arabic. Only when there is someone who does not speak Arabic is when he or she speak in Nubian and translate to me.

of knowing that their great grandparents' tombs were drowned under the water.

The stories would continue to explain the shock they had when they arrived to the resettlements, the difference between the resettlements- whom they call "the hell's valley" and Old Nubia, the unbearable heat, the deteriorating conditions of the houses and the unavailability of fertile lands.

I asked Am Jalal if they tend to repeat the stories every *Wannasa* night, and he said *"it is not on purpose, but we love to remember and we want to keep the memory alive. It's a burden that my father who witnessed the displacement gave to me. He wanted me to tell the story to my children who would pass it to their grandchildren."*

In another occasion, when I was talking with Azzam, he mentioned to me that this how he was raised up to *"the stories of my mother and my father about Old Nubia, the displacement, the drowned tombs and the hell's valley, this is our history which we never studied at school, but we know by heart"*

The same sequence of events and feelings attached to them were present at the *Wannasa* night that I spent with the Nubian women in Al-Dekka, as I was not allowed to sit with the men. The addition were the stories of the mothers who had abortions when they arrived at the hell's valley, the young infants who died because of the health conditions and the mothers who failed to breastfeed their children. Khalla<sup>33</sup> Zainab, an 80 years old woman, who witnessed the displacement, was the main speaker of the night. She was talking in Kenzi Nubian, and Zainab, a girl named after her, translating for me. *"It seemed that the bodies of the Nubian women were connected to the lands and the Nile from these stories, but believe me, men, too! They just don't*

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<sup>33</sup> a title that means Aunt and is used to refer to older and respected women. The word is Arabic and not Nubian, but this is how they introduced her to me.

*like to appear as weak as women, there are Sai'da<sup>34</sup> everywhere here, and they see weak men as vulnerable as women". Fatimah, a mother of two, who is originally from Heissa but she lives with her husband in Al-Dekka told me that she has been hearing the same stories since she was four. "But it is important, our story should be remembered, they took the lands and all of the prosperity! Let them leave the memories to us then".*

I was asking Ramzy and Am Jalal if there is one narrative to the story, that every Nubian knows why it remains oral then among themselves and not written somewhere. Ramzy said that the story is not only oral now, *"Hundreds of social media websites now have the stories of Nubia, written by Nubians, but we, Nubians, prefer to listen collectively."* Am Jalal told me *"This is how we annoy the government! The repetition of the story orally means it is still alive and not dead on the internet or in a book!"*

When I was asking many of the Nubians I met about any recent efforts they knew about documenting and rewriting the Nubian history, the majority of them guided me to an initiative that I was already familiar with. The fact is their familiarity with this initiative is what mattered for me, as they still regard it as Yasmine described *"an effort to keep our narratives, our resistance alive"*.

In 2015, Alia Mossallam launched "E7ky ya Tareekh/ Tell us History" workshops which aimed at (re)discovering and (re)narrating forgotten events in the Egyptian modern history. The workshops included an archival and research methodological training and included exhibitions at the end where the researchers can present their outcomes. The first workshop<sup>35</sup> was conducted in

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<sup>34</sup> Upper Egyptians

<sup>35</sup> You can check the visual diary of the workshop here: [https://issuu.com/historyworkshopsegypt/docs/final\\_3](https://issuu.com/historyworkshopsegypt/docs/final_3)



Gharb Suhail in Nubia and aimed at looking the social and political history of the South of Egypt. The group of researchers was not only from the South of Egypt but from other governorates too. The initiative's blog presented the researchers' outcomes on documenting their outcomes. The researchers who focused on Nubia were concerned about documenting stories about the displacement and the high Dam construction.<sup>36</sup>

Wessam, one of the participants in Aswan told me that the experience was fruitful, *“Documenting the songs sung during the displacement, hearing all the stories from the people and knowing how to document all of this opened my eyes and made me see that there is a parallel world; different narratives of all of the historical events we know of”*

## II. Resistance or Nostalgia? Songs and literature as Alternative Narratives

In 2008, young Nubian singer “Khedr Al Attar” released his song “Ismy Henak/My Name is there”.<sup>37</sup>The song refers to the bitterness of the displacement and calls for the Nubians to take action and move to save their rights. The lyrics say:

“My name is there, my country is there, Nubia is there watching us behind the Dam

They tried to erase the Nubian civilization and killed the hopes of Nubia

The wheel is weeping for us; they have even damaged the bones of our grandparents

They forced us to migrate; they told us Kom Ombo is the green paradise

We lived in sadness, as strangers

Our history is old and engraved in the rocks; they were kings of the valley

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<sup>36</sup> The blog: <https://historyworkshopsegypt.net/blog/category/%d9%88%d8%b1%d8%b4/%d8%a3%d8%b3%d9%88%d8%a7%d9%86/>

<sup>37</sup> The song: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t8oSbeAQb\\_8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t8oSbeAQb_8)

They invaded the world with their strong buildings until now their temples are there

Why did they erase the history of Nubia?

The moment we left Nubia was a shame of all of our generations

Come on Nubi and Nubiya (male and female Nubians),

Beat the drums of our future return

We will never bow to humiliation, Nubia will be always others

My name is there, my country is there, Nubia is there watching us behind the Dam”

In her research on Nubian popular memory through songs, Alia Mossallam argues that there are generational differences in how the Nubians understood their relationship to the Dams and their displacements. Most of the resistance songs produced are in Arabic, not in Kenzi or Fadiki Nubian, a language that the second generation of Nubians master. She quotes Lears when he claims that “the language choice lies in the way that every language contains the elements of conception of the world and so vocabulary helps mark the boundaries of permissible discourse, discourages the clarification of social alternatives and makes it difficult for the dispossessed to locate the source of their unease, let alone remedy it” (Mossallam 2012, 202–3; Lears 1985, 570)

When we talked during the two *Wannasa* nights on how they think the Nubian songs contributes to the Nubian resistance history narratives, there were different answers based on the age and the location. In Al-Dekka, the Nubian women told me that Nubians sing for everything; for the beauty of old Nubia, for love, for weddings, for funerals and for the family. Khalla Zainab started singing in Nubian, a song about the daily activities regarding farming and cooking in old Nubia. “*We always sing during Wannasa nights. We keep our memories alive by singing. It is such a shame that the new generations don’t sing in Nubian anymore, unlike us*” Songs did not seem to have any political implications at this point; it was more of an entertaining tool and a

way to preserve memories of a lost past.

However, in Heissa, I had a very different experience. When we started talking about songs, the first thing that was mentioned was Al Attar's song. Am Hamid said: *"the song was prohibited by the government. They confiscated all the tapes and prevented him from singing it in public. Because it was in Arabic, their language, it is no longer between Nubians only; it can be understood by the rest of Egyptian."* Yahia, a 40 years old fisherman said: *"When they prevented the song from going viral, we kept on singing it. There are different remixes of the song. There is a quick version of it, we sing it in our wedding parties, and a slower version that we sing in our Wannasa nights. Al Attar had other songs, but whenever he is on a stage, we always asked him to sing it."*

Khedr Al Attar was not the only one who was mentioned when we spoke about the narratives that the Nubian songs can provide. Muhammad Mounir, Hamza Alaa Al-Dine and others were mentioned as well. *"Hamza Alaa Al-Dine was an international singer, he was very famous worldwide and in Europe, he sang about Nubia, but he was never appreciated here in Egypt"*

Yahia added *"Mounir is the mainstream Nubian singer. His early songs reflected the Nubian culture and music. I can relate to one of his songs, it is called "El Madina/ The City" as it describes our frustration as Nubian youth in the cities we live in, how we feel as strangers, how these cities absorb us, and yet we can't relate to it."* Mounir sang many traditional Nubian songs, and along with the Nubian composer Ahmed Mounib introduced to the public Nubian melodies, yet, now he started to drift away especially with his latest TV series *"El Moghany/ The singer"*

The past ten years witnessed also the formation of many Nubian bands. One of them is “Black Theama” who define their task to the public “to celebrate the black culture in Egypt.” While Black Theama’s songs carry a wide range of emotions and issues, the Nubian issue is always there in their songs. In 2012, the band introduced their song “The Nile is a coffin/ El Nile Taboot”<sup>38</sup>

The song starts with these lyrics:

“The Nile is a coffin  
 When it became thirsty, it drank the houses  
 It drank the allies  
 It erased the memories of children playing together  
 The nights on the riverbanks  
 O Nile, how can you erase my existence?  
 While you are the source of existence  
 How can you live instead of me?  
 And expel me to live as a stranger outside the borders”

While Black Theama’s song is referring to the nostalgic feeling of going back, the agony of not living in old Nubia, “*It is not as revolutionary as Al Attar’s song. It doesn’t ask the Nubians to resist, it is only grieving*” Azzam told me.

While songs were mentioned as a tool to offer counter-narratives, Nubian literature was mentioned to me too by my informants. As argued by Christian Gilmore, the Nubian displacement issue led to the emergence of a counter-discourse in which writer-activists play a

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<sup>38</sup> Link to the song: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0Get8gRx2CE>

mediating role in resource conflicts by giving spaces to the voices of their communities, whose voices are not usually heard. (Gilmore 2015b, 201)

In 1968 the first Nubian novel in Arabic “Al-Shamandoura<sup>39</sup>/ The Buoy”, written by Nubian writer and activist Muhammad Khalil Qassim, was published. It focuses on the Nubian displacement experience. The timeframe of the novel is before, during and after Aswan Low Dam second elevation, however, it projects onto the experience of the 1964 displacement. The novel was written and published at a time where Nubia had not been completely flooded, and therefore, the main theme of the novel was not portraying old Nubia as the lost paradise- which is a theme that will emerge later in the Nubian novels-, but rather, it focused more on Nubians rights and resistance to their displacement. Through offering an alternative account of the legacy of the two Dams which is embedded in the hegemonic national discourses, the novel highlights the need of the Nubians to resist. As the novel was written and published at a time where Nubia had not been completely flooded, its main theme was not portraying old Nubia as the lost paradise- which is a theme that will emerge later in the Nubian novels-, but rather, it focused more on Nubians rights and resistance to their displacement. (Gilmore 2015a, 59; Naaman 2011, 115)

“While he was dictating the young boy his complaint, he remembered the Najiliyah Valley in Al-Dor village. He had a long sigh and then continued dictating the boy few extra sentences to be added to the complaint: “Killing one person is a non-negotiable unforgiven crime; yet, killing a whole community remains debatable.”

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<sup>39</sup> Al-Shamandoura is a Nubian word and not Arabic, meaning the Buoy and sometimes it is used in the Nubian slang to describe someone who is tall as beautiful.

In Al-Dekka and Heissa, the novel was widely celebrated by them. *“It is a Nubian novel with international standards”* as Am Hamid told me. The celebration of the novel was not only because of its content but also because of the context in which it was written. Qassim spent 15 years in jail because of his opposition to Nasser’s regime. The novel was written in 1961 on cigarette rolling papers and smuggled out of the prison to be published. Qassim’s political beliefs, his commitment to communism are evident in his novel; he initiates a debate in the novel between the village’s inhabitants on whether to accept the government’s compensations or resist their displacement, the solution comes in the form of a local Nubian activist who convinces them to resist for better and fair compensations. The novel ends without offering a narrative for what happened; whether the Nubians received proper compensations or not. (Hussien 2014, 42–45) I heard the story of Qassim’s prison from everyone who spoke about the novel. *“I wish everyone was persistent like him, he advocated for the Nubian rights even from the prison. He is a real activist, a Nubian by heart.”* Yahia told me.

The term “the Nubian literature “ was coined in the 1990s in association with the Nubian Awakening (Al Sahwa Al Nubiya), a revivalist Nubian cultural and political movement advocating for the Nubian rights and challenging the Egyptian intelligentsia for ignoring the effect of the dams on the Nubian society and culture. The articulation of this term is to make the Nubian literature constitute “ a distant form of literary regionalism within the broader field of Arabic literary production than a mere subjection of Egyptian literature”. However, this literature establishment came with the accusation of labeling it as having “separatist” or “racist” agenda. (Gilmore 2015a, 57; Naaman 2011, 115)

What marks the Nubian Awakening literature which started in 1985 till present, is their influence by Al-Shamandoura. Novels like “Abwab Al Qamar/ The moon’s gate” (1989) by Ibrahim Fahmy, “ Arous El Nile/ The Nile’s bride” (1990), “Jebal Al Kohl/The Kohl’s mountains” (2001) and “Inda Mendo/ From here and there” by Yahya Mukhtar, “Been Al Jabal W Al Bahr/ Between the mountain and the sea”(1991) and “Madart Al Janoub/The South routes” (2010) by Hassan Nour and “Dongoula” (1993) and “Taht Khat El Faqr/ Beneath the poverty line” (2001), who are considered the core of the Nubian Awakening, present the Nubians’ lives before and after displacement, the injustices and the changes they went through. For example, Ali’s Dongola called for a direct political action to reclaim political action. All of the Nubian writers mentioned here were displaced with their families from their villages in old Nubia at young age. (Gilmore 2015b, 208, 2015a, 59–60)

Ali’s preface to Dongola begins with an appeal addressed to “the people of the North”:

“These are all my pages; do not tear them up  
This is my voice; do not silence it  
This is I; do not curse me  
For I have lived among you and eaten with you,  
Loved your culture, and still do. I am merely  
Conveying to you, with the sting of truth, some of  
My sorrows and those of my people”

TRANSLATED BY DIMEO (2015, 74)



Figure 9- Three Nubians novels' covers (from left to right): Dongola, Layaly Al Misk Al Atiqa, and Al-Shamandoura

Due to the growing popularity of the Nubian literature, Nubian writers/activists occupied a privileged position which enabled them to advocate for the Nubian rights. Starting with the representations of Nubian writers in human rights conferences such as Oddoul moving to the seminars organized by the Ministry of Culture and the Cairo International Book Fair on the effect of the Nubian literature on Egyptian culture in 2011 and also the organization of conferences advocating the Nubian rights after the January 2011 revolution which brought together prominent Nubian writers and activists. The prominence of the role played by the writer/activist was evident when Oddoul was chosen to be one of the 50-member assembly chaired with amending the constitution in 2013. (Gilmore 2015b, 209)



## Chapter 4- Conclusion

Through this project, I have tried to question how Egypt exercises power over Nubians through enforcing hegemonic historical narratives using popular culture representations to silence their displacement and resistance history in the last decade. This question can be placed within the wider context of Egyptian nationalism, the production of historical narratives and the use of popular culture as a hegemonic apparatus by the state.

The postcolonial Egyptian state continues to adopt the same hegemonic ideology of the colonized Egyptian state, which envisions a homogenous identity for the entire population in order to create easily governed subjects. Popular culture serves as an ideological apparatus used by the state to reproduce the same hegemonic narratives the state wants to impose: *Othering* Nubians and constructing them as inferior to the modernity and nationalism discourses. As a result, enforcing silence on their displacement and resistance history.

Popular culture representations of Nubians in the Egyptian television and cinema throughout the past decade contributed to their construction as the black and underdeveloped Other compared to the modern, advanced Egyptian. These representations come also as a continuation of the orientalist discourse adopted by the British administration and the colonized Egyptian state at the beginning of the 20th century, where there has been a systematic difference between the way Nubians were portrayed, as servants, slaves and naive, and the way the modern Egyptians, who follow the modern patterns of the Western life, portrayed as rational, developed and civilized.

These popular culture representations become embodied in the collective modes of living and are reflected in the daily social practices of the public and Nubians themselves. The silence enforced on the Nubian displacement and resistance history is a result of constructing the Nubians as naive, silent and unable to resist or offer their own narratives of displacement or resistance.

After presenting how the state enforces its hegemonic historical narratives, I try to explore how Nubians, as a subaltern group, offer alternative narratives of their displacement and resistance. The Nubian resistance has not been isolated from the political, economic, and social changes that have been taking place in Egypt throughout the past decade. It has been constituted by power dynamics of these political, economic, and social trajectories. Thus, the transformation of the Nubian political identity especially after the 2011 revolution remains an important mechanism of how these alternative narratives are being offered.

While the forms of resistance before the 2011 revolution varied from forming organizations and individual activism that advocated for Nubian rights, the 2011 revolution set the stage for political mobilization and organization of Nubians in the streets. This mobilization in the streets, through social media and lobbying efforts, led to the issuance of the first constitutional article in the Egyptian constitution that acknowledges the rights of minorities in Egypt. The Nubian political mobilization is influenced by the space made available within the governing power discourses.

Oral history, songs, and literature serve as alternative mechanisms for Nubians to narrate their displacement and resistance history. These alternative narratives do not place the state as the dominant and the Nubians as the dominated, in equal and confrontational positions; they act as internal mechanisms by which Nubians deny the legitimacy of the state and express their opposition. While the Nubian political mobilization and activism have been constituted within the boundaries of power that governs the relations between the state and Nubians, the situation is different with these alternate narratives.

Some of these narratives act as what Scott named “hidden transcripts” are informal, unplanned, and can be easily initiated. While the production of some these narratives gives the narrator, the

singer or the writer, the agency to determine what should be discussed or told, these narratives always serve the purpose of reviving the displacement history and commemorating resistance.

This project offers two contributions. First, its emphasis on the role of popular culture representations of Nubians in enforcing certain historical narratives of their displacement and resistance history in the light of the transformations throughout the last decade in Egypt. Second, its emphasis on presenting how the Nubian political identity is shaped by these transformations, and how Nubians present alternative historical narratives through oral history, songs and literature.

This project can be a starting point for a future detailed research on how different ethnic and racial subaltern groups in Egypt—whose histories are misrepresented or neglected by popular culture—provide alternative historical narratives, choose certain mechanisms to present these narratives and if their political and cultural identities contribute to the construction of resistance mechanisms.

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