

Flooded Lands, Forgotten Voices: Safeguarding the Indigenous Languages and Intangible Heritage of the Nubian Nile valley

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ABSTRACT

The construction in Egyptian Nubia of the Aswan High Dam in the mid-twentieth century motivated the biggest rescue operation of tangible heritage that has ever been undertaken in the world. However, no comparable focus was accorded to Nubia's intangible heritage, albeit a small team of ethnographers salvaged what they could in a very short amount of time. Nubia is an ancient land that stretches from the first cataract of the river Nile in Egypt to roughly the fourth cataract in the Republic of Sudan. At each of these cataracts there has been, and will be the construction of dams, which will result in the loss of the majority of the natural, material and cultural landscape of Nubia. Knowing how detrimental dam construction, and its concomitant displacement of the inhabitants, is to the continuity of their culture, the Nubians are initiating urgent safeguarding practices in response. These initiatives are assisted by a project team in the documentation, protection and promotion of Nubian languages and intangible heritage. This paper presents some of these current initiatives and highlights how the project fosters capacity for the Nubian community to act to keep their heritage alive.

Keywords

Sudan, Egypt, dams, UNESCO, Nubian Campaign, dam building, toponyms, Nubia, Nubian languages, Nile Valley, Aswan High Dam, Abu Simbel, Nubian Languages and Culture Project, Nubian Culture and Tourism Festival, Nubian Ethnological Survey

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to communicate information about the Nubian community initiatives and the methods and practices of the Nubian Languages and Culture Project which are aimed at safeguarding the intangible

heritage of the Nubian Nile valley. The initiatives discussed herein are motivated by the damaging effects of previous and projected hydro-electric dam constructions on the river Nile's Nubian communities.

The paper highlights the fact that Nubia is famous because of UNESCO's safeguarding of the tangible heritage over fifty years previously, but also that the intangible heritage of these communities has been relegated to second place. As the Nubian Nile material and cultural landscape is not unique in being endangered or at risk, it is hoped that by describing these initiatives, they can serve as a template for the safeguarding of the threatened intangible heritage in other communities.

Nubia

Nubia is an ancient land that stretches from the first cataract of the river Nile in Egypt to a less distinct boundary in the south, typically considered as the fourth cataract in the Republic of Sudan, usually defined as the area where the Nubian languages are still spoken (Shinnie, 1996).

Divided into two major regions, Lower Nubia lies between the first and second cataracts on the Nile, traversing the Egyptian-Sudanese border, while Upper

Nubia covers the region between the second and fourth cataracts in the Republic of Sudan. Nubia is the site of some of the earliest kingdoms of Africa with an archaeological heritage that can be traced back to around 5,000BC. The study of Nubia is commonly overshadowed by that of Ancient Egypt, although these two great civilisations' histories and archaeology were intertwined through many millennia. The adversarial southerly neighbour of Ancient Egypt, Nubia successfully conquered and ruled Egypt during the twenty-fifth dynasty (760BC - 656BC) (Török, 1998), a period referred to as the Kushite dynasty. The Kingdom of Kush, incorporating the empires of Napata and Meroe, reigned in Nubia for a thousand years until the fourth century AD (Welsby, 1996). For centuries, as the *corridor to Africa* (Adams, 1977), Nubia's strategic position of encompassing the Middle Nile region of sub-Saharan Africa permitted it to act as a conduit for huge amounts of trade in ivory, gold, incense, animals etc. being transported to North Africa, the Mediterranean and beyond. Various factors contributed to the end of the Kushite state during the 4th-6th centuries AD (Welsby, 1996), thereafter three new kingdoms came to power in Nubia: Nobatia - between the first and second Nile cataracts; Makuria - bordering Nobatia to the south in the region of Old Dongola; and Alodia or Alwa - the southernmost Kingdom near to Khartoum. These medieval Christian kingdoms would also reign for almost a thousand years, until their demise as the region became dominated by the expansion of Arabs from Egypt and the spread of Islam (Shinnie, 1996; Welsby, 2002). With such a rich, multi-layered and varied history and archaeology, Nubia plays a major role in our understanding of this region of Africa.

The material heritage of Nubia

Given the exceedingly rich history of Nubia, it is no wonder that the region is spectacularly abundant in ancient material heritage. Spanning many millennia, and encompassing the rise, fall, invasion and colonisation of various kingdoms, states and empires, the Nubian landscape has a profusion of temples, monuments, shrines, churches, pyramids, burial grounds, rock art, etc.. An indication of the extent of Nubia's heritage is that over 1,000 archaeological sites were identified by the Survey of Sudanese Nubia along just one hundred mile stretch of the Nubian Nile valley in Sudan. The Survey was prompted by the construction of the Aswan High Dam (Edwards, 2002).



Figure 1
Map showing the distribution of the Nile Nubian languages and the displacement of Nubians in the 1960s. This map is adapted and reproduced with the kind permission of the Sudan Archaeological Research Society (SARS).

The importance of Nubia's material heritage was recognised by the recent UNESCO inscription of the archaeological sites of the Island of Meroe (between the third and fourth cataracts) in Sudanese Nubia on UNESCO's *World Heritage List* (35th Meeting, Paris, 2011).

Nubian languages

Historically and linguistically distinct from the predominantly Arabic-speaking populations of Egypt and the Republic of Sudan, 'Nubian' is also a linguistic collective term for a people that speak related languages: Kenuz in the Aswan area of the first cataract in Upper Egypt; Andaandi (Dongolawi) is spoken in the area between the third and fourth cataracts in Sudanese Nubia; and Nobiin (Mahas/Fadija) is the language used between the areas of the Kenuz and Andaandi speakers, encompassing the Egypt-Sudan border. Hopkins and Mehanna (2010, p.11) point out that while the *Nile Nubian languages* (Kenuz, Andaandi and Nobiin) *provide a mark of distinction, culturally there was more of a continuum*. Belonging to the East Sudanic family of the Nilo-Saharan language phylum, the Nubian languages are also found further south of Khartoum in the Kordofan region (Hill Nubian) and also in Darfur, western Sudan (Meidob). These non-Nile Nubian languages are severely endangered and some are now extinct, such as Haraza, which is only known from the documentation of a brief word list (Bell, 1975).

The Nile Nubian languages are also endangered and have a vulnerable status under UNESCO's guidelines for language endangerment and vitality (UNESCO *Language Vitality and Endangerment*, 2003). Their primary criteria for the status of a language's endangerment is based on intergenerational language transmission and domains of use. In the context of the Nile Nubian languages, Nubian children who do speak Nubian have a restricted domain of use - usually the language is only spoken in the home due to the strict Arabicisation language policies of Egypt and Sudan (Haashim and Bell, 2004; Sharkey, 2007) which definitely threatens the Nubian languages' vitality. Approximate figures indicate that it is the Kenuz Nubian language which has drastically reduced numbers of speakers, currently estimated to be 50,000 (*Ethnologue*), as the Kenuz Nubian language community has endured the most extensive displacement through the consecutive

constructions of the Aswan dam. Forced displacement is a major causative factor in language endangerment. Even though UNESCO recognises that language underpins the intangible heritage of many communities, the protection and preservation of individual languages is unfortunately beyond the scope of the 2003 *Convention*. However, language is included in Article 2 of the *Convention* as a means or 'vehicle' for the transmission of intangible cultural heritage. As language is so closely connected to culture, language loss is almost always accompanied by cultural and social disruption. One of the most considerable disruptions to cultural and social, and therefore linguistic, continuity, is that of the forced displacement of whole communities. Regrettably, forced displacement is something that the Nubians are all too familiar with as many communities have already been deracinated from the Nile valley, and many others are facing the potential threat of this very same fate due to the construction of dams.

The impact of Nile dams on the cultural continuity of Nubia

Dam construction on the river Nile has a history extending back over 4,500 years (Saxena and Sharma, 2005, p. 7). Despite the fact that the Nubian Nile inhabitants in the environs of the first cataract had endured successive dam building programmes from the early part of the twentieth century, it was during the mid-twentieth century that the Nubian Nile valley would receive international attention through the massive reconstruction of the Aswan High Dam in Upper Egypt. The construction of the Aswan High Dam prompted UNESCO's Nubian Campaign - the organised 'rescue' of some of the archaeological heritage of this region, most notably the colossi of Rameses II at Abu Simbel (International Campaign to Save the Monuments of Nubia) which, along with other monuments and temples, was relocated to higher ground. Hailed as *the greatest archaeological rescue operation of all time*, the Campaign's efforts, as is well-known, were focused on re-situating the ancient tangible heritage of this area of Nubia which was soon to be flooded through the creation of Lake Nubia (Nasser) once the dam was operational (Säve-Söderbergh, 1987). As this artificial reservoir would have a surface area of roughly 2,000 square miles covering a length of 340 miles, it meant that a large part of the Nile Nubian valley population in both Egypt and Sudan,

who were resident in the submergence area behind the dam, needed to be forcibly resettled. Approximate figures suggest that 100,000 predominantly Nubian people were resettled in areas which were many miles from the Nile valley. Nubians resident alongside the Egyptian Nile were displaced to 'New Nubia' about 30 miles north of Aswan near to the town of Kom Ombo in Upper Egypt, although those Nubians affected on the Sudanese Nile were mostly displaced many hundreds of miles away from their original riverine homelands and resettled in desert lands near to the border with Eritrea (see Figure 1).

While the international focus was on the tangible heritage of this region, there was to be no similar high-profile attention paid to the impact the displacement of over 100,000 Nubians would have on the intangible heritage of the Nubian Nile. As these Nubians were mostly resettled in arid desert locations far away from the Nile, the loss of their original riverine homelands and the resulting repercussions on the continuation of their intangible heritage was only anticipated by a small farsighted group of scholars. Anthropologists and social researchers affiliated to the American University in Cairo's Social Research Centre mobilised to survey, record and analyse the culture and social organisation of the Nubian inhabitants of the Nile valley who were about to be resettled, and the survey documented these Nubians' experiences post-resettlement. This study, the *Nubian Ethnological Survey*, was a mixture of *salvage anthropology* and *development anthropology* and with the cooperation of many Nubians was a record of *a way of life that seemed doomed to disappear* (Hopkins and Mehanna, 2010, p. 3), and that *the way of life of these communities could not, like the temples, be reassembled far from the banks of the Nile* (Fernea, 1978, p. xii). Recognising the detrimental significance that the Nubian exodus would have for their intangible heritage fifty years before UNESCO's *Convention for the safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage* 2003, the *Nubian Ethnological Survey* was prescient in identifying the need to document or 'salvage' the cultural heritage of Nubians who had lived for thousands of years beside the Nile; those whose homelands were soon to disappear forever. Extensive ethnographic documentation was produced over a number of years (Fernea and Fernea, 1991; Kennedy, 1978), and the results of the *Nubian Ethnological Survey* and accompanying documentation, comprising published and unpublished works, are deposited in the Social Research Centre Nubian Archive in the American University in Cairo (AUC) archives.

A further important survey was undertaken on Nubian toponymy (Bell, 1970) before the evacuation of the Nubian people who lived throughout the 340 mile long submergence area. Bell, who was engaged in archaeological field work in the threatened area, noted that the Nubian place names were inadequately recorded. As the toponymy is intricately linked with the Nubian intangible culture, his survey recognised the importance of recording not only the names of villages, but also the landscape features of this area of Nubia, in the Nubian languages. This survey resulted in the only record of the geographic features, shrines, temples and onomastics of these drowned lands.

Exacerbating the endangerment of Nubian living heritage is the recent construction of another Nile dam, this time in Sudanese Nubia at the fourth cataract which lies approximately 220 miles north of the capital, Khartoum. Over 70,000 mainly Nile Nubian communities were forcibly displaced between 2003 and 2009 with the construction of the Merowe High Dam and its subsequent flooding of this area of Nubia (Hafsaas-Tsakos, 2011). Even though there was another international movement which responded to a call by the Sudanese National Corporation for Antiquities and Museums (NCAM) to rescue some of the soon-to-be submerged archaeological heritage, no such international effort or extensive ethnological survey was initiated in which to document the intangible heritage of those Nile communities affected. However, there does appear to be an acknowledgement that this dam would have an impact on the intangible heritage of these communities, as an exceedingly minimal attempt at documenting the heritage - six researchers who interviewed 30 informants, gathering 14 hours of video - was funded by the *Dam Implementation Unit* (El Mahdi Bushra, 2006).

However, dam construction and the ensuing displacement of Nubians has not finished. Future threats to what is left of Nubia's tangible and intangible heritage are a very real prospect with the planned construction of more dams along the Nile in Sudanese Nubia. The second, third and fifth cataracts are scheduled to be the sites of three more imminent dam projects. Throughout Nubia, the continuous dam building, submergence of lands and subsequent near-total displacement of the Nile valley inhabitants will predictably result in the obsolescence of this ancient culture and the destruction and/or alteration of the natural and material landscape (Figure 2).



Figure 2
Map showing completed and proposed dams on the Nubian Nile.
Source: International Rivers (Creative Commons).

Community-driven approaches to safeguarding the intangible heritage

The threatened further demise of the Nubians' riverine natural and cultural landscapes due to more dam construction on the Nile has prompted members of the Nubian community to organise their own safeguarding initiatives for their intangible culture. One such initiative is the Nubian Culture and Tourism Festival sponsored by the DAL Group Company in Sudan (Plate 1).

The first of these festivals took place in Khartoum and Wadi Halfa in Sudan in 2012. The week-long programme of events included talks on Nubian architecture and the components of Nubian culture, such

as traditional house painting techniques and styles. Nubian houses are traditionally adorned with decoration and paintings which depict *their experiences ... accomplishments, skills and interests* (Fahmi, 1993, p. 104). Paintings of eyes, hands and other protective symbols are also traditional motifs painted near to doors and entrances, as is the inclusion of home-made china plates embedded into the front of the houses to symbolise Nubian hospitality. However, with the displacement of the Nubians and their subsequent rehoming in government built housing, which does not replicate the Nubian traditional homesteads, Nubian house painting is rapidly disappearing (Plate 2). Nubian house painting is identified as one of the most urgent forms of intangible heritage to safeguard.

The Festival also showcased the Sudanese Writers Union, and Egyptian writers were involved in giving lectures on Nubian literature. Discussions, workshops and presentations were given on the Nubian orthography and writing the Nubian

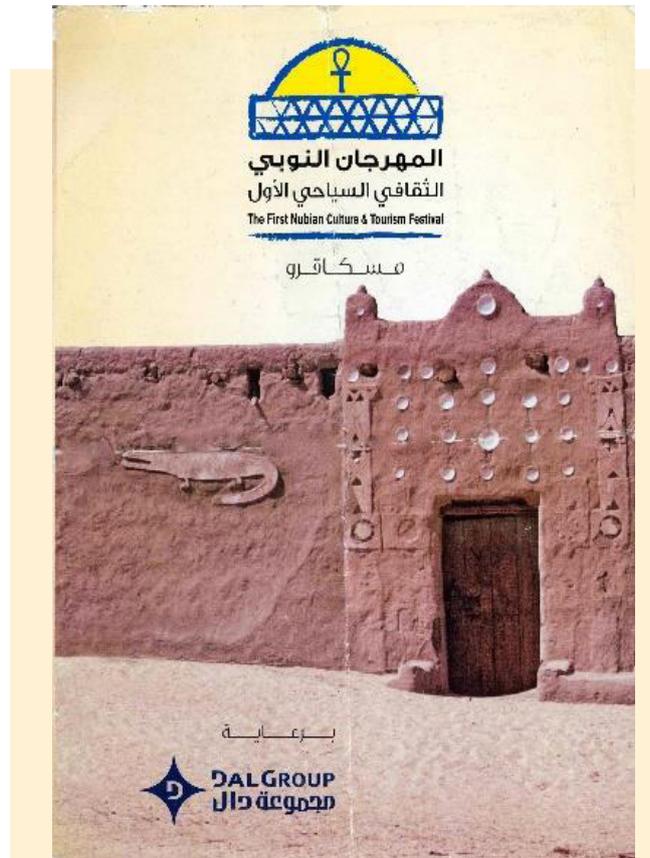


Plate 1
The First Nubian Culture and Tourism Festival brochure.
Source: DAL Group, Sudan 2011.



Plate 2
Traditional Nubian house painting.
Photo: by courtesy of Professor Herman Bell, Nubia, 1963.

languages. The Nubian script is one of the oldest of Africa, and some scholars are working towards reviving its use in writing the language (Hashim, 2016). Documentary film screenings, Nubian history talks, fashion shows, traditional craft techniques, such as using palm leaves to weave baskets and plates decorated with bright geometrical motifs were demonstrated, and a book fair was also organised. The Khartoum section of the Festival closed with concerts by prominent Nubian singers and traditional forms of Nubian music. The Festival then moved to Wadi Halfa in the north of Sudan and near to an area where Sudanese Nubians were deracinated during the construction of the Aswan High Dam. The Wadi Halfa programme focused on raising the profile of many aspects of the intangible heritage of Nubia through exhibitions of art, performances of traditional folklore, music, songs and dance, and recitals of poetry.

The aims of the Festival are to *strengthen the social bonds between Nubians throughout Sudan and Egypt; reinforce and develop cultural ties; assist in the economic revitalisation of the area; promote the revival of tourism in the area* (The First Nubian Culture and Tourism Festival 2012 brochure). These large-scale social celebrations of Nubian culture are an outstanding success in enhancing the valorisation of Nubian heritage, reaffirming a sense of Nubian identity and assisting continuity with the past. The inclusiveness of these events captures the multi-ethnic and multi-linguistic ecology of the Nubian Nile, and are a model for other ethnic groups in Sudan (and beyond) towards the safeguarding of their own cultures and languages. The Festival organisers also

invite many international scholars of Nubia, and many people travel from all over Sudan, Egypt and from the diaspora to attend the Festival. The Nubian Culture and Tourism Festival is an exceptional, community-driven initiative that creates a new social space which contributes to safeguarding the threatened intangible heritage of the Nubian Nile valley.

Nubian community members who were originally displaced when they were children from the Abu Simbel region of Upper Egypt (Lower Nubia) over half a century ago are starting to return to the area to once again be in close proximity to the Nile. These Nubians are initiating a further way of reviving their heritage by creating new social spaces in informal cultural centres in which to promote the continuity of Nubian living heritage (Plate 3).

These spaces are used for Nubian social gatherings with traditional Nubian music, songs and dance at their core. Run and organised by highly-esteemed Nubian musicians, these social spaces bring together community members and others to enjoy Nubian music, songs and dance. In the evenings, the musicians perform Nubian songs, which are distinctive in their interaction between the performers and the audience, and play Nubian music along with demonstrating the techniques of playing it - Nubian music uses a pentatonic scale and traditional instruments such as drums and the *kisir*, a five-stringed lyre (Plate 4).



Plate 3
New Nubian social spaces in Absambal (Abu Simbel), Egypt.
Photo: Author, April 2016.

These social gatherings are all-inclusive so many non-Nubians are welcome and attend regularly, as do many children of Nubian heritage, which is facilitating the intergenerational transmission of this aspect of Nubian intangible heritage. Furthermore, the children are not just learning the traditional songs and music but are also being instructed in performing the traditional dance forms which accompany the music.

These social spaces and performances are a definitive way in which the Nubians are reviving their heritage for its own sake and not for any commercial gain, commodification, or touristic entertainment as found in many Egyptian hotels. As the safeguarding of intangible heritage should be viewed as a process rather than a product, these events truly assist with the continuity of the transmission of the intangible heritage.

Highly aware of the threat of endangerment of their languages, there is a Nubian initiative to implement language learning classes for children of Nubian heritage who do not speak a Nubian language. These classes take place outside the environs of formal school education and Nubian speakers are being trained informally as language teachers. Culturally relevant language learning materials are also being developed and prepared by the Nubians themselves.

Valuable initiatives towards safeguarding are not only being established within Nubia, but also within the Nubian diaspora. Nubians have a long history of internal migration to Cairo and Khartoum seeking employment opportunities, mainly within the service industries, and

small Nubian social clubs can be found in these cities. Outside of Egypt and Sudan, members of the Nubian diaspora have organised associations, such as the Sudanese Nubian Association in the UK, which are also committed to cultural continuity. This Association's prime objective is:

... to assist our members and their children to learn and master the Nubian language, history and heritage. The Association also aims to promote and advance the education of the British and Sudanese public about the rich cultural heritage of Nubia and its great civilisation. We endeavour to do this through the organisation of cultural events, lectures, workshops, film shows, arts and folklores, publications and social gatherings (Sudanese Nubian Association UK website).

Given the extent to which the Nubian Nile communities have suffered, and will continue to suffer the loss of their natural and cultural landscape through the construction of dams, external assistance was needed and called for to support and complement these community-driven safeguarding measures.

Supporting the Nubian community in safeguarding their heritage

The Nubian Languages and Culture Project is a small team of Nubians and Nubian scholars, including linguists, ethnographers, folklore and language specialists and musicians. The Project was established with the aim of assisting the Nubian community with the safeguarding of their intangible heritage. The project was launched at SOAS, University of London, UK in May 2016 (Plate 5) and is affiliated to community-led safeguarding groups in Nubia and the diaspora.

Working with the Nubian community, the Project is identifying and inventorying the most urgent elements of intangible heritage for protection and documentation. One of the most urgent aspects identified builds on the work of Bell (1970; 2000), who, over half a century ago, made the only toponymic survey of the Nubian submergence area created by the Aswan High Dam. Through fieldwork conducted with and alongside Nubian community members who were displaced from the Abu Simbel region, the project is rechecking, and when necessary revising the documentation conducted by Professor Bell



Plate 4
Nubian musician playing the traditional Nubian *kisir*.
Photo: Author, April 2016.

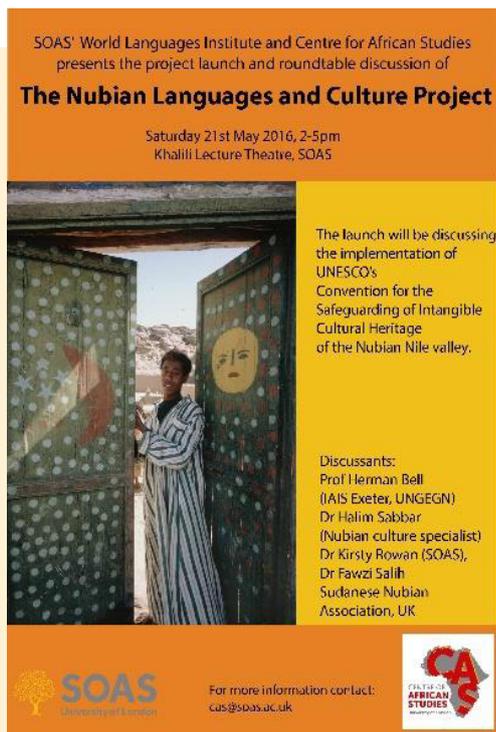


Plate 5
The Nubian Languages and Culture Project launch poster.
Photo: by courtesy of Professor Herman Bell, Nubia 1963.



Plate 6
Lake Nubia/Nasser, part of the Nubian submergence area created by the Aswan High Dam. Many ancient Nubian towns, villages and places are drowned under these waters.
Photo: Author, April 2016.

(Bell himself is the director of the Project) of the Nubian names of the submerged towns, villages, places and landscape features (Plate 6).

Accompanying this toponymic documentation, the Project is also video recording the oral histories, memories of place, descriptions of associated traditions, such as Nile navigation, folktales, myths, and narratives related to this area now lost forever under the waters of the Nile. These videos are recorded in both Nubian and Arabic to reflect the multilingual language ecology of Nubia and the Nubians. This part of the project is building an interactive online map of Nubia prior to the submergence, whereby the Nubian toponyms can not only be identified but heard, and the associated intangible heritage can be listened to and the referential meanings can be discussed. The map will also highlight the importance of traditional Nubian house painting, much documentation of house paintings was conducted by Dr Armgard Goo-Grauer in the 1960s before the submergence of much of the Kenuz region. This interactive online map will be a multimedia repository,

available to all, whereby these stories, narratives and descriptions linked to the toponyms will be able to be broadcast to the communities within Nubia and those displaced and in the diaspora. As the map details the personal histories of the Nubians before the exodus, it recreates the link between the Nubians and their lost land. Prior to the Aswan High Dam, the Nubians referred to themselves by their tribal and family origin and according to the name of the district they came from. Within their districts, Nubians were known according to their descent group and village of origin (Fernea and Rouchdy, 2010). Therefore, the importance of documenting the toponyms and associated oral histories is that it recovers some of the ways in which Nubian identity was established preceding their forced displacement. The toponymic collection and its associated texts is not to be limited to the Aswan High Dam region, but is to be extended throughout Nubia, especially in the region of the Merowe High Dam and the areas in Sudanese Nubia scheduled for future dam building. Team members of the Project have delivered training and equipment to a cultural centre in Abu Simbel so that the

Nubians themselves are the documenters, collectors and consultants of this important part of their heritage. This also promotes Nubian 'ownership' of the data, permitting the community to be the primary beneficiary.

Complementing the Nubian initiative of teaching the Nubian language, a further important part of the Project is the documentation of the Nubian Nile languages which relate directly to the toponymic collection and the transmission of intangible cultural heritage. UNESCO outlines the importance of language and living heritage as:

Constituting an essential part of an ethnic community, language is a carrier of values and knowledge, very often used in the practice and transmission of intangible cultural heritage. The spoken word in language is important in the enactment and transmission of virtually all intangible heritage, especially oral traditions and expressions, songs and most rituals. Using their mother tongue, bearers of specific traditions, often use highly specialised sets of terms and expressions, which reveal the intrinsic depth and oneness between mother tongue and the intangible cultural heritage (UNESCO, Living heritage and Mother Languages).

Much of the vocabulary associated with the living heritage that is connected to the Nile is under threat by the Nubians' forced displacement to areas far removed from the river. While there are extensive descriptions of Nile Nubian languages (Armbruster, 1960; Jakobi and Kümmerle, 1993; Werner, 1987), it is imperative that the languages now in use are documented to create a record of the actual linguistic practices of the speech communities (Lüpke, 2009). Specifically, the Project is engaged in the documentation of the Nubian languages relating to the various cultural and social realms which will be disrupted. For example, documenting the theme of Nile navigation and traditional craftsmanship in waterwheel and boat building will elicit a highly specialised vocabulary and terminology, along with its associated spatial and locative knowledge. Furthermore, by ensuring that the documentation records associated texts such as stories, histories, folktales and narratives, contributes not only to an understanding of ethno-physiographic research, but also to building a video repository that can be used and adapted by the community to support the continuity of cultural practices that are disappearing.

A further area of documenting language that the

Project is focused on is the Nubians' knowledge of the natural environment. Given that the landscape of the Nile valley is also under threat of loss and/or radical alteration, documenting traditional ecological wisdom, the terminology of the flora and fauna of the Nile valley and its uses and properties, is also urgent. Video documentation allows a record of the language as it is actually spoken, which means that the unique gestures and actions which accompany it - and are missing from dictionaries and grammars - can also be captured. Importantly, the Project is delivering training in video language documentation methods to various members of the Nubian community both in Nubia and in the diaspora, so that the process of selection and collection is in the hands of the community. This also means that the community distributes, adapts and utilises the documentation in the ways they deem applicable for the continuation of their living heritage. This in turn is facilitated by more economically viable access to technologies with which to record, save and distribute the documentation. Video recordings can increase the valorisation that communities attach to intangible heritage, even that heritage which is taken for granted or considered mundane. While it is recognised that in order to safeguard intangible heritage it needs to be continuously performed and thus facilitate intergenerational transmission, documentation by the community and in the hands of the community is especially beneficial in enhancing the significance of their living heritage. Subsequently, not only the collection but the distribution prompts the community to recognise and continue their linguistic, cultural and social practices. As new social spaces are being created by the Nubian communities in Nubia, there are available and prepared arenas in which to distribute the documentation. This documentation also supports the continuation of the Nubian languages, as they are a source of authentic and culturally relevant materials which the Nubian language teachers can use in their classes, while at the same time showcasing aspects of the intangible heritage. The Project is also making the documentation available to the Nubian diaspora and to those of Nubian heritage, along with training the Sudanese Nubian Youth Association members in the diaspora in documentation methods. This not only allows visible access to aspects of their culture and heritage as it is performed, but gives them a central role in assisting with its continuation, as the documentation



Plate 7
ELAR archive home page – a digital repository for Nubian documentation.

requires the performance of the cultural and linguistic expressions to be enacted.

With the importance and the amount of documentation being recorded, the issue of the sustainability of the data is crucial. The documentation from the Project is being deposited in the Endangered Languages Archive (ELAR) at SOAS (<https://elar.soas.ac.uk/Collection/MPI971097>) (Plate 7).

The ELAR archive is a searchable digital repository of multimedia collections which are free for registered users to access, and can be accessed or restricted according to the wishes of the documenters and/or the originating speakers and communities. The materials collected by the Project and the Nubian community have sustainability as they are bound to the lifetime of the institution (SOAS) and so the archive provides a secure long-term repository for documentation collections. The deposits can be accessed from anywhere in the world which enables communities, speakers and researchers to view the collections without any associated cost. The deposit for the Project involves the Nubian community in the collection, documentation and archiving of their living heritage. Housing the Nubian language and living heritage documentation in the Endangered Languages Archive means that the materials are easily deposited, accessible and usable for the community, which complements the materials collected by the Nubian

Ethnographic Survey, some of which are also being made available online.

Conclusion

The importance of the river Nile for the Nile Nubian communities cannot be overstressed. The riverine landscape is not only profuse in ancient material culture, but is the backdrop to the Nubians' intangible heritage; it is an *associative landscape* (Rössler, 2006). Nubia is unique in that we have a record of the impact that the alteration or destruction of the natural landscape and the subsequent displacement of communities has had on the intangible heritage and languages. Over half a century on from the preservation of the tangible heritage of Egyptian Nubia, we are able to assess the damage that has been done to the Nubians' living culture through the limited records of the Nubian Ethnographic Survey and the toponymic survey that was conducted at the same time. We are humbled by the Nubians who were actually subject and witness to this destruction and displacement, and by those who hear of this as part of their cultural and/or family histories. The destruction of their landscape and forced resettlement is not only a memory but a recent experience for some, and for others it is a very real threat. The Nubian community is responding to the erosion of their cultural continuity by initiating urgent safeguarding measures through their own identification of what has been, and will be lost. External support where viable is, and should be mobilised to assist with community-led and driven initiatives in safeguarding. This paper has outlined some of these initiatives which are facilitated by new technologies in documentation, and accessible repositories, along with a commitment to aiding the cultural continuity of the Nubian community. 🇸🇩

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