

The World Humanities Report

# Case Study: Nubian Geographic

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Reem Joudi



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# Case Study: Nubian Geographic

Reem Joudi Arab Council for the Social Sciences

Nubian Geographic is a youth-led research initiative established in 2015 to document the history, language, and geography of the Nubia region. Most of the researchers are based in Egypt; they work together remotely and disseminate their content on Facebook and Instagram. In the World Humanities Report survey, Nubian Geographic notes that their work concerns the preservation of Nubian culture and history, which has otherwise been silenced, forgotten, or incorrectly disseminated.

Despite its historical and cultural significance, the study of the region is often overshadowed by that of ancient Egypt, marginalizing Nubian knowledge and communities in the process.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, popular discourses around Nubia and community representations in the media are often racist, normalizing practices of cultural discrimination and marginalization. For Nubian Geographic, the study of the Nile Valley civilization has been segmented by Eurocentric discourses and particularly Egyptology studies, which pitted the history of Nubia against that of Egypt. This kind of division is increasingly challenged in modern academia. Yasmin Moll notes that “to narrate Nubia is to dwell in the inadequacies of that question. Nubia subverts the conventional, political, and scholarly assumptions that separate the Arab world from Africa, that distinguish ‘North Africa’ from ‘sub-Saharan Africa,’ for the lived realities of Nubian Egyptians refuse to map onto any neat axes of culture, history, or economy.”<sup>2</sup>

One particularly contentious historical moment is the building of the Aswan High Dam in the 1960s,, which forcibly displaced Nubians from their ancestral lands. Nubian past and present are tied to stories of violence and racism, which exist at structural (institutional and legal) levels, through media representations; and the level of everyday, lived experiences. Eric Hahonou notes that “there is evidence of lasting human rights violations against Nubian . . . populations,

<sup>1</sup> The Nubia region is an ancient land intimately linked to the Nile River, stretching 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.” See Kirsty Rowan, “Flooded Lands, Forgotten Voices: Safeguarding the Indigenous Languages and Intangible Heritage of the Nubian Nile Valley,” *International Journal of Intangible Heritage* 12 (2017): 175–87.

<sup>2</sup> Yasmin Moll, “Narrating Nubia: Between Sentimentalism and Solidarity,” in *Racial Formations in Africa and the Middle East: A Transregional Approach* (Washington, DC: POMEPS, 2021), 81.

including forced relocations. . . . Individuals are subjected to racial discriminations and varying degrees of daily verbal offenses (either related to their Blackness or their assumed servile status).”<sup>3</sup>

Nubian Geographic produces content in Arabic and English on their social media platforms. They share facts about archeological artifacts, places, people, flora and fauna, and maps (among other content) pertaining to Nubia, accompanied by explanations of their significance. They post news articles, research papers, and videos from Arab and international pages that present relevant historical, political, cultural, and social discourses. Their goal, as mentioned on their Facebook page, is to become a “Nubian scientific society that would help to preserve and revive [our] rich culture.”<sup>4</sup> Recently, Nubian Geographic participated in an event held at Bard College, where they discussed the film *There Is a Baba in Our House* in relation to patriarchy, nationalism, and pan-Arabism and the erasures and marginalizations they produce.

In the survey, they note that the biggest threats to the Nubian community are hostile cultural surroundings in nearby villages, which led to the deterioration of Nubian culture and way of life over time; multiple migrations from rural communities by the Nile to urban centers like Cairo and Alexandria, making it difficult to preserve Nubian language and practice a village-related lifestyle; and the lack of systematic documentation of Nubian heritage and habits. Moreover, researchers believe that their work attempts to correct inaccurate or superficial information about Nubia, focusing on interdisciplinary methodologies toward critical knowledge production. However, they note that their team is small and works on a volunteer basis and is therefore unable to produce as much content as they would like.

The research team at Nubian Geographic are cognizant of the challenges that come with their research. They note in the survey that scholars who work on Nubia need a prior understanding of the language to translate and disseminate ideas correctly. This kind of awareness is often lacking, and there are structural factors that explain why the language was excluded. Ekbal Mohammed Mokhles argues that Nubians were denied space in the educational system to practice and learn their linguistic and cultural heritage, and this was a deliberate choice by the governing power.<sup>5</sup> These tensions trouble south-south solidarity, highlighting how power imbalances and racial hierarchies persist across and within

<sup>3</sup> Eric Hahonou, “Blackness, Slavery and Anti-Racism Activism in Contemporary North Africa,” in *Racial Formations in Africa and the Middle East*, 44.

<sup>4</sup> Nubian Geographic, About page, <https://www.nubiangeographic.com/about>.

<sup>5</sup> Ekbal Mohammed Mokhles, “Indigenous Knowledge: A Route to the Infusion of Sustainable Development in Education” (master’s thesis, American University of Cairo, 2019), 43.

the Arab world, in turn affecting knowledge production. For example, Wangui Kimari notes that “even after centuries of African presence in the Middle East, African communities remain marginal to discussions about identity and citizenship.”<sup>6</sup> Echoing a similar sentiment, Nubian Geographic’s director notes that the dearth of information about Nubia across various disciplines (anthropology, geography, history) has created “misinformation about the region, which, coupled with marginalization on a regional level, produced superficial thoughts about [Nubia] . . . its geography, and ethno-racial makeup.”<sup>7</sup>

Nubian Geographic emphasizes the strong connections the Nubian community has to their ancestral lands. They discuss issues of water governance, accentuating particular pastoral habits that are part of Nubian identity, as well as maps that highlight various regions of Nubia. The intimate relationship between Nubia, the Nile, and state building are crucial for understanding how knowledge around the region is produced and circulated. In their study on dam projects in Sudan, Maimuna Mohamud and Harry Verhoeven argue that the Sudanese government used these projects and propaganda to promote Arab Islamic identity and silence Nubian heritage, thus consolidating a hegemonic political order based on the latter’s exclusion.<sup>8</sup>

In addition, Nubian Geographic’s online operation can be seen as a practice of virtual space-making, where the boundaries of a place that is actively silenced can be redrawn. Menna Agha argues that “Nubians have evoked a nostalgic metanarrative of the ‘lost paradise’ to create a common space . . . which has been populated and modelled using stories and images of [our] old land.”<sup>9</sup> Building on Agha’s work, Nubian Geographic’s content is an exercise in critical knowledge production and of spatial remappings online.

Although Nubian Geographic’s name and visual aesthetic recall those of *National Geographic*, their content differs dramatically. Catherine Lutz and Jane Collins note how the magazine often frames non-Western people as exotic, “other,” and less “civilized,” thus reproducing colonial narratives and discourses.<sup>10</sup> In follow-up communication with the Nubian Geographic team

<sup>6</sup> Wangui Kimari, *Troubling South-South Solidarity* (World Humanities Report, CHCI, 2023), 5.

<sup>7</sup> Alaaddine Mohammed, Nubian Geographic, responses to the Humanities Initiative online survey by the Arab Council for the Social Sciences / World Humanities Report, 2020.

<sup>8</sup> Maimuna Mohamud and Harry Verhoeven, “Re-Engineering the State, Awakening the Nation: Dams, Islamist Modernity and Nationalist Politics in Sudan,” *Water Alternatives* 9, no. 2 (2016): 182–202.

<sup>9</sup> Menna Agha, “Nubia Still Exists: On the Utility of the Nostalgic Space,” *Humanities* 8, no. 24 (2019): 10.

<sup>10</sup> Catherine A. Lutz and Jane L. Collins, *Reading National Geographic* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

between April and May 2021, they emphasized their need to “critique and correct colonial methodologies” that distort Nubian history and culture. They said, “*National Geographic* and other Eurocentric publications often insist on racially and ethnically dividing the Nile Valley civilization between the ancient regions of Kush and Kemet, which is erroneous. Our work, which is based on archeological and anthropological studies, attempted to challenge this argument and demonstrate the interconnected, ethnic roots of this ancient civilization.” Consequently, Nubian Geographic’s work can be read as a reappropriation and subversion of the magazine’s name and style, which reframes the power dynamics that marginalize Nubian culture and history from public discourse in the region.

**Reem Joudi** is a media researcher and writer based in Lebanon, currently working as a researcher and project coordinator at the Arab Council for the Social Sciences. She earned her MA in media studies from the American University of Beirut and her BSFS in international economics from Georgetown University. Her research interests lie at the intersection of visual culture, digital technologies, and affect theory, with a particular focus on Lebanon and the Southwest Asia and North Africa region.