A House Against Housing: Post-Displacement Nubian Domesticity

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The Nubians and their houses faced multiple displacements triggered by hydropower projects, starting with the Aswan Low Dam in 1902 (later raised in 1912 and 1933).[1] The impact of the dam development resulted in the loss of arable land, resources, and power within the Nubian house. Economic dispossession forced Nubian men to migrate to urban centers for wage labour, leaving the Nubian house to be managed by women. The 1933 raising of the dam caused further devastation, flooding villages and prompting more labour migration. The Nubian house confronted an environmental catastrophe due to irresponsible developments. Despite the state offering a meager amount to replace the houses lost, the Nubian community rallied together, rebuilding their villages in what Hassan Fathy termed "A Miracle in Architecture."[2] The Nubian house exhibited resilience, with all houses reconstructed in twelve months, each unique and more beautiful than the other, reflecting the community-based and emotionally-driven building regime.

It is important to the larger pushback against epistemic violence and the depoliticizing language of "development" to investigate and explain the wealth that was lost after displacement, and to do so, I look into modes of epistemic violence by way of housing in the resettlement villages. The state-built housing project was dubbed New Nubia by the state, but Nubians refer to it unfavorably as *"Al Tahgīr,"* meaning "place of displacement."[3] In this text, I look at the Nubian house from inside the house, through memories, and rely on stories embedded within the Nubian collective consciousness. In this text, I use the term Old Nubia to refer to Nubian land before 1963

1 Waterbury, *Hydropolitics of the Nile Valley.*
2 El-Hakim *Nubian Architecture,* p. iv.
3 On the term "New Nubia," see Fernea and Gerster, *Nubians in Egypt.*

and use the terms resettlement villages, settlements, and *tahgeer* to refer to the current site of resettlement near Aswan.

Planning without Nubians

New Nubia, as the state names it, or *tahgeer* as Nubians refer to it, is a large housing project (approximately 12,000 units) that was designed as a substitute "habitat" for residents of Nubian lands flooded during the construction of the High Dam, was later criticized for replicating the economic habitat of the old community which alienated Nubians.[4] The state produced the plan under the supervision of The Joint Committee for Nubian Resettlement, established in April 1961.[5] The planning concept claimed to take a motto of "centralization in planning and decentralization in implementation" to reconcile central planning and community participation.[6]

However, the planning was hastily finalized and claimed to be "a replica of the original housing schemes with a socialist tinge," which is visibility contradicted by comparing the plans of Old Nubia and those of *tahgeer.*[7] Notably, the plans were not based on substantial sociological or anthropological studies, as they were finalized before the Ethnographic survey on Nubia concluded its duties.[8] The Ethnographic survey, which was first conceived in 1960, was not directed to offer spatial information about Nubian houses.[9] Instead, it had a clear task of providing information to assist the Egyptian government in its efforts; the project helped the state learn how to deal with Nubians but not the other way around.[10] The research was tasked with uncovering tactical problems, part of which was to study the social organization and cultural traditions of the three ethnic sub-divisions of Egyptian Nubia, each with its own linguistic and cultural characteristics.

The government then invited locals to show them models of their then-future homes, as a part of a participatory agenda. However, this was done later in the process when most of the design decisions had already been made. As documented in the official reports, the planning process was based on modern urban planning methodologies.[11] The rectangular planning pattern, the minimalist dwelling units, the centralized and optimized surveys,

4 Wahdan, "Planning Imploded."
5 Serageldin, "Planning for New Nubia 1960-1980."
6 Ibid, p. 95.
7 Ghabbour, "Involuntary Resettlement in Development Projects."
8 Hopkins and Mehanna, *Nubian Encounters*.
9 Fernea, "The Ethnological Survey of Egyptian Nubia."
10 Hopkins and Mehanna, *Nubian Encounters*.
11 Serageldin, "Planning for New Nubia 1960-1980."

and the greater focus on productivity were all features in planning the new Nubian settlements. Nubian women were excluded from decision-making, which is evident in the Egyptian government's documentation, which kept lists of locals invited. They were all men, and this rendered the process gender biased.

"We [the women] did not speak Arabic, and they [the interviewers] did not speak Nubian. They spoke only to the Omda [mayor] and some men; then the men told us our houses would drown; they also said we would go to a new Qustul, we would have hospitals and schools and plenty of lands (sarcastically), look around you, we were fooled," as Anna Zolihka said (Qustul interviews, 28 December 2016: In this specific trip, my great aunt Zolikha Sakina — Zulikha, daughter of Sakina, since this is a matrilineal society — was telling stories and conditions of displacement, especially from the point of view of Nubian women).

The government operated a gender-exclusive assignment, with most officials being men, who dealt mostly with Nubian men. This was justified by the claim that few Nubian women spoke Arabic.[12] Consequently, most states offered polls and community invitations only to men, and compensation was distributed to the men. The flaws in the state system that excluded women from much of the wealth and the complicity of some Nubian men with said system for material gains all rendered the process unjust.

The typical resettlement village in New Nubia had a modern linear grid and a linear orientation for residential buildings, with a concentration of building plots surrounded by agricultural land. The linear grid was often dominated by the main street, with services such as a mosque, commercial center, school, sports center, and post office in the heart of this area. The design was often referred to as unimaginative due to its simple form and synthetic spaces that reappropriated elements of Nubian architecture but failed to offer the spatial quality of our ancestral land.[13]

The layout of a typical settlement is similar to plans produced by the early modernist schools. It was also affected by the 1930 and 1940 movements of the "modern Egyptian village" that aimed to replace the existing village with a gridded one to introduce the Egyptian peasant to order and culture.[14] Large-scale housing projects in cases of development-induced displacement and resettlement have been a topic of concern and debate within the field of urban development and social sciences. The challenges and problems associated with such projects have been well-documented in academic literature.

12 Fernea and Kennedy, "Initial Adaptations to Resettlement."

13 On the unimaginative design, see Serageldin, "Planning for New Nubia 1960-1980"; Ghabbour, "Involuntary Resettlement in Development Projects."

14 Mitchell, *Rule of Experts*, p. 195.

Several key issues arise in the context of large-scale housing projects for development-induced displacement and resettlement, including social disruption, loss of livelihoods, inadequate compensation, and lack of community participation in the resettlement process.

After resettlement, dwelling units were distributed to families according to their size, thus discounting spatial logic and severing social contracts. Residents recalled that their first encounter with the settlement was filled with disappointment: the modern paradise they were promised was just an incomplete housing project in the desert. But even those housed in the state-built dwelling units were roofless and doorless, so the Nubian people had to invest time and resources into building their own houses. During that time, the society came together to survive.

The process of resettlement in new houses did not flow smoothly, according to most literature.[15] The housing units and their facilities were not complete at the time of the move. As Saida, a 78-year-old woman in Qustul, said: "When we first arrived here, there was a house for one family and no house for five others, and if one received one, it would have no roof and windows" (Qustul interviews, 28 December 2016).

Building Houses Against Housing

American anthropologists Fernea and Kennedy were responsible for the ethnographic survey in Nubia during and after the displacement.[16] They noted the vast construction efforts in Nubian displacement villages: "There is scarcely a neighborhood in New Nubia in which some houses have not been radically altered through the mounting of China plates above the doors, as in Old Nubia, and by plastering the exterior with mud to create a facade upon which traditional Nubian designs may be painted."[17]

The creation of the house in the "Nubian way" was crucial to Nubians; therefore, they often paid for an expensive remodeling of the new settlement. "Some house-owners have spent as much as 300 EGP in their efforts to bring the new homes into conformity with traditional Nubian standards." This is an astounding amount of money, knowing that in 1960, Egyptian per capita income was 52.4 EGP per year. The government's compensation for their lost houses

15 Allen, *Nubians and Development;* Fahim, "Community-Health Aspects of the Nubian Resettlement in Egypt"; Fernea and Kennedy, "Initial Adaptations to Resettlement"; Ghabbour, "Involuntary Resettlement in Development Projects"; Hopkins and Mehanna, *Nubian Encounters;* Mahgoub, "The Nubian Experience"; Scudder, *Aswan High Dam Resettlement of Egyptian Nubians;* Serageldin, "Planning for New Nubia 1960-1980"; Tadros, "The Human Aspects of Rural Resettlement Schemes in Egypt"; Tibe, "Nubian Land Rights."

16 Fernea and Kennedy, "Initial Adaptations to Resettlement."

17 Fernea and Kennedy, "Initial Adaptations to Resettlement," p. 351.

was 10 pounds per house. As Fernea mentions, cash compensations were given to men and quickly spent, which meant the burden fell on Nubian women who had to sell their coveted gold.[18] My grand aunt said: "We had to sell our gold in Kom Ombo to make this [points to the dwelling unit] a proper house."

Nubians have exhibited their dissatisfaction with their newly built environment both verbally, in my interviews, and in the renovations they implemented to make the state-built dwelling units liveable. They have reappropriated the state-built dwellings and refurbished them; Nubian women have made the *Mastaba,* a bench attached to the home, as they did in their old villages.[19] Some Nubians have opted to build a house themselves. Often referred to *ahali* (people-built) houses, they are similar in design and spatial order to the old Nubian houses, yet they had to redefine their relationship with the outside. Nonetheless, Nubian houses retained the tradition of unlocked doors even in the state-built dwellings with their built-in door lock; Nubians drilled a hole in their doors to ensure accessibility. Growing up, I remember that our door would open after three polite knocks, and someone would come in without being told to enter. The accessibility of the house and people's desire to access it were matters of family pride: "Our house is always full," as my grandmother used to say.

Historically, the everyday lives of Nubian women were integrated within the social sphere, as was the house. The average surface area of Nubian houses, before resettlement, ranged from 500 to 2,000 square meters, and it is common to find a 1,600 square meter unit that is registered as the residence of four or five people.[20] The state dwelling units offered much smaller surface areas, moving all social encounters, such as weddings and conflict councils, to formally designated public spaces. Dwelling units in the current settlement are less than 10% of the average Nubian house as the state-offered dwellings varied from 100 to 220 square meters, which resulted in two separate spheres — one public and one private.[21]

My grandmother's stories often deal with the house as the site of everyday life; she expects me to automatically set the events in her story in a house unless otherwise told. A house is a place where people meet, eat, sort their crops, and divide their shares. The house in my grandmothers' stories has the ability to transform into a courthouse, a warehouse, and a large-scale kitchen, which explains the large surface areas of traditional Nubian houses in

18 Fernea, "The Ethnological Survey of Egyptian Nubia."
19 Fernea and Kennedy, "Initial Adaptations to Resettlement."
20 On average surface area of Nubian houses before resettlement, see El-Hakim, *Nubian Architecture.*
21 On the size, see Serageldin, "Planning for New Nubia 1960-1980."

relation to the number of their occupants, unlike the units designed by the Egyptian state in the resettlement village. The Nubian house was never a mere dwelling. The state-built houses are modernist in design, offering the minimum requirements for a human being — rooms to sleep in, a kitchen, and a bathroom. The units were built around a courtyard as the state architects claimed to draw inspiration from traditional Nubian houses.[22] The courtyard was too small in scale to fulfil its social role in incubating social life or its environmental role in cooling and ventilating the house.[23] The architecture of the dwellings limited the Nubian house and its role in social, economic, and political functions and, therefore, made the Nubian house a dispossessed Nubian institution, consequently excluding women from the public sphere and destroying the Nubian household as a cultural institution and its constitutive power. In this case, the very existence of public space is an ontological intrusion and an infringement on the indigenous spatial order, an order in which the house and its women were politically involved.

Emotional Place-Making

In the early 1970s, a remarkable story unfolds against the backdrop of the massive displacement of the Nubian community from their ancestral lands in Old Nubia due to hydropower projects. It centers around Sakina Abaya, a Nubian woman who became a symbol of resilience, emotional placemaking, and community empowerment in the face of upheaval. A few years after the move from Old Nubia, there was a surge in construction activities by displaced Nubians. Four of Sakina Abaya's children were in Qustul during the state-operated census before the resettlement; the fifth was studying in Khartoum with his family and was not issued a house (Cairo interviews, 12 February 2017: Notes of my uncle, remembering how housing was distributed, commissioned, and built in the early days of displacement).

The construction of Sakina's son's house began; he states: "She had commissioned a master mason with the foundation work, as we did not understand the soil of this place [new settlement]." He continues:

> She sat there, in a close distance under the shade while we started working with the master mason, she brought food and a tea making kit every day, she woke us up, came with us, and left with us.

22 Serageldin, "Planning for New Nubia 1960-1980."
23 Bayoumi, "Nubian Vernacular Architecture and Contemporary Aswan Buildings' Enhancement."

Then, I asked: "Who decided the division of the house?" He answered:

> She did, she would tell us to get this wall to end here, or leave a place for windows here.

He continues:

> She was a boss, she understood building and was never fooled by commissioned workers. Actually, they all respected her because she gave them food and made them tea whenever they wanted.

Sakina Abaya initiated the building process by invoking the love and respect of her grandchildren that she garnered over years of caring for them; she sustained the construction process from beginning to end by performing a practice of care as she sat there with the workers all day making tea, she also choreographed the social characteristics of the house from her position. Sakina Abaya acted as their building supervisor and caregiver. Sakina Abaya died when I was around nine years old, but she was surrounded by stories of the exquisite skill with which she generated social, emotional, and material capital. With the same method, she built three houses for her family, farmed their land, and planted numerous palm trees, from which we eat daily to this day.

Within the shadow economy of Qustul, I found an effective micro-financing network. A person in financial need can initiate a financing cycle, a *jamʿīyya,* in which he or she can ask trusted persons, mostly women, who are willing and able to join a pool of women by paying a cyclic contribution (monthly/weekly/bi-monthly/etc.).[24] When they find a pool that suits their economic need, the person and the *jamʿīyya* agree on a time frame, and a person responsible for managing the pool (banker) is assigned. This person is often a trusted woman. The banker/manager is responsible for the collection and the allocation of funds in a timely manner (e.g., each month); she is also responsible for conducting a random draw to decide the succession of payment to participants. Usually, need trumps the random draw; for instance, if the participants agree among each other — under the banker's coordination — that those in pressing need are paid first. People who are financially comfortable join these co-ops as it is a social honor and duty; they often get paid last.

It is the poor people's bank "where money is not idle for long but changes hands rapidly, satisfying both consumption and produc-

24 Habbob, "Community Sharing"; Jennings, *The Nubians of West Aswan.*

Figure 1.
The house built by Sakina Abaya in Qustul.

tion needs."[25] Moreover, the trade in this bank is not only in money; there is also an exchange of care and honor. Habbob tells the story of Fatom Jaara, a woman in her eighties who has been managing a *jamʿīyya* since 1970 in the displaced village of Thomas Wa Afia, his Nubian village, which is now located in Esna, 55 kilometers south of Luxor.[26] In the 1970s, her participants used to pay 0.25 EGP per month. Fatom Jaara's *jamʿīyya* is one of the many old banks that can be found in all displacement villages, whose inhabitants have no relations with formalized or big banks, which helped the funding of buildings, weddings, travel, school supplies, and more.

In this exploration of Sakina Abaya's building story and the *jamʿīyya* network, I remember and honor the emotional labor that builds our Nubian houses, communal bonds, and the profound connection between people and the places they create, even in the face of forced displacement. It underscores the notion that places are not merely physical entities but also vessels of emotion, memory, and identity, shaped by those who inhabit and care for them. As we journey through these narratives, we gain insight into the intricate web of emotions, values, and traditions that define Nubian placemaking, even in the most challenging circumstances.

25 Bouman, "Indigenous Savings and Credit Societies in the Developing World."
26 Habbob, "Community Sharing."

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