Nubian Women's Bridal Rooms

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This essay deals with the Nubian tradition of particularly decorating one room in the house, solely to be used by the bride and her husband after marriage. They adhered to this tradition before the flooding of Nubia due to the Aswan High Dam, which caused the exodus of the Nubian people from their villages more than half a century ago. This custom is now totally obsolete.

While some of Nubia's antiquities could be saved from the flood of this dam, the homeland of the Nubians vanished without much attention by the global community. Between 1963 and 1964, about 100,000 Nubians of Egyptian and Sudanese nationality had to be evacuated. Their villages drowned in the waters of the huge lake, and their unique decorated mud brick houses and wall paintings vanished as well. This very subject I discuss in detail in my book "The Colors of Nubia", to be published by the AUC Press, Cairo and New York, 2025.

I carried out field studies in former Egyptian Nubia in the early 1960s, with a particular emphasis on women's house decoration, sharing the life of Nubian families, which allowed me to get an idea of women's day-to-day life during the last period in the ancestral setting. In the beginning of 1964, I participated in the involuntary resettlement of the Egyptian Nubians to the area of Kom Ombo, about 50 km north of Aswan, the *Tahjīr,* the term the Nubians mainly referred to their exodus.[1]

1 In the spelling of Nubian words and Arabic loan words I follow Gertrud von Massenbach who was my Nubian teacher. She conducted pioneering work on the Kenzi Nubian language considered by the majority of scholars to be the most comprehensive and thorough investigations in this field. Regrettably, the existing literature and the maps of the region do not match on the spelling of toponyms, which leads to much misunderstandings. To avoid confusion, I had to find a plausible and consistent spelling system for the Nubian place names (districts, villages, and hamlets). The best way to do this seemed to be based on the meaning of the toponyms, for which I used the linguistic material of Gertrud von Massenbach (1933 and 1962) and Junker and Schäfer (1932). I also oriented myself according to UNGEGN 1986, United Nations 2006, and Bell and Sabbar 2017.

Figure 1. Nubian women in front of a decorated entry. Koshtammne, W. Neja Hamadāb/ Katabāb, 1963 (Photographed by the author).

The substitute villages in New Nubia with cramped and monotonous dwellings in the middle of a barren desert which the Nubians received for their former spacious homes triggered a shock and did not at all correspond with what the official propaganda had led people to expect. The *Tahjīr* turned out to be a traumatic social and cultural incident, the adverse impacts of which still manifest themselves today.

Nubians had already experienced resettlement as a consequence of earlier dam constructions in 1902, 1912, and 1933. Although these earlier constructions were not nearly as ambitious in their extent as the Aswan High Dam of the 1960s, they had required villages to be rebuilt further inland and had caused the loss of vast stretches of agricultural land. The result was the forfeiture of livelihood. Consequently, since the beginning of the 20th century, Nubian men had been obliged to migrate to the Egyptian cities where they worked mostly in the service sector. Their remittances supported the families back in the villages. They themselves could return home only rarely — usually once a year.

Figure 2. House entry, decoration with lime and washblue. Toshke, W. Neja Seidāb qibli, 1964 (Photographed by the author).

Due to the extensive male labor migration many of the isolated Nubian villages, especially those in the northern Kunuzi region, were populated predominantly by women. They were the ones who carried the full responsibility for the household routine, raising the children, and caring for the elderly as well as tending the few remaining fields and livestock. Also, they crafted furnishings and utensils of Nile mud, weaves, and basketry. Their creativity found foremost expression in the outstanding Nubian house decoration.

Women pursued fantasies in the design of their bridal rooms. These accomplishments contributed significantly to a female Nubian identity.[2] Women also followed traditional practices of folk religion, perpetuated a rich oral literature, maintaining and passing on the Nubian language, and achieved generally a remarkable degree of self-determination, especially in comparison to the peasant women of Upper Egypt.

While men constructed the Nubian houses there was one chamber in all houses, which carried female handwriting. This chamber was the so-called bridal room, *arūsana kā.* In the Fadija area, the bridal

2 Goo-Grauer, "House Decoration in Egyptian Nubia Prior to 1964."

Figure 3. Decoration with baskets in a barrel-vaulted bridal room. Shellāl, Bijje island, 1964 (Photographed by the author).

room was called *diwān;* Mahgoub refers to it as *"diwāni"* the bridal hall.[3]

The bride had in the time preceding the wedding the task of decorating this room in her paternal house or compound, which would be the couple's private quarters and bedroom for a while. They lived there for at least forty days or until the first child was born. Sometimes this arrangement lasted for years. The husband's income determined if and when he could install a living space for the young family at or near his parents's compound. While staying with the in-laws, the bridegroom was considered a guest of the bride's parents.

The bride was eager to decorate the *arūsana kā* and to show her inventiveness and creativity. For an outsider who had the opportunity to visit a Nubian bridal room in the1960s, this proved a remarkable experience. One was transported into a fantastic realm of colors and forms. The experience had a mysterious character because very little light entered the room through the narrow

3 Mahgoub, "The Nubian Experience," p. 146.

Figure 4.
Young girl, Wadi el Arab, E. Neja Salahāb, 1963 (Photographed by the author).

ventilation slots — *tagā* — high on the walls just below the ceiling. The place was confined, as a bridal room in the Kenzi area rarely exceeded ten square meters. Especially so, since the two obligatory furniture pieces of any Nubian house — the marital bed and the bridal chest — were placed in the bridal room and took up a good portion of the floor space, leaving the walls and the ceiling as the main loci for the overwhelmingly abundant decoration. Bridal rooms could have larger dimensions in the Fadija area, where houses generally were more spacious.

In contrast to the two-dimensional wall paintings, the bridal room decoration is probably best termed as an assemblage, bringing to mind the realizations associated with this term in the visual arts of the works famously created by Picasso, Duchamp, and Dubuffet. A Nubian bride worked on these assemblages for weeks, if not months, before the wedding feast. They included a wide range of objects which she prized as valuable and of individual significance, ranging from items of artful handicraft to *objets trouvés*, found objects that are aesthetically pleasing. As one's eye adjusted to the dim lighting, one could see that these objects were deliberately

Figure 5. Bridal room with pleated mats, baskets, a gun, photos, and various small plastic objects, from the ceiling suspended slings with enamel bowls. Umbarakāb, W. Neja Siukutti, 1963 (Photographed by the author).

and ingeniously arranged, some given weight over others in the foreground or background.

Their small size enhanced the effect this room made on a visitor. Whereas generally in Nubian houses — especially the huge compounds with their ample yards — rendered an impression of space and vacuity, being devoid of furniture or things standing and lying around, the plenty and abundance of objects in the *arūsana kā* overwhelmed.

The custom of creating and decorating a bridal room possibly had a long tradition in Nubia. Formerly, however, the bridal rooms were not located within the house or compound. The community set them up at a distance from the hamlet to provide privacy for the newlyweds once the nuptial ceremonies were completed. Yet, these were not permanent buildings but small temporary structures, huts made of acacia branches or palm fronds and furnished with homemade mats. In light of the description given by Samuel Ali Hussein, who lived as a farmer in the district of Abu Hor between 1885 and 1896, the interior decoration of these structures closely resembled the bridal room custom of the 1960s. Hussein mentions

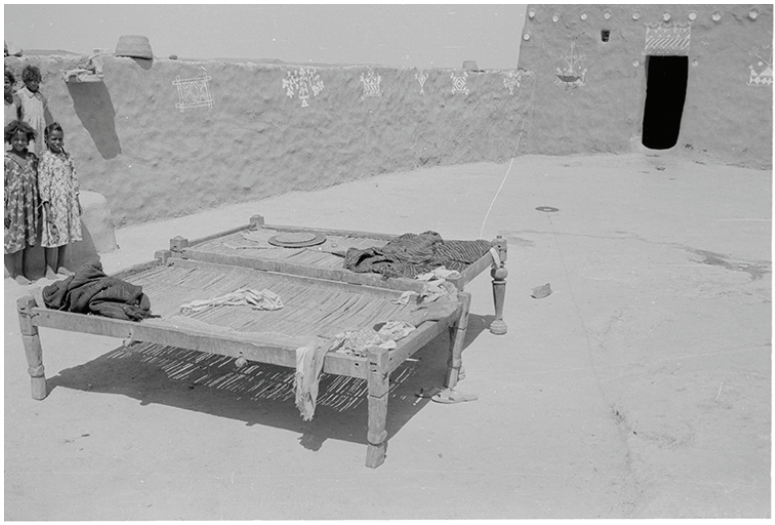

Figure 6. Angarē beds with mesh. Abu Hor, E. Neja Khor Rahma, 1962 (Photographed by the author).

that a "variety of all sort of things" was displayed in the bride's hut, naming these as round, shield-shaped baskets (*tagaddi*); hampers (*kobōta*); mats (*nibid*); hanging baskets (*tagaddig*); plates (*sīni*); and mirrors (*koyalli*).[4]

The remarks of Burckhardt indicate that the custom existed in the wider region already at the beginning of the nineteenth century. He wrote, "The ladies of Damer adorn their sitting rooms with many large wooden bowls or dishes hung against the wall like so many pictures.[5]" Since Damer is located a bit south of Nubia, we can assume that the habit of bridal room decoration was adhered in Nubia.

In the 1960s, when Nubian men were predominantly absent as labor migrants, this room was, in effect, the wife's private domain, her sanctuary, so to speak, serving as the reception place for female guests to whom the place was proudly presented. Male visitors and outsiders had no access to it. Though the rich decoration all over the room suggested an impression of plenty, the fitments of the bridal room consisted mainly of the two furniture pieces — a bed and a chest — installed at the wedding.

The traditional bed was a locally-made *angarē,* a kind of divan, but it could also be an imported iron bedstead, even a four-poster. Commonly, Nubians slept on home-made mats placed on the ground — these could also be laid on top of the *angarē*. Sometimes a cotton mattress was used. The *angarē* beds had a frame from acacia wood and a covering with a taut mesh of palm fibers or palm bast:

4 Schäfer, "Nubisches Frauenleben," pp. 233 — 4.
5 Burckhardt, *Travels in Nubia*, p. 270.

Figure 7. Wooden chest: *sandūg*. Shellāl, Seheel Island, 2013 (Photographed by the author).

ashmān. When the mesh wore out, it could be easily renewed or replaced with wooden boards. Bigger households would have several of these *angarēs,* which were brought during the daytime into the courtyard to be used for sitting. Yet, the usually decorated marital bed always remained inside the bride's room.

The second furniture item in the bridal room, a wooden chest, housed the bride's trousseau. Called *sandūg iskandarāni* or "Alexandrian chest," since it formerly came from there, it served as a lockable storage space for personal belongings such as jewelry, clothes, blankets, and treasured possessions. Things needed for the wife's daily grooming, such as homemade massaging ointment (*dilka*) and the antimony eye makeup (*nidmee*), were also kept in the chest or on a little wall shelf.

The chests always featured some carved decorations with symmetrically arranged motifs, such as stars, stylized flowers, and pairs of animals, often lions facing each other. Wooden dowry chests were customary throughout the Islamic world from Pakistan to Morocco and from the Arabian Peninsula to Zanzibar. As likely prototypes for these chests, the wooden boxes of early Portuguese sailors have been suggested.[6]

While the bridal room assemblages were a central feature of all Nubian houses, they were especially exuberant in the Kenuzi region.

6 Stone, "The Art of the Dowry Chest," pp. 24ff.

Figure 8. Mats, round baskets, and hanging slings in a bridal room, under the ceiling rolled up mats, stored on pegs. Mediig, W. Neja Sebue, 1963 (Photographed by the author).

At large, the room's walls were first covered with handcrafted braided mats, to which flat round baskets were attached. These two formed the main artisanal product all over Nubia.[7]

They both played an important role during wedding feasts, being fabricated in advance by the bride and her female relatives. The mats would be spread on the ground for guests to sit on as they paid their respects during the week-long celebrations. A mat might also be placed on an *angarē,* serving as a bench for the bridal pair. The shield-shaped baskets were primarily used as lids to cover the food served on large trays but formed also a popular wedding gift. Following the wedding, the mats would be removed from the ground, rolled up, and hung on pegs right below the ceiling in the bridal room. As all the decorations of the bridal room, they likely had some symbolic significance because it was customary in some areas for the wife to remove them when her husband died.[8] Also, colorful flag-shaped hand fans were hung on top of the mats and amongst the baskets.

7 Wenzel, *House Decoration in Nubia,* pp. 25ff; p. 27, fig 4; p. 28 plate 9; p. 29, fig 5.
8 Kennedy, *Nubian Ceremonial Life,* p. 235.

Figure 9. Hand fan, cotton and palm material, Kenuzi region, 1962 (Photographed by the author).

Primarily, objects which the bride considered as special and worthy of being shown were displayed in this room. These comprised a bizarre collection of objects peculiar in Nubia, sometimes stranded goods washed up along the banks of the river or things brought back by the men from their workplaces. Though the latter items had had some utility in the Egyptian towns, they were of no use in the Nubian households. Here the women to whom these things appeared wondrous subjected them to a kind of recycling as they hung them on the walls as decorations.

Sometimes an object would be left unchanged in its original form, but sometimes it would be skillfully altered. Electric bulbs — inoperable in Nubia, which had no electricity — and burned-out batteries were carefully embedded into a mesh of colored glass beads. The empty cigarette packs from the heavily smoking men were cut open and sewed with needle and thread into multi-faceted cardboard stars. Old tin cans showing their labels were flattened and nailed to the wall next to discarded parts of transistor radios or other appliances. Colorful photos from magazines were galleried like precious images. Thus, the picture of a white chicken could be hung beside that of a sparsely-clad cinema star, which seemed odd in the Nubian context, considering the widely-held norms of female decency. Some items came actually from the trash left behind by the international archaeological missions sent to Nubia in the late 1950s and early 1960s to rescue the monuments threatened by the High Dam.

Together with this mixture of decorative and, in the Nubian context, seemingly exotic items appeared a multitude of miniature

Figure 10.
Bed coverlet decorated with small handmade objects. Magazine clippings and photos are displayed on the wall above the bed. Toshke, W. Neja Dukki Daur, 1964 (Photographed by the author).

handmade objects intended as good luck charms. They were no larger than five-to-fifteen centimeters and hung either on the walls or suspended from the marital bed's coverlet.

Handcrafted in needlework, these items were made of leather or colorful plastic sheeting, available in Egypt since the 1950s. They could represent scorpions, human hands, flowers, *aruusa* dolls, or small-scale replicas of household equipment, such as mats, bags, baskets, and water containers. There were miniaturized fly swatters, purses, boxes for eye makeup, and triangular stuffed cushions, termed *sambuska.*

Other items could be small geometrical forms such as rings, circles, and squares, some of which were considered to have special protective powers.

Whereas the walls of most bride's rooms were decorated with objects and not painted, there existed some exceptions, two of which are shown. The house in Fig. 17, from Dehemiit, E. Neja Kogge, looks ruined as it had already been vacated for the exodus. The roof with the valuable wooden beams has been removed, and as well the decorative interior fitments. The motifs rendered in this room were narrowed down to those items of which the prototypes

Figure 11. Small aruusa figure, plastic material. Toshke, W. Neja Dukki Daur, 1964 (Photographed by the author).

were substantially displayed on the walls: handmade mats with ornamental patterns. In this way, a real mat could be hung up on top or beside a painted one, the difference between a real object shown on the wall and its reproduced image merging, thus fulfilling the elsewhere realized function of the painting as a placeholder.

It is interesting to note, however, that the discussed small objects which the women fabricated for the equipment of their bridal rooms could reappear as motifs women painted on the walls of the men's guest room (see Fig. 18).

The impression of abundance in a bridal room was intensified by the way that the space overhead was also filled. Hanging down from the ceiling were slings made of braided wool (*shālōg*) or leather (*soleddi*), the cords strung with snail shells and cowries (*nerre*).[9]

Suspended in these slings were dozens of empty enamel bowls, porcelain plates, or gourds (figures 19 and 20). Although food and utensils were stored in the cooking area in the same manner, the sole intention here was decoration.

9 Schäfer, "Nubisches Frauenleben," p. 308; Wenzel, *House Decoration in Nubia*, p. 27, fig 4; Fernea et al., *Nubian Ethnographies*, pp. 39 — 40.

Figure 12.
Bird, plastic material, Toshke, W. Neja Dukki Daur, 1964 (Photographed by the author).

At times ostrich eggs imported from Sudan — to which magical powers were ascribed — could be seen in such a sling. In addition to the room's decoration and simultaneously crowding it even more were wooden bars (*wāwir*) suspended horizontally by ropes from the ceiling and used as racks to store and display the bright clothes and scarfs of the women.

Even though the bride's room was distinctly the domain of females, men had at least a symbolic presence here in the form of their swords and guns, which were presented on the walls, complete with their rows of cartridges. The swords used in the men's ceremonial dances and carried at a wedding, and guns cherished for occasional hunts in the desert or for shooting in the air at festivals. They had often been in the family's possession for generations. The guns usually dated back to the time of the Mahdi at the end of the nineteenth century.

But besides their weapons, men were present moreover in black and white photos on the walls (Figure 21). These photos had been taken by street photographers in the Egyptian towns where the men worked, showing them dressed either in European fashion or with

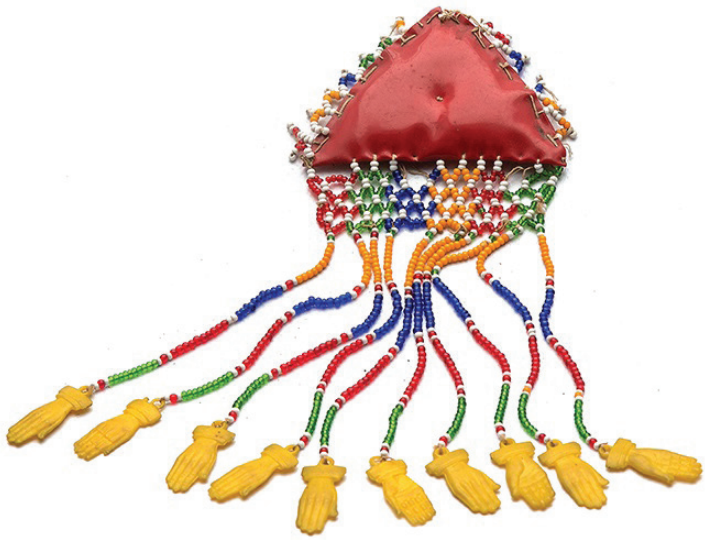

Figure 13. Protective sign, sambuska, plastic material. Toshke, W. Neja Dukki Daur, 1964 (Photographed by the author).

the local long shirt-like gown, *galabieh.* Some of these shots dated from the 1930s and 40s. Street photographers offered their services in Aswan since World War I and could still be seen on the Corniche in the 1960s. They were equipped with huge cameras mounted on wooden tripods in front of which the customer would pose on a stool, usually sitting stiffly with both hands on the knees and presenting an earnest and dignified facial expression, while the photographer disappeared behind his camera under a huge black cloth to take the shot.

The phenomenon of the design and decoration of the former bridal rooms, where Nubian women transformed foreign objects into new creations, might be understood as an example of how the Nubians, since distant times, have adopted outside influences into their culture, appropriating these impacts to such an extent that they seemed to be characteristic for Nubia, a feature reappearing also in other realms of Nubian culture.

After the exodus of the people to the new settlements near Kom Ombo, the tradition of decorating the bridal room was given up.

Figure 14. Star sewn from flattened cigarette boxes. Toshke, W. Neja Dukki Daur, 1964 (Photographed by the author).

In the new villages the everyday experience was totally different from the one before and life proceeded under changed premises: running water, roads, electricity, refrigerators, schools, telephones, and eventually TV — all unknown in Old Nubia — became matters of fact. In addition, many consumer goods became available and money started to play a more significant role than before.

Many of the former customs were given up. And the skill of how to fabricate craft articles were lost because the material for it was no longer available. For example, the handmade mats, previously an essential item of Nubian houses, were replaced by plastic items. The two traditional pieces of furniture, the *sandūg* chest and the *angarē* bed, were considered old fashioned and not used anymore. Instead, heavily upholstered armchairs, massive sofas, buffets, tables, and other items of modern-day furniture were used. These pieces are ornately adorned, often with gold trimmings, as was popular throughout Egypt. The often-oversized items narrow down the small rooms, where relatively low ceilings enhance the impression of confined space.

Figure 15. Protective sign, busuq, cotton material, ornamented with cowry shells. Toshke, W. Neja Dukki Daur, 1964 (Photographed by the author).

The reason for the abandonment of the bridal room decoration might partially have been the absence of adequate space, but also and probably more so due to the now changed female state of mind. This mental change can be attributed to girls' education. The strong cultural influences of the Egyptian mainstream must also be considered.

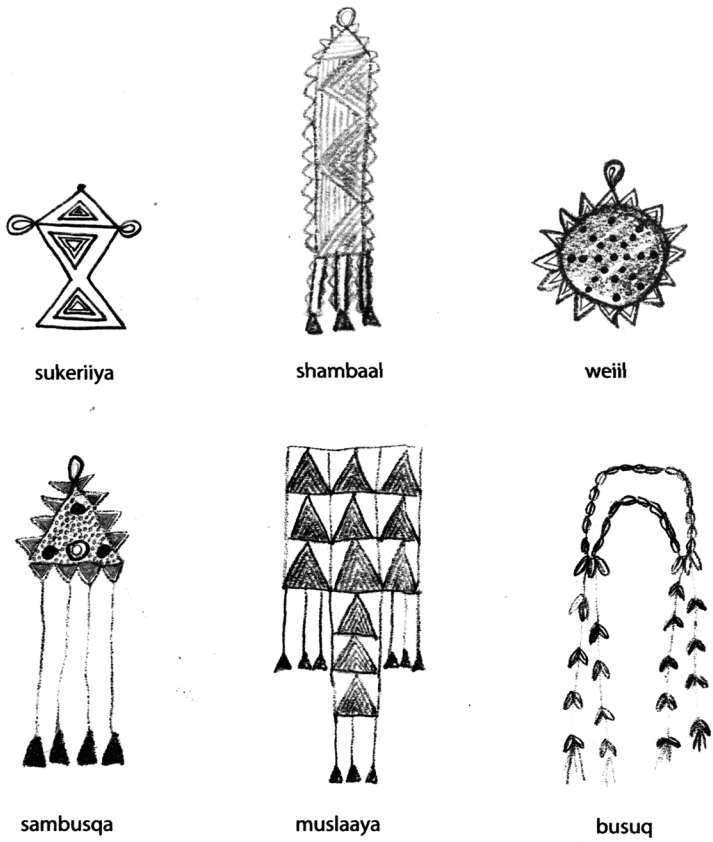

Figure 16. Various small protective objects. Toshke, W. Neja Dukki Daur, 1964 (Drawn by the author).

Figure 17.
A dismantled bride's room with painted praying mats. Dehemiit, E. Neja Kogge, 1964 (Photographed by the author).

Figure 18.
The same protective objects, which adorned in real the bride's room, appear here as painted motifs in a guest room. Gurte, W. Neja Affedunya, 1963 (Photographed by the author).

Figure 19. Enamel bowls in slings suspended from the ceiling, on the four posters a lace curtain to which protective small plastic objects are pinned. Shellāl, Bijje island, 1964 (Photographed by the author).

Figure 20. Double hanging slings, made from wool, with enamel bowls in a barrel-vaulted bridal room. Kalābshe, 1963 (Photographed by the author).

Figure 21. Photos of male family members on the wall of a bridal room. Shellāl, Bijje island, 1964 (Photographed by the author).

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