

# Houses of Egyptian Nubia: West Aswan — Then and Now

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Egyptian Nubia is that area of Nubia which extends from the First Cataract, near the town of Aswan, to the Sudanese border. The people in this area call themselves Kenuz and speak the language which they call Kenuzi or Matoki.<sup>1</sup> Traditionally, their economy involved a combination of subsistence farming, animal husbandry, and date production on a narrow strip of land next to the Nile. The erection of the first dam in 1903, and subsequent elevations in 1913 and 1933, crippled their agricultural system. Because of the difficulties of farming the land, Nubian men had sought employment outside of Nubia for centuries, returning to their homeland only periodically. Those who remained in the villages — mostly women, children, and old men — were dependent upon remittances from these migrants.

Most of the Kenuz were relocated when their homeland was flooded because of the elevation of the Aswan Dam in 1964. At the time of relocation, approximately 70,000 Egyptian Nubians (both male and female), were living outside of Nubia.<sup>2</sup> Many Nubians returned to their homeland when the relocation began, and approximately 50,000 were resettled in the thirty-three villages built to accommodate them near the town of Kom Ombo, thirty miles north of Aswan. This was named New Nubia.

Not all the Nubians moved from the Aswan area, however. Several villages, situated north of the High Dam, were in no danger of inundation and so were not evacuated. In this photographic essay, I wish to show my photographs of some of the homes that the people who inhabited the hamlet (*naja*<sup>3</sup>) of Gubba, in the village of West Aswan, were living in during the time I lived there. My first field trip was in 1981, and the house that I lived in, as well as most others of the village, was built of clay/mud bricks that had been

1 Rouchdy, "Languages in Contact."

2 Fernea and Kennedy, *Initial Adaptations to Resettlement*.

dried in the sun, and then plastered over with more clay to make a smooth surface for painting. This photo shows the houses in one of the *nujū*<sup>c</sup> of West Aswan, with its mudbrick walls and barrel vault roofs. These roofs allow the air to circulate freely within the homes, keeping the inhabitants cool.

Within the *naja*<sup>c</sup> of Gubba, houses have been built in such a way that every nine or ten of them surrounds a large open area (*mulāga*). Doors open onto this square, which may have as its focal point a large tree, or a small kiosk selling canned milk and candy, or a water spigot.

Walls that are made of mud brick absorb the heat of the sun throughout the day. In the winter, this is delightful, but during the summer months the out-of-doors is more comfortable. Both men and women congregate upon the *mastabas* — benches of smoothly-plastered clay that are built along the fronts of the outside walls — in the evenings, to share tasks and good conversation, and to catch the evening breezes that seem to freshen just in time.

The traditional Nubian home has an inner courtyard which is quite wide, with a large sandy floor. Traditional celebrations and ceremonies are held in these courtyards, so they must be quite large.

The Nubians of West Aswan, as well as those living in surrounding villages such as West Saheil and Hessa, are quite dependent upon tourism. Foreign tourists are brought into the home (usually just the courtyard area), served tea, and allowed to wander around the area so that they can see what a traditional Nubian home looks like. It is hoped that they will also buy souvenirs.

The women of the family may also contribute to the household income by drawing tattoos with henna.

In 1981, I rarely saw two-storey houses, but there were a couple, made of bricks rather than mudbricks. These walls were strong enough to support a second storey.

When I returned to Gubba in 1986, I saw several new houses which departed from the plan of the more traditional homes. Newer houses were built of stone and concrete, although they were still plastered over with clay and painted. They were much less comfortable than the older houses, as stone tends to be hotter than adobe, and they were roofed with tin. Nevertheless, stone and concrete walls are stronger, and enabled the families to add a second storey to the home.

By 2007, the newer houses had become larger and more comfortable, with tiled floors throughout the house, and with glassed-in windows and air-conditioning. They also have large

kitchens with Western-style stoves and refrigerators, and bathrooms with toilets and showers.<sup>3</sup>

By that time, the villagers were making quite a bit of money from tourism, so many of their houses were geared towards welcoming tourists. This is such a home in Gubba.

Restaurants, such as the one in Figure 12, which has been constructed in an old Nubian house, as well as the one in Figure 13, have been built in West Aswan to increase tourism.

Other contributors to this volume have discussed the shock and disappointment that those who were relocated felt when they beheld their new homes. The houses of New Nubia appear to have been based upon an architect's assumption about the kinds of homes that the Nubians had lived in. It seems to me that the planners of New Nubia had never actually visited Aswan or any of the Nubian villages surrounding it, as evidenced by my photographs of their houses, but had assumed that the Nubians lived the same way other Egyptian farming people lived. Due to racism and indifference, the houses of New Nubia were built in a style that was completely unrelated to the houses of Old Nubia.

3 Jennings, *Nubian Women of West Aswan*.

Figure 1.  
The houses in one  
of the *nijū*‘ in  
West Aswān, with  
their barrel-vault  
roofs. (Jennings,  
1981).



Figure 2.  
Within the *naja*‘  
of Gubba, doors  
open up into the  
square (*mulāga*).  
(Jennings, 1981).





Figure 3. Many walls display a representation of Al Buraq, the mythical being who, according to legend, carried Mohammed to heaven on her back. (Jennings, 1981).



Figure 4. Some houses have paintings on their walls, indicating that the owner has made the pilgrimage to Mecca (Jennings, 1981).

Figure 5.  
Most houses  
have benches of  
smoothly plastered  
clay (*mastabas*)  
that are built along  
the fronts of the  
outside walls.  
(Jennings, 1981).



Figure 6.  
These *mastabas*  
are gathering  
places for men and  
women at the end  
of the working  
day. (Jennings,  
1981).





Figure 7. The wide courtyard of a traditional Nubian home, where celebrations and ceremonies are held. (Jennings, 2007).



Figure 8. A tourist group being welcomed into the courtyard of a Nubian house. (Jennings, 2007).

Figure 9.  
Women of the  
family may also  
contribute to the  
household income  
by drawing tattoos  
on tourists with  
henna. (Jennings,  
2007).



Figure 10.  
A house of  
the older style  
(Jennings, 1997).



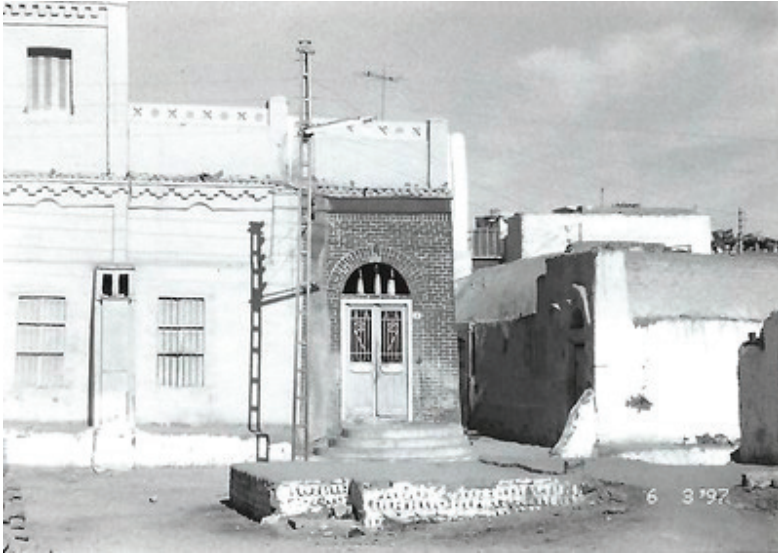


Figure 11.  
A two-storey  
house made of  
bricks rather  
than mudbricks  
(Jennings, 1997).



Figure 12.  
This home is  
offered as a Bed &  
Breakfast for any  
tourist who wants  
to spend more  
time in Nubia.  
(Jennings, 2007).

Figure 13.  
A cafe which  
has been  
reconstructed  
in an old Nubian  
house for the  
tourist trade  
(Jennings, 2007).



Figure 14.  
A restaurant  
which was built  
in West Aswan to  
invite the tourist  
trade. (Jennings,  
1997).



**References**

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