

# Stereotypes and Negative Indexes of the Nubians in Egypt

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For generations, Nubians (both Fadija and Kenuz<sup>1</sup>) have been stigmatized and ridiculed in the Egyptian media. Nubian speakers of the Fadija and Mattoki vernaculars in Egypt are associated with unintelligible or incompetent Arabic, dark-skinned people, working lower-class jobs, and so on. Among the negative indexes used in Egyptian media to refer to Nubians are /barbarj/ “barbarian,” /bijurtʿun/ “speaking gibberish,” or /bijitkallim ʿarabi mikassar/ “speaking broken Arabic.” These pejorative and prevalent images are extensively emphasized by the media. These constant negative indexes have compelled some Nubians to speak only Arabic with their children to avoid mockery, prejudice, and discrimination.

Despite the stigmatized portrayals, there are Nubian speakers who have a positive attitude towards learning their mother tongues to preserve their languages, identities, and ideologies. The importance of learning Nubian languages at home is essential for preserving not only linguistic diversity, but also the cultural and ideological foundations that are deeply embedded in Nubian homescapes. Nubian houses and households are not just physical spaces; they are living embodiments of history, identity, and social organization. By teaching and learning these languages within the home, Nubians can maintain a direct connection to their heritage, ensuring that their unique cultural practices, ways of life, and worldviews are passed down to future generations.

Learning the mother tongue in the home environment reinforces the multisensory, embodied experience of Nubian homelife, which this volume explores in relation to material culture, architecture, and everyday practices. Language acts as a bridge that ties the past to the present, allowing individuals to engage with their ancestral

<sup>1</sup> The Fadija primarily live in the southern villages of Aswan, as well as in other parts of Egypt and speak Nobiin. In contrast, the Kenuz mainly reside in the northern villages, but also live in other areas in Egypt and speak Mattoki.

knowledge and traditional ideologies, even in times of political and social change. By continuing to use Nubian languages in domestic settings, speakers are not only preserving their linguistic heritage, but also reinforcing their identity within the larger narrative of Nubian resilience, especially during periods of systemic transformation and resettlement. Thus, language learning at home becomes a vital practice in sustaining the cultural continuity explored throughout this volume.

Nubian homes serve as a critical locus for shaping a positive Nubian identity. Within the home, Nubians hear and learn their native language, embrace their culture and traditions, and develop a deep sense of pride in their heritage. The home functions as a cultural anchor, preserving Nubian identity across generations. Through daily interactions, stories, songs, and communal practices, Nubian children are rooted in their cultural traditions, which they carry into the wider society. This foundation is essential for combating stereotypes and fostering a positive self-image, empowering Nubians to assert their dignity and rightful place within broader Egyptian society.

This paper examines data from the media, including films and soap operas, to explore the indexical attitudes towards Nubians established in the media showing recurring patterns and mechanisms utilized in their metalinguistic discourse representations. To investigate the metalinguistic discourse of Nubians in the media, I utilize the indexicality theory.<sup>2</sup> More specifically, I demonstrate different linguistic elements that are accompanied by noticeable patterns such as dress code, work type, skin color, and character traits. Media makers utilize these linguistic resources to create and disseminate indirect negative racial and social indexes by alluding to linguistic and non-linguistic attributions that are featured in their films or soap operas. In addition, this article presents discussion questions and analytical data showing how Nubians themselves perceive these media productions and how they feel about the associated stereotypes. Finally, it examines how Nubian speakers react to the negative indexes and how they are attributed to their language and culture, highlighting positive movements and portrayals of Nubians. The need for fluency in Arabic, a skill that carries power and prestige in several domains such as education, religion, and public media, cannot be denied. However, public awareness and counterstereotypes are urgently needed among Egyptians—Nubians, and non-

2 Indexicality theory explores the semiotic connections between linguistic forms and their social meanings, emphasizing how language both reflects and shapes social identities and ideologies. The theory highlights the importance of context, ideology, and cultural beliefs in shaping the relationship between language and social identity.

Nubians—to construct positive stances and provide fair and authentic representations of the Nubian language and culture.

## Background

This paper adopts the analytical framework of Bassiouney,<sup>3</sup> a distinguished sociolinguist and award-winning novelist, to examine the stereotypes of the stigmatized /s<sup>ʕ</sup>i:di/ dialect (Arabic spoken in the southern part of Egypt<sup>4</sup>) in Egyptian media. The study explores how visual, linguistic, and literary resources are used by media producers to construct these portrayals. Inspired by Bassiouney's analysis, I offer an analysis of the negative media portrayals of Nubians in Egypt highlighting the visual, literary, and linguistic resources as well as other patterns that manifest the negative indexes found in the media productions. While the visual resources refer to dress code, skin color (make-up used to deliberately darken skin color, for example), and overall demeanor, the literary resources refer to characters' traits, recurrent names, lower-class job associations, and subordination. The linguistic resources or metalinguistic discourse discusses the salient features of Nubian characters portrayed by the media, including the heavy accented Arabic and syntactic and phonological errors.

In this paper, the terms “Nubians and Nubian language” are mainly used to refer to both Fadija and Mattoki Nubians in Egypt. Although the term “Nobiin” refers to speakers of Fadija (Halfawi, Sikkut, and Mahas are dialects of Nobiin spoken in Sudan and Fadija is spoken in Egypt), it is exclusively used in this case to refer to Fadija speakers in Egypt as this article focuses on the media in Egypt.

Arabic is the official language that is valued and treated with high esteem in Egypt. Cairene Arabic (CA) is the most prestigious of all Egyptian dialects due to the fact that Cairo is the largest urban center; the powerful dialect is used in the media discourse. As Bassiouney puts it:<sup>5</sup>

Cairo has been the focal point of the political and cultural renaissance throughout the Arab world. Along with the central role played by Cairo both in the political arena and in the sphere of culture, came the rise of CA as the code that indexes power, as well as cultural and political superiority and authenticity in Egypt.”

3 Bassiouney, *Constructing the Stereotype*. I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Dr. Reem Bassiouney for her advice and guidance during brainstorming.

4 In this paper, International Phonetic Alphabets (IPA) transcription of Egyptian Colloquial Arabic is used. Please check appendix 2 for details. This paper uses /j/, which can be represented as /y/ in other systems.

5 Bassiouney, *Constructing the Stereotype*, p. 7.

On the other hand, the Nubian language is ranked as lower status than Arabic in Egypt. In fact, the extensive stigma attached to Nubian speakers may be the reason why some Nubians speak Arabic with their children or refrain from teaching their native Nubian language. Yet even the Arabic of Nubian speakers is highly stigmatized and ridiculed due to the associated indexes utilized by media makers. However, there are Nubians who take pride in speaking both Arabic and Nubian languages. Abou-Ras, a Nubian academic researcher, asserts that her participants have positive attitudes towards both languages, yet they favor learning and using Nubian because it is the mother or heritage language.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, there is widespread awareness among Nubians of the importance of maintaining and reviving their language. Several initiatives, including educational centers and YouTube channels, exist to teach the Nubian language and highlight the culture. Just to name a few, the Nubian Educational Center (NEC)<sup>7</sup> and the Nubian Language Society (NLS)<sup>8</sup> support the education of Nubians and help preserve their language and culture. The NEC, located in Egypt, has been actively involved in teaching the Nubian language and preserving Nubian cultural heritage. They offer language classes and cultural programs for both children and adults. Similarly, the NLS, a non-profit organization based in Washington, D.C., is dedicated to promoting, documenting, and raising awareness of the Nubian language and culture.

### Media impact on societies

In this section, I discuss the influence and impact of media on societies and the role the Egyptian media plays in establishing stereotypes and negative images of Nubians in Egypt. Media has become an effective and powerful tool to fuel disruption, rumors, misunderstandings, mockery, and discrimination. As Sánchez Macarro, a linguist, puts it “as individuals, we are all influenced, our opinions shaped, reinforced and altered by our exposure to the media.”<sup>9</sup>

In describing the media discourse, O’Keeffe, a notable applied linguist, characterizes it as a

6 Abou-Ras, *The attitude of Egyptian Nubian University Students towards Arabic and Nubian Languages*.

7 The NEC has an active Facebook group which can be accessed at the following link: <https://www.facebook.com/share/ufuiPKpvFA4Chu9p/?mibextid=qizOmg> (accessed December 2024).

8 The NLS website can be accessed at: <https://nlsnubia.com/> (accessed December 2024).

9 Sánchez Macarro, *Windows to the World*, p. 13.

public, manufactured, on-record, form of interaction. It is not ad hoc or spontaneous (in the same way as causal speaking or writing is); it is neither private nor off the record.<sup>10</sup>

The fact that media discourse is not spontaneous, but rather manufactured and purposefully chosen tells us that these negative images of Nubians are not random; they reflect specific ideologies as well as political and social stances. The fact that media production is public tells us how quickly and widely these stereotypes of Nubians are constructed and established. By using a critical discourse analysis to look at the media discourse portraying Nubians, we can see the social power abuse, dominance, and inequality exercised against Egyptian Nubians. Bassiouney argues that

public discourse, especially in the media, not only reiterates shared belief systems and ideologies, but also constructs and controls access to them.

In order to construct the /s'i:ɪ:dj/ stereotype, media reiterates indexes of the region and its speakers."<sup>11</sup> The process of stigmatization and derogation against Nubians and their language in media discourse reflects discrimination and unequal treatment of Nubian speakers on political and social levels. Recurring patterns and ideologies used to represent Nubians in movies, soap operas, and other media productions negatively influence and shape how Nubians are perceived by non-Nubian Egyptians eroding the cultural, social, and global identity of all Egyptian citizens. Participant 18, a thirty-year-old female, stated that she felt the brunt of the media's negative indexes and experienced racist and teasing responses while at school.<sup>12</sup>

The present author, a Nubian applied linguistics researcher, asserts that media in Egypt has played a significant role in perpetuating negative stereotypes, such as depicting Nubians as speaking incomprehensible Arabic and occupying lower-class jobs.<sup>13</sup> The case of Nubians' portrayal in the media is not only associated with fluency and job opportunities, but with direct insults and affronts. As a Nubian, I myself experienced situations of mockery and teasing by non-Nubian classmates at schools in Egypt. Moreover, the word /barbarj/ "barbarian," is a pejorative term extensively used in soap operas when referring to Nubians, in addition to the

10 O'Keeffe, "Media and Discourse Analysis," p. 441.

11 Bassiouney, *Constructing the Stereotype*, p.3.

12 Detailed information about the participants and their backgrounds can be found in Table 1.

13 Taha, "From Nub to Dahab," p. 118.

constant prevalent images of Nubian characters as backward, less sophisticated, naïve, and slow.

Media influences people and their beliefs; conversely, the media itself is being influenced by several social, political, economic, and social values. Particular ideologies are propagated in the media industry and these values or agendas are carefully chosen and play a crucial influential role in public discourse. Fairclough, an emeritus linguist and pioneer in Critical Discourse Analysis, asserts that

media output is very much under professional and institutional control, and in general it is those who already have other forms of economic, political or cultural power that have the best access to the media.<sup>14</sup>

In other words, the media industry is controlled by certain institutions that have political, cultural, and economic power and immense influence. According to Fairclough, the media is a powerful tool that can shape government and parties, and influence “knowledge, belief, values, social relations, and social identities.”<sup>15</sup> Thus, the media reflects our societal and cultural values and ideologies.

### Data

This article examines data spanning seventy years, including movies, soap operas, cartoons, music video clips, and documentaries. Notably, many of the documentaries were filmed in peoples’ homes, providing an intimate perspective on Nubian life. I posit that producers utilize three resources to portray Nubians in movies and soap operas: linguistic resources, visual resources, and literary resources. The examples in this article are derived from well-known Egyptian movies and the /Bakka:r/ cartoon (an Egyptian production by the Radio and Television Union, broadcast on Channel One, following the adventures of a young Nubian boy, his pet goat, and his friends) where stereotypical linguistic errors pronounced by Nubian characters are prevalent. In addition to analyzing the metalinguistic discourse in movies and cartoons, the study includes insights from nine discussion sessions held with twenty-two native Nobiin speakers. These discussions explore how Nubians themselves perceive and respond to negative representations and stereotypes in Egyptian media. The discussions also delve into Nobiin speakers’ reflections on their Arabic fluency and proficiency and how it is depicted in the media and by filmmakers and screenwriters.

<sup>14</sup> Fairclough, “Language and Globalization,” p. 40.

<sup>15</sup> Fairclough, “Language and Globalization,” p. 2.

## Theory and Methodology

The indexicality theory serves as an essential theoretical framework for this study. It involves understanding how utterances or signs are interpreted within the context of their use focusing on how meaning is shaped by social and cultural factors. By examining how specific linguistic features or signs point to social identities or cultural backgrounds, indexicality helps in analyzing how media representations reinforce or challenge existing stereotypes, particularly in the portrayal of marginalized groups like Nubians. Through this lens, the study explores how language and indexes are used to create or perpetuate social hierarchies in media. By examining linguistic choices, visual symbols, and cultural references, the study can reveal how media reinforces existing power dynamics and marginalization. For example, certain language patterns or character portrayals may elevate dominant social groups while depicting marginalized groups in subservient roles, thus reinforcing stereotypes and maintaining the status quo of social inequality. This analysis highlights the role of media in shaping perceptions and sustaining social hierarchies.

Ochs, a linguistic anthropologist, views indexicality as a spoken property through which socio-cultural contexts (such as gender) and social activities (such as gossip) are formed by taking particular stances that are indexed through the language chosen.<sup>16</sup> In other words, indexicality is interpreted in light of the semiotic associations between linguistic forms, social meanings, and identities. Ochs identifies two types of indexicality, direct and indirect, and each performs different functions in discourse. According to Ochs, direct indexicality refers to interactional stances, including evaluative stances, while indirect indexicality points to social stances.<sup>17</sup>

Among those who refer to an index as contextualization cues are Hughes and Tracy, discourse analysts, emphasizing that signaling context and reinforcing pragmatic signs are crucial for effective communication. They define indexicality as “the function by which linguistic and nonlinguistic signs point to aspects of context.”<sup>18</sup> According to Hughes and Tracy, indexicality is closely related to deixis and they could even be “sometimes interchangeable,” but they consider deixis to be a specific type of indexicality, which helps participants navigate the oral or written discourse frame through understanding references. Indexical and cultural contextual cues are essential to properly interpret inferences and understand the ideologies behind them, Johnstone et al., a group of linguists,

<sup>16</sup> Ochs, “Indexing Gender.”

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Hughes and Tracy, “Indexicality,” p. 1.

categorize indexes into two types: referential and non-referential.<sup>19</sup> On the one hand, referential indexes include pronouns and demonstratives i.e. the term denotation is based on the utterance context. On the other hand, non-referential indexes are linguistic forms that convey or construct social meaning. They consider “social meaning to be a “concept that encompasses matters such as register (in the narrow sense of situation appropriateness), stance (certainty, authority, etc.), and social identity (class, ethnicity, interactional role, etc.).”<sup>20</sup> They also explain further that the relationship between linguistic forms and social meanings can be manifested at different levels of indexicality order. They consider the first-order indexes as unnoticeable and unintentional because they are common among people, unlike second-order indexes that are both noticeable, recognized, and intentional because of their association with social meanings and shared ideologies. An example of the first-order indexes is a regional vowel variation, while the stereotypes and negative images of Nubians in the movies and soap operas are examples of second-order indexes.

In his seminal work, Silverstein, a leading linguistics anthropologist, explores the order of indexicality, distinguishing between first and second-order indexes. He notes that the second-order indexes are “creative or effective” and potentially can have ethno-metapragmatically driven interpretation.<sup>21</sup> This interpretation allows speakers to not only presuppose meanings based on existing social structures or stereotypes, but also to actively reshape and reinforce these meanings in dynamic, context-specific ways. In other words, the presupposed indexical meanings align with a higher metapragmatic order and are “creatively” transformed to perpetuate new or existing social narratives. Silverstein’s theory of indexicality offers a useful framework for understanding how media representations of Nubians both draw upon and reshape existing social stereotypes. By focusing on second-order indexes, we gain a deeper understanding of how linguistic and visual elements — such as accents, racialized portrayals, or specific character traits — are not merely reflective of preexisting social hierarchies but are strategically manipulated to reinforce and sustain these hierarchies. This framework reveals how media creators play an active role in constructing and perpetuating narratives of marginalization, embedding them within the cultural fabric in ways that maintain power imbalances. In the context of Nubian representation, second-order indexicality is evident when filmmakers and screenwriters overexaggerate certain linguistic features — such as accents,

19 Johnstone et al., “Mobility, Indexicality, and the Enregisterment of ‘Pittsburghese,’” p. 81.

20 Ibid.

21 Silverstein, “Indexical Order and the Dialectics of Sociolinguistic Life,” p. 194.

grammatical errors, or mispronunciations—and link them to negative stereotypes like servitude, simplicity, or inferiority. By doing so, these linguistic forms become socially charged and reinforce existing racial and social hierarchies. For example, the media's portrayal of Nubians through broken Arabic or exaggerated accents is a deliberate act that imbues these features with racial and social implications. This transformation from unnoticed linguistic markers to socially meaningful symbols is central to how media perpetuates harmful stereotypes and embeds them into the cultural imagination.

Eckert, a prominent sociolinguist, emphasizes the close connection between speakers' ideologies and stylistic practices (both linguistic and non-linguistic) utilized to construct worldwide views and social meanings.<sup>22</sup> I argue that the stylistic choices—such as dark skin portrayals, costumes depicting servants and doorkeepers, bright clothing, heavily accented Arabic, and numerous fluency and accuracy errors—are deliberate and conscious decisions made by producers and media creators. These choices are designed not only to reflect and reinforce their ideological perspectives, but also to cater to audience expectations and stereotypes. By perpetuating these negative portrayals, media producers exploit prejudices and biases to attract larger viewership and generate higher profits. These portrayals also reflect the wider media assumptions of Nubians' social and political roles in the Egyptian society.

This article focuses on the second-order non-referential indexes that producers and media makers use to cast Nubians as backward, less sophisticated, naïve, and dark-skinned. Their stereotypical linguistic features, physical traits, and character traits are consistently tied to pejorative images and second-order indexes, depicting Nubians as low-income, lower-class workers from inferior communities. Characters in movies and soap operas who play Nubian roles often use specific linguistic resources and salient visual and literary resources alongside direct and indirect negative indexes to reinforce these stereotypes. These social meanings are highly marked, deliberately crafted, and reinforced by the media's portrayal of Nubians in the Egyptian culture. However, Nubians have responded by creating positive personal and social stances against these negative portrayals, speaking out in condemnation, and initiating their own channels and venues to authentically represent their identity and culture. These efforts are discussed in detail later in the article, particularly in the "Moving Forward: What Can Be Done?" section.

22 Eckert, "Variation and the Indexical Field."

### Established negative indexes and stereotypes

This section outlines the established negative stereotypes of Nubians through media including movies, soap operas, and songs. I highlight the salient visual and literary features of Nubians that carry second-order indexes.

After investigating various Egyptian soap operas and films in terms of character roles, traits, dress codes, and visual features, I argue that consistent patterns and attitudes shape the use of these literary and visual elements, along with linguistic features. Nubians, in particular, are often depicted in subordinate and inferior roles, typically portrayed in lower-class jobs. Throughout these media productions, they frequently appear as minor characters working as servants, waiters, cooks, doorkeepers, or housekeepers. Moreover, they are often ridiculed or criticized by both their employers and peers. Egyptian television dramas commonly cast Nubians in these roles, subjecting them to mockery and insults. Similarly, many Egyptian films, especially those from the mid-20th century, portray Nubians in menial positions, reinforcing negative stereotypes. These portrayals contribute to the marginalization of Nubians and perpetuate harmful stereotypes, underscoring ongoing issues with representation in the media.

Two recent soap operas stand out as exceptions to the general portrayal of Nubians. The first soap opera is /ʔil-ʔasˤdiqa:/ “Friends,” a 29-episode series that streamed in 2002. In this show, the Nubian character was not treated as an equal by one of the friends, but rather as an outsider included only because of a mutual friend who did business with him. Despite this, there was a notable positive shift in the portrayal with other lead characters enjoying his Arabic and Nubian songs. In episode 12 of the “Friends” soap opera, the show featured a pretend Nubian wedding as a performance for tourists, intended to promote one of the lead characters’ businesses by highlighting the cultural diversity of Egyptians and showcasing a unique authentic tradition.<sup>23</sup> Overall, two of the main characters spoke very highly of Nubians, expressing respect and appreciation for both the people and their culture.

The second soap opera, /ʔil-muʔannj/ “The Singer,” which was aired in 2016, features a famous Nubian actor as the main character, with the entire storyline revolving around his life. Although it did not achieve the widespread popularity of other soap operas, it stands out for its authentic portrayal of Nubian culture. The series vividly depicts Nubian daily life and homescapes, showcasing traditional Nubian houses, the Nile River, iconic songs, palm trees and dates,

<sup>23</sup> See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=koEE24Pco2E> (accessed December 2024).



Figure 1.  
The screenshot shows a non-Nubian actor named Soliman Eid in blackface pretending to be Nubian. Source: *ʕija:l habiba* “Love Birds” (2005).

boats, and musical instruments. These cultural elements offer a rich and genuine portrayal of Nubian heritage. For instance, episode 5 poignantly depicts the forced relocation of Nubians from their homeland villages, with characters dressed in traditional Nubian clothing, sorrowfully leaving their own homes.<sup>24</sup> This moving depiction highlights the cultural and historical significance of the events, providing a glimpse into the struggles and resilience of the Nubian people, while grounding the narrative in real experiences and traditions.

In relation to character traits, Nubian characters are usually depicted as less sophisticated than non-Nubian characters, yet they are sometimes more honest and trustworthy. However, they are mainly portrayed as naïve, slow, backward, and unintelligent, who are easily manipulated and tricked with intelligibility issues or disabilities. The names of the characters are mainly *Othman*, *Idris*, or *Seliman*. In the */ʔil-fa:nu:s ʔas-siħirj/* “The Magic Lantern,” a Nubian waiter fails to recognize that two pretend waiters, who are trying to retrieve magic lanterns, are not Nubians.<sup>25</sup> The two characters who only used a single word in Nubian */maskagna/* “hello,” then make totally random sounds that do not belong to any language whatsoever. When asked if he understood the other two waiters, the Nubian waiter explains: “I am not a fool, they are not from my hometown, but they are coming from a high honorable place. I know, I am not a fool.” Despite the waiter’s confidence, he was easily tricked, and too ignorant to know if others were speaking his language.

In movies and soap operas, literary elements are closely intertwined with visual and linguistic resources to reinforce stereotypes. As for the visual resources, Nubian characters are

24 See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vYfif7sAnpw&list=PL4ZQAYKf0Bc-GzfgRN8M9HJe152WYJ9D&index=5> (accessed December 2024).

25 See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vLW3gDcVzak> (accessed December 2024).

depicted with dark skin, and in several cases, actors use blackface to inaccurately represent Nubian skin color. Both male and female characters are typically shown with dark skin and are often dressed in the uniforms of cleaners or waiters, or men wearing the traditional white /galla:bi:jjja/ “a loose-fitting garment.” Figure 1 provides a typical example of a blackfaced Nubian character in movies and soap operas. The scene is from the movie /ʕija:l ha:bi:ba/ “Love Birds,” which streamed in 2005. In the movie, the Nubian character is constantly subjected to ridicule and insults due to stereotypical portrayals of dark skin by other characters. Throughout the film, numerous derogatory references are made toward the Nubian character and his family. Shockingly, some of these discriminatory remarks come from the character himself, who is impersonating a Nubian man in blackface. In one particularly offensive scene, the actor Ramez Galal addresses the Nubian character, saying, “Come on, you don’t want your heart to be black, just like your face.”<sup>26</sup> This film contains numerous racist and discriminatory indexes, perpetuating harmful stereotypes.

Similarly, media makers explicitly and frequently make several direct insults and negative indexes about Nubians by hurling clear and affronting insults and derogatory references. In the soap opera /nikdib law ʔulna: ma: binhibj/ “We’d Be Lying to Say We Didn’t Love,” streamed on TV in 2013, a major female actress, Ragaa Al-Giddawy, refers to the Nubian male character and his family as “barbarians” saying: “Listen, I won’t let you marry my daughter unless you bring all your barbarian folks right here to ask for her hand in marriage.”<sup>27</sup> In another soap opera /huru:f in-nasʕb/ “Letters of Fraud”, released in 2000, the actor Hisham Selim impersonates a Nubian by wearing waiter apparel, darkening his face, and referring to himself as “Othman Abdel El-Basset, the one Egyptian barbarian.”<sup>28</sup> In a movie produced in 1998 /sʕi:ʕi:dj fi:l-ga:mʕa ʔil-amri:ki:jjja/ “An Upper-Egyptian at the American University of Cairo”, the actor Mohamed Henedi, tells a minor Nubian female character: “No need to turn the light off. I cannot see your face already. Your face is as dark as the night.”<sup>29</sup>

These examples highlight how media productions reinforce and perpetuate negative stereotypes about Nubians through both visual and literary elements. The use of blackface, derogatory language,

26 See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z9ViDzUnJU> (accessed December 2024).

27 See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-G-5gKXOkNQ> (accessed December 2024).

28 See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=irloGB1-N6A> (accessed December 2024).

29 He was not a non-Nubian Egyptian actor born in 1887. He was one the earliest actors to stigmatize and grossly exaggerate Nubians in movies and plays. His style of portraying Nubians, that includes ridiculing their Arabic fluency and accuracy, is still used in Egypt. See [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UAPYImuAK\\_g](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UAPYImuAK_g) (accessed December 2024).

and offensive depictions further marginalize Nubians, casting them in demeaning and inferior roles.

These portrayals are not isolated incidents but part of a broader pattern of racial discrimination in media, where negative depictions of Nubians are normalized and repeatedly portrayed. This ongoing misrepresentation embeds harmful stereotypes into popular culture, contributing to the wider social marginalization of Nubian communities.

Having established the connection between the visual and literary resources used to propagate these stereotypes, I will now turn to the analysis of linguistic resources and metalinguistic discourse. This next section will explore how specific linguistic choices, such as intentional grammatical or pronunciation errors portrayed by characters impersonating Nubians, are used to ridicule and reinforce negative stereotypes. These deliberate linguistic inaccuracies often serve to mock Nubians, further entrenching racial and social hierarchies. By examining these elements, I aim to offer a nuanced understanding of the role language plays in the construction and perpetuation of these harmful portrayals.

### Metalinguistic discourse: examples and analysis

This section examines the metalinguistic discourse or linguistic resources of Nubian characters focusing on the stigmatized linguistic and pronunciation errors portrayed and derived from movies and soap operas. In particular, I analyze several examples of stereotypical language errors produced by characters portraying Nubians in movies and cartoons.<sup>30</sup>

Actor Ali Kassar<sup>31</sup>

(1) a. \*ʔinta ʔismak jasmi:na?  
Q name-your.M PR  
“Your name is Yassmina?”

b. ʕumra-k-f ʃiribi-t  
ever-you.M-NEG drink-PST.2.M.S  
nabiz zaji di?  
wine.M like this.DEM.F  
“Haven’t you ever drunk wine like this (before)?”

30 Glossing abbreviations used in this paper: 1- first person; 2- second person; 3- third person; IMP- imperative; PR- proper noun; DEM- demonstrative; PRS- present; PST- past; FUT- future marker; SG- singular; PL- plural; PREP- preposition; NEG- negation; WH.Q- WH question; Q- question particle; QUANT- quantifier; PCP- participle; PM- possessive marker; M- masculine; F- feminine; VOC- vocative.

31 He was a non-Nubian Egyptian actor born in 1887. He was one of the earliest actors to stigmatize and grossly exaggerate Nubians in movies and plays. His style of portraying Nubians, that includes ridiculing their Arabic fluency and accuracy, is still used in Egypt. See [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UAPYImuAK\\_g](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UAPYImuAK_g) (accessed December 2024).

In example 1a, a Nubian character is talking to a female character in Arabic, but he mistakenly addresses her using a masculine possessive form, highlighting his perceived poor command of Arabic.<sup>32</sup> Similarly, in example 1b the Nubian character demonstrates a lack of accuracy by using a feminine demonstrative with a masculine noun which is ungrammatical.

*Actors Gomaa Edriss and Ali Oraby*<sup>33</sup>

- (2) a. *ʃu:f*                      *if-fut<sup>ʕ</sup>*    *il-ha:mis*    *fi*                      *ʔe:h!*  
 check.2M.S-US    round-M    the-fifth    in.PREP    EXCLAM  
 “check what is in the fifth section for us!”
- b. \**ilʔasanser*            *mitʔatʔ<sup>ʕ</sup>al*            *ja:*                      *usta:z*  
 the elevator    broken            VOC                      HON  
 “The elevator is broken, Sir.”
- inn*    *kunt-i*            *mistaʔgel-a*    *itʔlaʃj*  
 if    was.2.F.S    hurry.2.F.S    go-2.F.S  
*ʃala*                      *rigl-ikj*  
 on.PREP    foot-your.F  
 “If you are in a hurry, go on your foot.”
- c. \**ana*    *ni-ʃu:f*                      *ʃa:wiz*                      *ʔe:h*  
 I            PRS.1.PL-see    want.PCP.M.S    what  
 “I (will) see what they want.”
- d. *ʔe:h*    *illi*            *ʃatal-u?*    \**ana*    *lazim*  
 WH.Q    which    break.it    I            have.to  
*je-ruħ*                      *l-il-waki:l*  
 PRS.3.M.S-GO    to.PREP-the-agent.M  
 “What caused it to break down? I have to go to the agent.”

Beyond gender agreement errors, the portrayal includes fluency errors such as pronunciation mistakes. For instance, in example 2a, the character fails to produce the /x/ sound, so he replaces it with the /h/ sound i.e., /ʔil-ha:mis/ ‘fifth’ instead of /il-xa:mis/. Additionally, in the same example, the Nubian character mispronounces the vowel in the word /if-ʃut/ ‘section’ instead of /if-ʃot<sup>ʕ</sup>/. In example 2b, multiple accuracy language errors are evident. First, the Nubian character addresses a group of people using a singular masculine

32 Arabic is a grammatically gendered language in which verbs, nouns, and adjective always assign either a male or female case based on the person addressed. For example, nouns and adjectives or nouns have to agree in gender.

33 See [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l\\_18m7gWKQM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l_18m7gWKQM) (accessed December 2024).

form *usta:z* “sir” before switching to a singular feminine form instead of the appropriate plural. Examples 2c and 2d are ungrammatical as the Nubian character uses plural and third person masculine forms, respectively, when he refers to himself.

Actor *Sayed Sulieman*<sup>34</sup>

- (3) a. \**huwa* *fe:n* *ja:* *ʔaxu:j:a*  
 is WH.Q VOC dear-my  
*ʕelbet* *il-saga:j:er*  
 carton.F the-cigarette.F  
 “Oh my dear, where is the carton of cigarette?”

*w-il* *wala:ʕa* *bita:ʕ-u* *di*  
 and-the lighter.F PM.M this.DEM.F  
 “And the lighter of his?”

- b. \**is-sitt* *ʕa:jiz-ak* *ruħ-i*  
 the-lady want.PCP.2.M.S go.IMP.F.S  
*ʕu:f-i* *ʕa:jiz* *ʔe:h*  
 see.IMP.F.S want.PCP.3.M.S what  
 “The lady wants (to see) you.  
 Go, (and) see what she wants!”

In example 3a, the Nubian character is looking for his boss’s cigarette and the lighter used a possessive marker that does not agree, gender-wise, with the noun it modifies. Similarly, in example 3b, the same Nubian character talks to a female co-worker about his employer who is a woman, but uses masculine forms (masculine participles), and hence, there is gender disagreement.

Further examples highlight systematic gender disagreement between determiners, quantifiers, and possessive markers and their modified nouns. Examples 4a, 4b, and 4c show such ungrammatical usage.

Actor *Ali Oraby*<sup>35</sup>

- (4) a. \**ana* *ma-nʕiraf-f* *ʔaj:* *ħaga* *ʕan*  
 I NG-know.1-NG any thing.F about  
*mawdʕuʕ* *di*  
 matter.M this.DEM.F  
 “I do not know anything about this matter.”

<sup>34</sup> See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vLW3gDcVzak> (accessed December 2024).

<sup>35</sup> See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PmgjwTZ6aRM> for 4a; [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ryWp\\_nqybml](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ryWp_nqybml) for 4b, and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZF8dncakq7k> for 4c (accessed December 2024).

- b. \*di bejt-na wi-ʔihna ʕa:j:la waħid  
 this.F house.M-our and-we family.F one.QUANT.M  
 “This is (like) our house. We are (like) one family.”
- c. ʕagab-hum ij-fuyl bita:ʕ-ak xa:les  
 like-they the-work.M PM.M absolutely  
 “They absolutely like your (f) work.”

Examples 4a, 4b, and 4c purposefully demonstrate the Nubian character’s lack of accuracy and proficiency. In 4a, /mawdʕu:ʕ di/ “this matter,” the feminine demonstrative does not agree with the masculine noun in gender. In contrast, in 4b, /ʕa:j:la waħid/ “one family,” the masculine quantifier does not agree with the feminine noun. In a similar way, the Nubian character uses masculine possessive markers when talking to his sister, rather than the feminine using possessive markers /bita:ʕik/ “your.”

Actor Mohamed El Adendani<sup>36</sup>

- (5) a. \*ana bi-nraʕaħ il-ħag abdo ismail  
 I PRS-elect.1 the-hajj PR PR  
 “I elect Hajj Abdo Ismail.”
- b. qarrar-na lazem wi-ħatman  
 decide.PST-us have.to and-definitely  
 ne-ʕmel waħid rubatʕaja  
 PRS.PL-form one.M gang.M  
 “We definitely decided (that) we have to form a \*gang (union).”
- c. ana ʕa:jiz ne-ʕraf il-ʔwel  
 I want.PCP.1.M.S PRS.PL-know the-first  
 “I would like to know first.”

Example 5a shows a case of noun-verb disagreement, whereby the Nubian character uses plural verb conjugation when referring to himself. On the other hand, in example 5b, he chooses the wrong word i.e., using /rubatʕaja/ “gang” instead of /rabtʕa/ “union” as an example of his intelligibility and incoherence. Example 5c shows a grammatical error where the speaker uses the singular first person for the participle “want” followed immediately by the plural form of the verb “know,” creating an awkward and inconsistent structure.

As we can see, all examples present syntactic disagreement (noun-adjective agreement, verb-noun agreement, demonstrative

<sup>36</sup> See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ixZ9YtVLU3Q> (accessed December 2024).

and pronoun disagreement) or phonological errors or idiosyncrasy, often accompanied by a heavy accent of Arabic. The question is, why these language errors in particular? There are two possible hypotheses or scenarios that explain the media fixation on these intentional metalinguistic discourse errors. The first postulation is associated with historical linguistic challenges. The earliest Nubians, often monolingual speakers of Nubian, who migrated to different areas in Egypt such as Cairo and Alexandria to look for job opportunities had some language difficulties when learning Arabic due to the influence of their mother tongue. For example, Rouchdy, a linguistic researcher, noted in her 1991 study, that non-competent Fadija bilingual speakers had a tendency to add the suffix -a to borrowed Arabic words such as /ani:da/ "stubborn."<sup>37</sup>

Nevertheless, do Nubians, considering all the generations that have emerged since the forced relocations because of the Aswan Dam construction in 1905, still face language proficiency and accuracy issues? Are Nubians today merely monolingual speakers of Nubian? Most Nubians today are bilingual speakers of Arabic and Nubian. Unfortunately, in some cases, they are monolinguals of Arabic. The Arabic spoken by Nubians varies regionally; for example, those in Aswan or Luxor commonly speak the *Sesidi* dialect, while Cairo residents use the Cairene dialect.

The second hypothesis points to intentional stereotyping prevalent in the media. The portrayal of Nubians as "broken," flawed, unintelligible, faulty, or incompetent, coupled with a heavy accent, is deliberate and serves to reinforce stigmas and propaganda surrounding these media productions. These linguistic inaccuracies are not random; they represent recurring patterns in the language used by filmmakers and screenwriters. Such portrayals often go hand-in-hand with blackface and visual tropes that depict Nubians as belonging to a lower socioeconomic status. I believe that the second hypothesis provides a compelling explanation for the persistence of these stereotypes in Egyptian media. By amplifying these intentional errors, the media perpetuates widespread mockery, prejudice, and harmful representations of Nubians, further entrenching societal stigmas.

37 Rouchdy, *Nubians and the Nubian Language in Contemporary Egypt*, p.27.

### Discussion data: Participants and Procedures

Table 1.  
A table showing  
the participants of  
this study.

Group	Gender	Age	Education	City of residence
Participant 1	male	70's	BA	Cairo
Participant 2	male	70's	BA	Cairo
Participant 3	male	70's	BA	Dallas
Participant 4	male	60's	BA	Aswan
Participant 5	male	60's	PHD	Cairo
Participant 6	male	60's	BA	Aswan
Participant 7	male	60's	BA	Aswan
Participant 8	male	60's	MA	Aswan
Participant 9	female	60's	PHD	Cairo
Participant 10	male	50's	BA	Cairo
Participant 11	female	50's	BA	Aswan
Participant 12	female	50's	BA	Cairo
Participant 13	female	50's	MA	Aswan
Participant 14	female	40's	MA	Aswan
Participant 15	male	40's	BA	Riyadh
Participant 16	male	30's	BA	Cairo
Participant 17	female	30's	BA	Cairo
Participant 18	female	30's	BA	Dammam
Participant 19	female	30's	BA	Luxor
Participant 20	male	30's	BA	Dammam
Participant 21	male	20's	BA	Aswan
Participant 22	male	20's	BA	Cairo
<b>Total (22)</b>				
Native and heritage	8 females	3 in their 20's	2 PhD	9 in Cairo
Nobiin speakers	14 males	5 in their 30's 2 in their 40's 3 in their 50's 6 in their 60's 3 in their 70's	3 MA 17 BA	8 in Aswan 2 in Dammam 1 in Dallas 1 in Luxor 1 in Riyadh

A discussion was held with native Nobiin speakers to explore their perception of the negative indexes associated with themselves and the Nubian language in the Egyptian media. There were twenty-two participants: eight females and fourteen males ranging in age from twenty to seventy years old. All the participants were educated and held various higher education degrees (bachelor's, master's, and Ph.D. qualifications). Responses were not anonymous, as identifying information was deemed beneficial for analyzing social

variables. Participants were recruited through the researcher's social networks (family, friends, and community members). All participants provided consent prior to the discussion.

Most participants reside in Egypt: eight in Aswan, nine in Cairo, and one in Luxor. Three participants currently live in Saudi Arabia and one participant lives in the United States. The majority of the participants are bilingual (fluent in both Arabic and Nobiin). Seven participants, however, are heritage speakers of Nobiin, meaning they understand Nobiin, but primarily speak Arabic. Table 1 provides details about the participants' background information.

The researcher showed each participant pictures of Egyptian movies, TV shows, songs, and documentaries. After presenting the image, the researcher asked indirect questions to let the participants talk about the pictures leading to their views about the Nubians' representations, their clothes portrayal and authenticity, the characters depicted, their roles, and skin color as shown in the Egyptian media (movies, soap operas, TV programs, songs, cartoons, and documentary movies). Open-ended questions were used to generate rich, meaningful responses and insights. The researcher always asked the participants to provide illustrations, examples, and/or clarifications. A discussion was held with Fadija Nobiin speakers to show how they perceive the negative indexes attributed to themselves and the Nubian language in the Egyptian media.

### **Discussion: Results and findings summary**

To analyze the discussion data, I coded it and then created a graph for each question to organize and categorize the collected data visually. This section presents the study discussion results, their frequencies, and some of the participants' statements and opinions.

#### *Early Nubian representations in the Egyptian media*

The distribution of the first discussion question is presented in graph 3 in Figure 3. It reveals that there are twenty-one participants stating that the early representations of Nubians in the Egyptian media are discriminatory and prejudicial (95%), while one participant indicated that they were not intentionally belittling or undermining them (5%). Moreover, participant 12, a female participant in her fifties who lives in Cairo, added that the media, including movies, at that time was informative about Nubians and their lives. From her point of view, Nubians in these movies, for example, were portrayed as trustworthy people who are famous for their excellent personal hygiene and honesty.

Figure 2.  
An example of the pictures shown to the participants to start the discussion. The image depicts two characters — Ismail Yassine on the right and Abdel Ghani El Nagdi on the left — who painted their faces black to impersonate Nubians. Source: /?il-fa.nu:s ?as-sihirj/ ‘The Magic Lantern’ (1960).



On the other hand, Dr. Mohammad Ali-Bik<sup>38</sup> asserts that media makers consistently presented a stereotypical exaggerated image of Nubians portrayed as less sophisticated and naïve, even though, in reality, they are recognized within the Egyptian society for their honesty and straightforwardness. He further stated that Egyptian media has marginalized Nubians in many ways, including associating them with exaggerated negative portrayals, and primarily depicting them in low-income jobs such as doorkeepers and workers in houses, hotels, and restaurants. This association stems from the business goals of media producers. By perpetuating harmful stereotypes and sensationalized depictions, producers attract a larger audience, which in turn boosts viewership ratings and advertising revenue. These portrayals create a dramatic narrative that appeals to viewers' preconceptions and biases, making the content more marketable. Consequently, media producers benefit financially from the

38 I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my uncle, Dr. Mohammad Ali-Bik, Professor of Mineralogy and Geochemistry at the National Research Centre in Egypt, for his invaluable insights and feedback. I am also deeply grateful to my family members and friends who assisted with the survey study. My heartfelt gratitude goes to my late brother, Taha Taha (d. 2023), whose input and responses to the discussion questions were foundational to this work.

Furthermore, I am incredibly grateful to the editorial team for their unwavering support throughout this journey. Anne Jennings provided continuous instrumental guidance, tips, and recommendations, particularly during the initial data collection phase in 2022. Dr. Anna Boozer dedicated significant time to reviewing multiple versions of this paper, providing thorough and invaluable feedback. Lastly, I would like to thank Alexandros Tsakos for his considerable efforts in enhancing the quality and presentation of this manuscript.

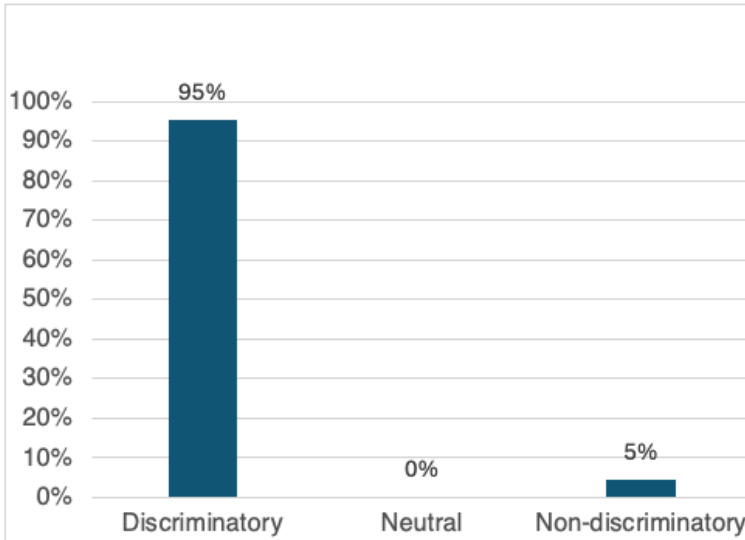


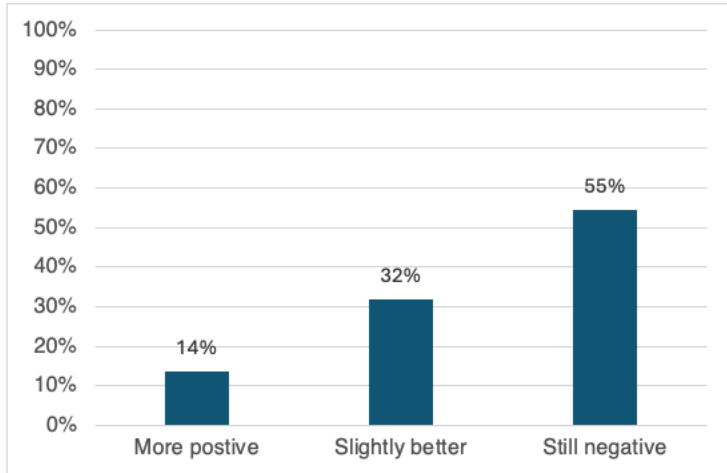
Figure 3. The graph shows the responses of participants regarding the early representation of Nubians in the media.

commercial success of their productions, reinforcing negative stereotypes and continuing a cycle of profit-driven exploitation.

Dr. Ali-Bik believes that the government has failed to protect these minorities, including Nubians, and has not taken sufficient steps to include them in Egyptian media production and media channels. This exclusion exacerbates the issue, leaving Nubians underrepresented and inaccurately portrayed in mainstream media. Moreover, he indicates that he: “blames the Egyptian cinema which has focused since the 60s on only promoting pan-Arabism as the sole national identity of all Egyptians neglecting and erasing the identities of all other minorities such as Nubians, Amazig, and Bedouin Egyptians. It was a mistake to perform this homogeneous anti-diversity policy that disintegrated multiculturalism without considering the rich history of Egypt’s cultural diversity, e.g., Pharaohs, Romans, Copts, Ottomans, etc.”

All the participants are aware that portraying Nubians as underprivileged and low-paid workers is derived from the fact that these were typical professions occupied by those who migrated to Cairo and Alexandria in the early 20th century, particularly during the significant relocations because of the High Dam construction between 1902 and 1964. These early migrations were largely driven by limited educational opportunities and the well-earned reputation of Nubians as trustworthy, diligent, hardworking, honest, and faithful individuals.

Figure 4.  
The graph exhibits  
the distribution  
of the recent  
representations  
of Nubians in the  
media.



However, Nubians continue to be depicted primarily in lower-class jobs, overlooking the distinguished and reputable careers they hold today. Participants noted that among the discriminatory attitudes reflected in the media towards Nubians is the stigma associated with their use of unintelligible or incompetent Arabic and their dark skin. The media extensively and offensively emphasizes these pejorative images, perpetuating negative stereotypes prevalent in Egypt.

#### *Have the Nubian representations in the media recently changed?*

Figure 4 shows that 55% of the participants believe that there are still negative representations of Nubians in the media channels. In comparison, 32% think there is a slightly positive attitude in their pictures. Additionally, 14% of total responses generally maintain a more positive change. Participant 17, a thirty-three-year-old female who lives in Cairo, remarked that the situation remains the same with “abusive and derogatory references. No one cares about getting to know the real Nubians or their culture.” Similarly, participant 11, a fifty-year-old female expressed her disappointment with the current portrayal of Nubians in the media, particularly the use of heavily accented Arabic which often contains linguistic errors.

On the other hand, participant 21, a young male in his twenties, observed a slight improvement in the representation of Nubians on social media platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter, as well as some TV shows and programs. However, participant 20, a thirty-year-old male participant, stated that “you will not be able to find a single Nubian show host. They do not look at us as Egyptian.” Over-

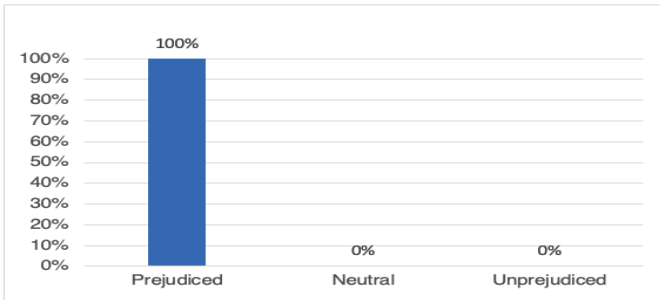


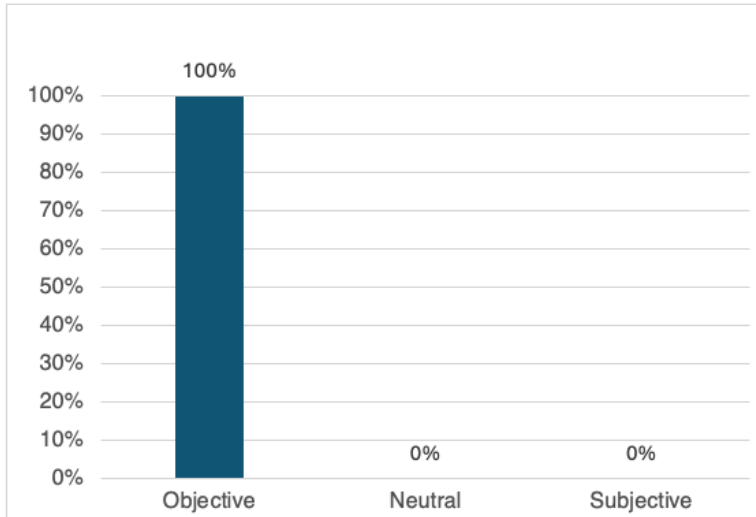
Figure 5. The graph presents Nubians views regarding their portrayals in movies and soap operas.

all, Nubians are still treated and portrayed in a condescending and patronizing way. Nevertheless, there is a slightly more constructive depiction of Nubians nowadays, it remains limited and bound to specific venues and platforms such as social media, documentaries, and talk shows. That being said, the following discussion focuses on participants' views regarding the representation of Nubians in movies and soap operas. Discussions of media platforms such as social media are outside the scope of this paper.

#### *Portrayals of Nubians in movies and soap operas*

There is a total consensus among Nubians that there is a high prejudice and bigotry in Egyptian soap operas and movies as shown in Figure 5. A sixty-year-old speaker asserts that "not only there is bullying and mockery, but also direct insults and slurs on films and soap operas." Another female speaker in her thirties mentioned that non-Nubian Egyptians are ignorant of Nubians, their culture, and their language, adding "I do not understand why characters feel the need to use blackface when pretending to be or imitating Nubians. It seems like they fail to recognize that Nubians, like many other ethnic groups, have a range of skin tones and shades. This crude portrayal oversimplifies the diversity within the Nubian community and reinforces harmful stereotypes, reducing an entire group of people to a single, inaccurate characteristic. Such depictions are not only misleading, but also disrespectful as they ignore the complexity of Nubian identity and culture. It is disheartening that, rather than portraying Nubians accurately, the media resorts to such reductive and disrespectful depictions." Many participants also reported several negative indexes and attitudes in film and showed productions, including racism, belittling, generalization, and bias that stigmatize and defame their reputations.

Figure 6.  
The graph exhibits  
objective Nubian  
portrayal in  
documentary  
movies.



#### *Depictions of Nubians in documentary movies*

Alternatively, Nubian representations in documentary movies are very objective, as shown in Figure 6 below. The widespread consensus responses indicate that the documentary movies represent authentic images and pictures of the Nubian culture, language, lifestyle, values, and traditions. Participant 9, a sixty-year-old female speaker commented, “these documentaries play a role in preserving the Nubian heritage and culture.” I believe that documentary movies, unlike fictionalized movies, do not target profit, but rather the true people and cultures. Several recently produced documentaries about Nubians are available on YouTube, covering topics like food, the Nile River sacredness, handicrafts, weddings, homescapes, and customs.

Notable examples include /a:j-ga:jilli/ “Remember Me”,<sup>39</sup> uploaded in 2011, and /sono/ “Roots” in 2020,<sup>40</sup> both of them offering viewers a more accurate and respectful look at the richness of Nubian culture.

#### *How are the Nubians portrayed in music video clips?*

Similarly, music video clips have an essential and promising role in maintaining the Nubian language and cultural heritage.<sup>41</sup> These music video clips are also accessible on YouTube and discuss vital issues such as migration, relocation, family bonds, solidarity,

39 See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8X5bmom-2SA> (accessed December 2024).

40 See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AUocl5ft-E> (accessed December 2024).

41 In this study, music video clips refer to recorded video clips or filmed performances usually accompanied by dancing, visual images, and musical instruments intended to promote and showcase artists and cultures and marketing for their albums.

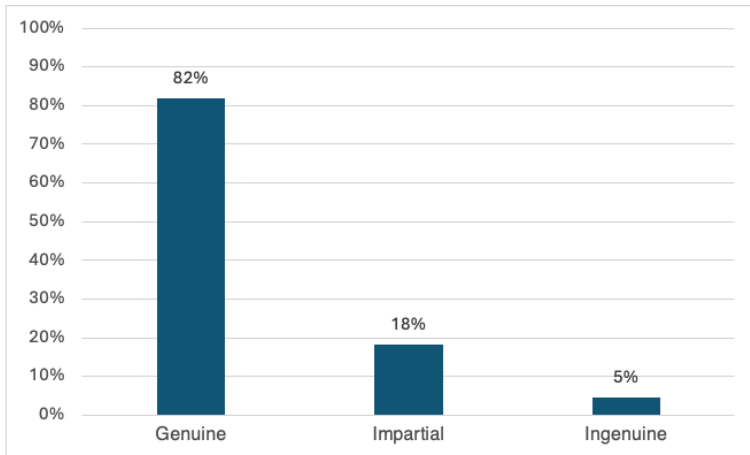


Figure 7. The graph shows responses of Nubian participants about their portrayal in music videos.

religion, and other inspirational themes. Figure 7 presents question five discussion results, and we can see that most participants agree that the Nubians are genuinely represented in music video clips (80%). The impartiality of Nubian representations in music video clips amounts to 18% compared to the frequency of the ingenuine representations of Nubians in YouTube video clips.

Participant 22, a young male in his twenties, explained that Nubian music video clips have “Touched the hearts and souls of millions of non-Nubian Egyptians and they know some songs by heart, even if they do not understand the Nubian language.” Conversely, participant 13, a fifty- two-year-old female speaker, believes that most of the videotaped songs are not authentic as they are filmed exclusively in the western part of Aswan and have several overgeneralized elements. She also noted that “many people dancing in these music video clips are not Nubians and cannot dance as Nubians.” Agreeing with the majority of the participants, I believe that Nubian songs, whether they are audio or video recorded, are powerful tools for portraying the real Nubian culture and preserving both language and tradition. Moreover, they have had a positive impact on both Nubian and non-Nubian Egyptians, helping to keep the Nubian music and folklore alive.

Figure 8.  
A picture of  
Mohamed Mounir,  
a Nubian Egyptian  
legend singer and  
actor. Source:  
Essam (2022).



*The role played by Mounir and his songs in promoting Nubian culture and language*

While discussing their portrayal in the videotaped songs, all Nobiin participants referred to Mohamed Mounir, a popular and accomplished Fadija Nobiin singer and actor. Mounir, who sings in both Arabic and Nobiin incorporates diverse musical genres into his work, including Egyptian, Nubian, blues, jazz, and reggae. Widely regarded as an iconic artist, he is affectionately known by his fans in both Egypt and Germany as /il-malik/ “The King”, a title inspired by one of his popular plays.

Mounir is among the Nubians who were displaced to Cairo following the floods and the construction of the Aswan High Dam. He addresses profound philosophical, social, and political issues throughout his songs. Over his career, he has performed in twelve movies, four tv shows, three plays, and released more than 24 albums.

Of his 350 songs, approximately ten are in the Nubian language, some of which have been translated into Arabic and are accessible on platforms YouTube and social media.

In 2016, Mounir starred in the tv show titled /il-muyannj/ “The Singer,” which aired on television and YouTube. The tv show revolves around Mounir’s personal and professional life, his Nubian heritage, and raising important issues for Nubians in Egypt including Nubian forced relocations, the sacredness of the Nile River to Nubians, and various Nubian customs and home lifestyles.

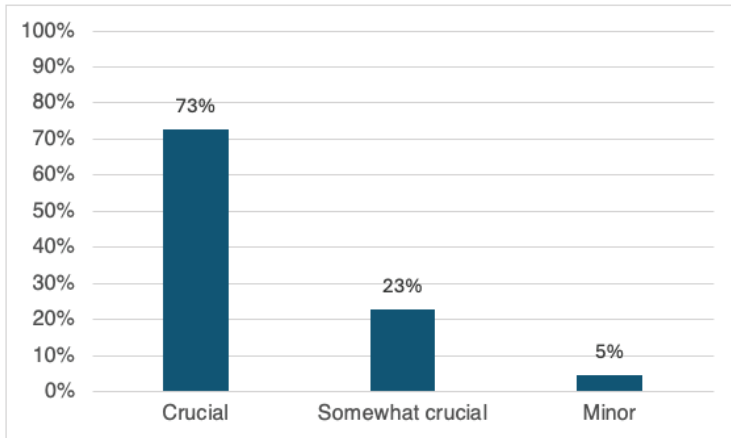


Figure 9.  
The graph reflects  
the participants'  
views about  
Mounir's role.

In an interview with the Egyptian pop singer, Mounir was asked about his Nubian roots and history during his lifetime.<sup>42</sup> In responding to this question, Mounir asserts that he does not

understand why the words “Nubia” and “Nubian” have become such a problem, why it’s taken this racial direction [...] I’ve always wished that the Nubian culture would be treated as a distinct and special culture within the Egyptian culture. I think it is a good thing to have a culture within a culture. The subcultures won’t be conflicting but would contribute and compliment the other. The international community did not understand the magnitude of the tragedy the free soldiers committed against the Nubians. They drove them out of their homes and didn’t attempt to preserve their culture.

With that mentioned, I was eager to know what the participant thinks about his role in promoting and preserving the Nubian culture and language. As shown in Figure 9, the total of speakers who believe that Mohamed Mounir plays a crucial role in supporting the Nubian language, culture, and people is 73% or sixteen participants. In comparison, 23% (five participants) stated that his role is only partially crucial, with limited contributions. Additionally, 5% (one participant) noted that Mounir played a minor role. Participant 2 who is a male in his seventies noted that “Mounir was able to draw attention to Nubians and their language through the few Nubian songs, to some extent.” He added that Mounir “deforms the traditional Nubian music by mixing up different genres and tones,

<sup>42</sup> Afropop Worldwide interviewed Mohamed Mounir in July 2011 and published in April 2012. The hosts of the show, Banning Eyre and Sean Barlow wrote and conducted the radio broadcasted interview with Mounir discussing the Egyptian revolution.

Figure 10.  
The picture  
portrays a woman  
and a man wearing  
traditional Nubian  
clothing. Source:  
Twitter (2000).



however, he slightly helped in raising awareness of our language and culture.” On the other hand, participant 10, a male in his fifties, elaborated that Mounir “plays a tremendous role in increasing awareness about Nubians.”

Non-Nubian Egyptians know some of his songs by heart even without understanding them. He further explained that Mounir’s music often incorporates traditional Nubian rhythms and themes, which resonate with listeners across different backgrounds.

*The authenticity of the white /galla:bi:jjja/ for men and the black /jarja:r/ for women used in music video clips and documentaries*

The traditional Nubian clothing is white /galla:bi:jjja/, “a white garment” for males, and a black /jarja:r/, “a black dress, usually colored clothing underneath it,” for females, as shown in the picture above. Throughout videotaped songs and even documentaries, Nubian men are usually depicted wearing a /galla:bi:jjja/, while women wear /jarja:r/ and headscarves. Discussion question seven aimed to show how the participants feel about the recurring pattern of clothing authenticity in the production of songs and documentary movies.

The survey found that 77% of the participants concluded that the white /galla:bi:jjja/ and the black /jarja:r/ are traditional and national Nubian clothing, and hence, it is an authentic visual representation that reflects reality and ethnic apparel. However, 23% of participants considered these garments as only partially authentic and realistic, noting that they are typically worn on special occasions, while regular daily clothes are also common. Participant 16, a thirty-eight-year-old male, stated that “there is nothing wrong with portraying traditional Nubian clothing, but it should be more diverse reflecting

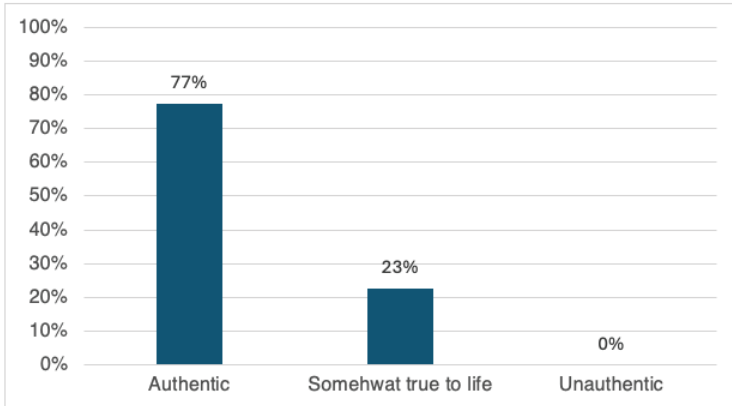


Figure 11. The graph compares the distribution of the clothing authenticity utilized in music songs and documentaries.

daily regular apparel too.” On the contrary, participant 1 who is a seventy-year-old male speaker, indicated that he longs to “visit Aswan to wear his white /galla:bi:jjja/ and turban. It makes me alive and proud.” The difference between the participants’ responses, in this case, is based on whether the participants are from urban (Cairo) or non-urban cities (Aswan and Luxor), age differences, and whether they are native or heritage speakers of Nobiin.

Figure 11 shows the frequency of participants’ responses to the distribution of the authenticity of Nubian clothing representations in music video clips and documentary movies. Interestingly, the age range of the five participants who believe that clothing authenticity in music video clips is partially true to life, amounting to 23% of clothing authenticity in music video clips data, is from the twenties to forties and they are all heritage Nubian speakers, born and raised in Cairo. The traditional national Nubian clothing is still used nowadays and is a unique part of the Nubian culture, so visually presenting the traditional apparel in media productions is a remarkable and distinctive feature to honor the culture.

#### *Nubian costumes used by music bands on YouTube and TV shows*

Moving from the apparel represented and utilized in videotaped songs and documentaries, we are now in a position to present the discussion findings on the Nubian clothing used by music bands on YouTube and TV shows. Music art-pop bands performing in several areas and platforms wear and portray non-traditional Nubian costumes that are characterized by unusual patterns or designs and very bright colours, as shown in the picture below.

When asked about their opinions, all the participants (100%) entirely agree that the costumes used by art-pop musical bands are

Figure 12.  
The picture  
represents  
unconventional  
Nubian costumes  
used by art-pop  
bands. Source:  
Blomqvist (2012).



unauthentic and misleading representations of Nubians and their traditional apparel. Dr. Mohamed Taha, a Nubian instructor and language editor, shared during our discussion a few pictures of the unconventional costumes, adding “I do not know why they use these bright overexaggerated colors with weird patterns to portray us.” He reports that he was pleased and honored to be hired as a proof-reader and language editor to /ma: wara: al-tʻabi:jfa/ “Paranormal,” a soap opera streamed on Netflix in 2020:

I was working with clothes and the Nubian language authenticity as well as pronunciation with the actors and actresses. It was one of the limited occasions in which they work with a Nubian linguist to get a real representation of Nubians.

Similarly, a fifty-year-old female speaker expressed her disagreement with these costumes commenting “Not only they use unauthentic clothing that stands out negatively, but they depict false and fabricated pictures of Nubians.” Figure 13 exemplifies the discussion results of costumes used by musical bands on shows and programs.

#### *The portrayal of Nubians in the /Bakka:r/ cartoon*

The last discussion question was dedicated to learning about the opinions of the participating speakers in a famous Egyptian cartoon show /Bakka:r/ initially broadcasted on tv in the late 1990s. The show revolved around a young Nubian Egyptian boy named /Bakka:r/, his pet goat /Raji:da/, and his family and friends. The soundtrack for /Bakka:r/ was sung by Mohamed Mounir and there are several Nubian songs during the series by other singers. There are ten seasons of the cartoon show and the latest release was in

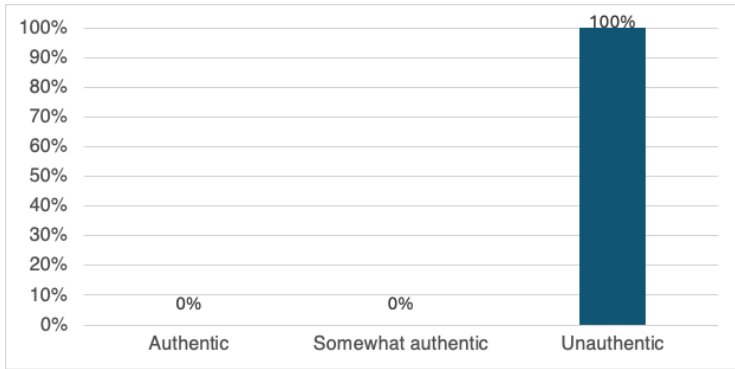


Figure 13.  
The graph shows the communal agreement of the costume unauthenticity.

2016. Figure 14 shows a poster of /Bakka:r/ and some of the main characters in the animated series.

Figure 15 shows considerable disagreement on Nubian representation in the /Bakka:r/ cartoon: more than half of the participants (55%) consider Nubian representation in /Bakka:r/ as realistic, 32% as realistic to some degree, and 18% as unrealistic. In other words, 55% of the participants denoted that the cartoon show has positive and realistic representations of Nubians. Despite the exaggeration in the costumes and the heavy accent of some characters, it is very popular among Egyptian children. Some participants (32%) thought the show was relatively realistic with odd fictitious adventures, /Bakka:r/'s pet goat, and unconventional clothing. However, those participants agree that it has a positive impact on promoting the Nubian culture and it also has some realistic elements such as the music and songs utilized in the animated show. Also, 18% of the participants concluded that /Bakka:r/ is an unrealistic portrayal of Nubians with negative stereotypes and negative indexes such as the dark skin color of all the Nubian characters, the heavy stereotypical accent of /Bakka:r/'s uncle, and used clothes.

Participant 4, a sixty-year-old male speaker, conveyed that “/Bakka:r/” is the first cartoon attempt to shed light on the Nubian culture. Although the scriptwriter of the animated show is not Nubian and did not go in-depth in portraying the culture, the participant noted that “considering it is the first attempt to represent Nubia, I view it, overall, with some reservations, as a positive and realistic portrayal of Nubians.” In contrast, participant 15, a man in his forties, remarked that

the idea to have a pet goat is ridiculous and far from realistic. It does not differ from Nubian representations in movies and soap operas embedded with racist and derogatory references. On top of that, the

Figure 14.  
A picture of  
Bakkar, his pet  
goat, and his  
friends. Source:  
Egyptian Radio  
and Television  
Union (2015).



stories do not portray Nubian tales, but rather tales of gangs and antiquities theft.

Participant 19, a forty-year-old female observed that /Bakka:r/ is a “very popular cartoon among Egyptian children and my children. It shows the Nubian values and heritage.”

As shown in the nine discussion questions, the focus group highly agrees on numerous discussion points, including the early discriminatory representations of Nubians in the media, the prejudiced portrayal of Nubians in movies and soap operas, the positive depiction of Nubians in documentaries, and the unauthentic costumes used by musical bands. The second highest frequency, as indicated in discussion questions 5-7, is the genuine presentation of Nubians in music video clips, the crucial role played by Mounir in spreading awareness of the Nubian language and culture through his influential music and artistic vision, and the authenticity of apparel portrayed in documentaries and videotaped songs. More than half of all participants (55%) agreed on the ongoing negative indexes shown in the media and the real portrayal of Nubians shown in the /Bakka:r/ cartoon.

### **Moving forward: What can be done?**

The discussion findings confirm the existence of stereotypical and stigmatized indexes associated with Nubians, which are frequently employed by media makers. These persistent negative and pejorative portrayals that are extensively emphasized have influenced some Nubians to prioritize speaking Arabic with their children to mitigate the risk of mockery, discrimination, and bullying. Despite the stigmatized representations, many Nubian speakers have a

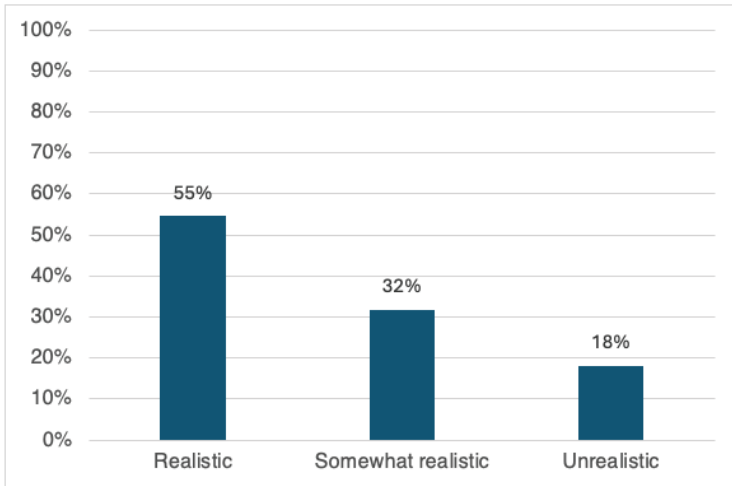


Figure 15. The graph exhibits the participants' views regarding the Nubian representations in /Bakka:r/ Cartoon.

positive attitude toward learning their mother tongue to preserve their language, identities, and cultural ideologies.

Moreover, Nubians actively and continuously denounce and condemn racist references and insults on social media and other platforms, advocating for appropriate and truthful representations in the media that honor their status as Egyptian citizens. Prominent Nubian singers such as Ahmed Mounib, Khedr El-Attar, Hamza El Din, Mohamed Mounir, and others play a significant role in preserving the language and culture. Their music often features traditional themes and rhythms, and several Nubian music video clips are translated into Arabic to raise awareness and make the language accessible to younger generations whose primary language may be Arabic. The influence of these artists extends beyond entertainment; it serves as a bridge, connecting diverse audiences to the rich tapestry of Nubian life and history. In doing so, they not only challenge stereotypes, but also promote greater acceptance and understanding of Nubians within Egyptian society.

In addition, numerous Facebook and YouTube channels have recently been established by and for Nubians, aimed at promoting their culture and heritage while reviving their language.

Among the YouTube social forums are "Nub Tube" and "I and Nuba Channel."<sup>43</sup> Through these initiatives, Nubians are creating a positive stance, emphasizing their identities, their language and cultural values, and their true characteristics and traits. By refusing to accept stereotypes and negative indexes, they leverage these

43 See <https://www.youtube.com/%40NubaTubeChannel> (accessed December 2024) and [www.youtube.com/@قناة\\_النوبة\\_طع7ع](http://www.youtube.com/@قناة_النوبة_طع7ع) (accessed December 2024) respectively.

platforms to spread awareness about themselves and their rich cultural heritage through social media, music, documentaries, and online content. This proactive approach not only challenges existing prejudices but also fosters a greater understanding and appreciation of Nubian identity within the broader Egyptian society.

Public awareness and counterstereotypes are strongly needed among Egyptians, Nubians, and non-Nubians to construct positive stances and provide authentic representations of the Nubian language and culture. The Egyptian government should consider making the Nubian language an official language alongside Arabic to revitalize this endangered language and support all Egyptian minority groups, including Nubians. Incorporating information about Nubians and their culture in school curriculums would further raise awareness and reduce discrimination. More importantly, media makers need to recognize the harm caused by inaccurately and unjustly portraying Nubians and other indigenous minorities through negative and derisive stereotypes.

Nubians and non-Nubians who appreciate and admire the Nubian language and culture actively challenge negative stereotypes by voicing their opinions, condemning such biases, and creating platforms that authentically represent their identity and heritage. One example is the Art of Nubia website,<sup>44</sup> which features a variety of sections dedicated to the Nubian language, books about the language, proverbs and wisdom, courses and lessons, songs, history, Nubian literature, dance, and weddings. This impressive initiative was founded and is maintained by Elia Moor, a distinguished Swiss researcher. In addition to translating Nubian texts and literature from German into English, she personally funds and develops the website. With her expertise as a computer and web developer, Moor has made the site accessible in multiple languages, including Arabic, English, German, French, and Italian. Her vision is to create a comprehensive encyclopedia about Nubia. Moor explains that “the website’s mission is to help preserve a culture and language she deeply loves and admires for its rich history, ethical values, and simplicity.” Through this initiative, she hopes to raise awareness of this remarkable culture and combat racism and discrimination.

Another example is the NAPATA website,<sup>45</sup> which is currently undergoing redesign. Similar to the Art of Nubia, NAPATA provides information on Nubian poetry, music, language, history, and heritage. As a non-profit organization, NAPATA is dedicated to serving the needs of rural Nubian communities and other regions, with a focus on promoting Nubian heritage, culture, and language.

44 <https://artofnubia.com/index.html> (accessed December 2024).

45 <https://www.napata.org/language.html> (accessed December 2024).

Significant effort to counter negative stereotypes is made by the Nubian Cultural Center for Social Development in Aswan, Egypt. This organization works to preserve and promote Nubian heritage through educational programs, workshops, and cultural events. By offering classes in the Nubian language, organizing traditional music and dance performances, and hosting exhibitions on Nubian history, the center provides a platform for the Nubian community to express their identity and challenge stereotypes. It also fosters dialogue between Nubians and non-Nubians, encouraging understanding and appreciation of Nubian culture. Through initiatives like these, Nubians not only work to preserve their heritage, but also actively counter the negative portrayals often propagated by media and mainstream narratives.

## Conclusion

This paper investigated the frequent stereotypes and negative indexes associated with Nubians in the Egyptian media, focusing on the recurring linguistic, visual, and narrative tools that perpetuate these harmful portrayals. These depictions, which include linguistic markers such as broken Arabic, character traits, dress codes, and the exaggerated darkening of skin color, are systematically employed to create and sustain second-order indexes of inferiority and backwardness. By examining the metalinguistic discourse in films and soap operas, I highlighted how the media persistently relies on a narrow and reductive portrayal of Nubians, reinforcing negative images in the public consciousness. The consistent use of these linguistic and visual cues reflects the limited and stereotypical repertoire that has dominated—and continues to dominate—Nubian representation in Egyptian media.

Despite this long-standing stigmatization, Nubians continue to resist these constructed stereotypes. They challenge these media portrayals through various avenues, including social media, music, and cultural preservation initiatives, aiming to present more authentic and empowering representations of their language, culture, and identity. While media power is heavily centralized in Cairo—allowing it to dominate and marginalize other ethnicities, including Nubians—this resistance underscores a critical pushback against misrepresentation.

The second part of the article reveals how native Nubiins perceive their portrayal in the media, revealing both their frustration with the negative stereotypes and their pride in positive representations, especially in documentaries and music video clips. Moving forward, it is imperative that these stereotypes be dismantled, and that

awareness be raised among all Egyptians — both Nubians and non-Nubians — about the harmful impact of these depictions. Without such change, new generations of Nubians will continue to bear the emotional and social costs of these negative portrayals, enduring discrimination and marginalization. For Nubian identity and culture to flourish, public discourse must shift toward a more respectful and inclusive portrayal, reflecting the rich cultural contributions Nubians have made to Egyptian society.

### **Appendix 1: Discussion questions**

Thank you for taking the time to participate in this discussion. The discussion will take between 15 to 20 minutes. I have a few background questions for you before starting our discussion.

- ▶ Name:
- ▶ Education:
- ▶ Age:
- ▶ Place of Residence:

I have nine questions and I will start the discussion by showing you some pictures to help with our discussion and then we can talk about them and elaborate on the target questions.

1. Have you seen these pictures before? Did you see any of these movies? If yes, what do you think about the early Nubian representations in the Egyptian media?
2. Now, look at these pictures from several soap operas. Have the Nubian representations in the Egyptian media recently changed? Can you explain your opinion with some examples?
3. Could you tell me about the Nubian portrayals in the movies and soap operas? How do you feel about these portrayals?
4. Does the Nubian portrayal in documentary movies differ from their representation in movies and soap operas? Please explain and provide some examples.
5. Now, let's move to music video clips. How are Nubians portrayed in music video clips? What do you think about this representation in terms of how genuine it is?
6. Mohamed Mounir is one of the famous Nubian singers. Do you think he plays a role in promoting the Nubian culture and language? How so? If yes, how do you describe this role?
7. Now let's talk about Nubian clothing used in most music video clips. How do you feel about the use of the white /galla:bi:jjja/, and the black /jarja:r/?

8. How do the Nubian costumes used by music bands on tv shows and YouTube differ from the clothes used in music video clips? Are the costumes used by the music bands authentic? Please explain and provide some examples.
9. Have you heard of the cartoon /Bakka:r/? What do you think about it? How are Nubians represented in the cartoon? Do you believe that their representations are realistic?

## Appendix 2: IPA transcription of Arabic

Appendix 2 provides a description of the Arabic IPA Arabic sounds used in this paper.

Consonants		Consonants	
IPA	Grapheme	IPA	Grapheme
ʔ	ء	t <sup>ʕ</sup>	ط
b	ب	ð <sup>ʕ</sup>	ظ
t	ت	ʕ	ع
θ	ث	ʁ	غ
ɟ or g	ج	f	ف
ħ	ح	q	ق
x	خ	k	ك
d	د	l	ل
ð	ذ	ʎ	ڨ
r	ر	m	م
z	ز	n	ن
s	س	h	ه
ʃ	ش	a/at	ة
s <sup>ʕ</sup>	ص	w	و
d <sup>ʕ</sup>	ض	j	ي

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