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The Political Culture of Young Nubians in Egypt: The Return Movement**

الثقافة السياسية لدى الشباب النوبي في مصر: الحراك النوبي نحو قضية العودة نموذجًا

Abstract: This article examines the role of Nubian political culture in galvanizing public action around a return to “Old Nubia”. It explores the achievements of Nubian Return Movement, and whether taking part therein correlates with a degree of awareness and political culture. The analysis interrogates the conception of this return among young Nubians, using qualitative data and Clifford Geertz’s “interpretation of cultures” approach. The article concludes that the political values promoted by the 2011 Egyptian Revolution heralded the emergence of a novel political culture among young Nubians that has revitalized the return, but lacks the necessary tools to rectify the issue.

Keywords: Political Culture; Old Nubia; Nubian Return Movement; 2011 Egyptian Revolution; Egypt.

الملخص: تسعى الدراسة لمعرفة الدور الذي أدته الثقافة السياسية للشباب النوبي في إثارة الحراك النوبي تجاه العودة إلى النوبة القديمة، وما حققه هذا الحراك من أهداف، وما إذا كانت المشاركة فيه قد ارتبطت بمستوى الوعي والثقافة السياسية. وتحاول الوصول إلى تصور الشباب النوبي لكيفية تنفيذ العودة، بالاستناد إلى بيانات كيفية ومقاربة «تأويل الثقافة» عند كليفورد جيرتز. وقد خلصت إلى أن القيم السياسية التي نشرتها الثورة المصرية عام 2011 أدت إلى بزوغ بوادر ثقافة سياسية جديدة لدى الشباب النوبي، ما أسهم في إحياء قضية العودة، لكنها توصلت إلى أن هؤلاء الشباب لا يملكون حاليًا من الأدوات ما يسمح لهم بإدارة تلك القضية.

كلمات مفتاحية: الثقافة السياسية؛ النوبة القديمة؛ الحراك النوبي تجاه العودة؛ الثورة المصرية عام 2011؛ مصر.

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Introduction

October 2023 marks nearly six decades since the 1964 displacement of Nubians, from their ancestral homeland to make way for a high dam against the Nile's floodwaters. By 1970, around 50,000 Nubians had been displaced according to some estimates.¹ Although the resettlement of an entire community² was hailed as a ground-breaking experience for Egypt at the time, "the locals were faced with difficult circumstances during the resettlement".³ The repercussions continue to affect the lives of tens of thousands of Nubians who have demanded the state fulfil its promises to relocate them closer to their ancestral villages.⁴ Nubians, especially the elderly, often speak of the displacement with bitterness. Many studies suggest that Nubians have faced deprivation in New Nubia⁵ following the flooding of Old Nubia's⁶ fertile lands.⁷

The initial desire to return⁸ to Old Nubia was articulated among the elderly in the wake of the displacement. In contrast, much scholarship illustrates a lack of consensus among Nubians, many of whom expressed apprehension toward the notion of a return. Yet the relocation of other "non-Nubian" communities to Old Nubia, coinciding with deteriorating economic conditions for Nubians, provoked Nubian interest in their right of return,⁹ remobilizing the public, particularly the younger generation, toward the issue of return. Hence, post-displacement policies, coupled with the challenges of displacement, have precipitated clashes between the government and the Nubians.¹⁰

It refers to the actions taken by members of the Nubian community to return to ancient Nubia, the form of which varied over time depending on the political climate in Egypt. The early generations in this movement were content with sending official correspondence to the government to facilitate their return. However, the Nubian movement saw a conspicuous upsurge in the wake of the 2011 Revolution.

Therefore, the state has since implemented measures to quell the growing movement and contain the Nubian community, mitigate their grievances, and grant them recognition as a distinct ethnic group within

¹ Maja Janmyr, "Human Rights and Nubian Mobilisation in Egypt: Towards Recognition of Indigeneity," *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 38, no. 3 (2017), p. 718.

² Yahya Darwish, "Tahjir Ahālī al-Nūba: Tajriba Idāriyya Rā'ida li-Tahjir al-Mujtama'āt al-Maḥalliyya," *Edara Magazine*, vol. 1, no. 2 (1968), p. 24.

³ Mostafa Gaweesh, *al-Nūba: Azmat Huwiyya Am Qaḍiyyat Aqalliyya* (Cairo: Egyptian Institute for Political and Strategic Studies, 2016), p. 6.

⁴ Sherif Mohyeldeen, "al-Tahjir al-Dākhilī fī Miṣr: Ḥalat al-Nūba al-Miṣriyya," *El Malaf El Masry*, no. 30 (2017), p. 32; Nesma Mansour, "Discourses around Nubians: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Egyptian Social Studies and History Textbooks," Master's thesis, American University in Cairo, Cairo, Egypt (2017), p. 5.

⁵ New Nubia refers to the villages of Nasr al-Nuba to which the Nubians were displaced in 1964, located in an agricultural land reclamation area in Kom Ombo, north of Aswan. Each of its 43 villages bears the same ancient name, and the communities are distributed by ethnic group just as they were in Old Nubia. See: Mohamed Abdo Mahgoub, "al-Tahjir wa-l-Tawfīn fī al-Mujtama'āt al-Mustaḥdatha: Dirāsa Ḥaqliyya fī al-Mujtama' al-Nūbī al-Miṣrī," in: Mostapha Hamada (ed.), *Dirāsāt Anthrūbūlūjiyā fī al-Mujtama' wa-l-Thaqāfa* (Alexandria: Dar Elmaarefa Elgameaia, 2005), p. 76.

⁶ Old Nubia refers to the original location of Nubian villages behind the Aswan High Dam, extending northward from the Egyptian-Sudanese border until Aswan along the Nile. All the lands of Nubia once constituted a single, distinct geographical unit inhabited by an ethnically, culturally, and socially homogeneous people until 1899, when the British colonial powers partitioned Nubia into a northern region, known as Egyptian Nubia, and a southern region as part of Sudan, known as Upper Nubia. See: Leslie Greener, *High Dam Over Nubia* (Cairo: Egyptian House of Composition and Translation, 1966), p. 17; and Maher Ahmed Zaki, *Hākadhā Takallama al-Nūbiyyūn: Mawsū'a Nūbiyya* (Cairo: Maher Zaki Esq., 2011), pp. 153-154.

⁷ Mohamed Riyad & Kawthar Abdel Rasoul, *Riḥla fī Zamān al-Nūba: Dirāsa li-l-Nūba al-Qadīma wa-Mu'ashshirāt al-Tanmiyya al-Mustaḥdatha* (Cairo: Hindawi Publishing Corporation, 2014), p. 226; Yehya Serag, "Nubian Resettlement Challenges between Past Memories and Present Setting," *Sustainable building conference SB13-Cairo* (2013), p. 8.

⁸ By "return", Nubians mean being repatriated to the lands from which water has receded near Lake Nasser (upon the stabilization of its water level) and receiving priority for the use of land that was once part of Old Nubia. Currently, the youth are calling for a return to this land on the basis that it be allocated according to the old divisions.

⁹ "2,300 feddans in Old Nubia were allocated to farmers affected by the landlord-tenant relationship law and 75,000 labourers were relocated to the region from other governorates". See: Zaki, pp. 140-141.

¹⁰ Mohamed Elkafrawi, "al-Nūba wa-l-Nūbiyyūn fī Miṣr bayn Nisyān al-Dawla wa-l-Taḥdīd bi-l-Infīṣāl," *Alssiyasi*, 19/03/2009, accessed on 29/01/2019, at: <https://tinyurl.com/4xwbuksj>

Egyptian society via constitutional provision (Article 236¹¹), which promises young Nubians resettlement to Old Nubia. However, conflicts have erupted between the Nubian community and state institutions over the article's implementation and the government's inaction.

The study thus investigates the role of the young Nubians' political culture in animating the ongoing return movement. It analyses whether the movement has accomplished its goals, and whether its developments are representative of a political culture that is cognizant of the different dimensions of the Nubian cause. The study also evaluates the extent to which the 2011 Revolution contributed to altering the movement's image and effectiveness.

General Framework: The Issue of the Nubian Displacement

1. Characteristics of Old Nubia

Old Nubia contained 39 villages, each of which included multiple hamlets along the banks of the Nile. The villages were geographically divided between three ethnic groups:

- The Kunuz [*al-Kunūz*], inhabiting 17 villages in the northern region, who speak Kenzi (Mattokki);
- The 'Ulayqat Arabs [*'Arab al- 'Ulayqāt*], an Arab tribe inhabiting five villages in the central region; and
- The Fadicca [*al-Fādījā*], inhabiting 17 villages in the southern region, who speak their own language.¹²

Life in Old Nubia was marked by relative isolation from the outside world, given its remote location from major population centres up north, its barren, mountainous climate, the absence of land routes, and the spread of its population across 600 hamlets.¹³ With the Nile as their only link to the outside world, Nubians developed a connection to the riverbanks, while little contact was established between the three ethnic groups that make up the Nubian society.¹⁴ Because Old Nubia was shaped by its location along the Nile and reified through isolation, marginality, and limited productive capacity,¹⁵ the only mechanism for improving living conditions has traditionally been migration out of Nubia (whether within Egypt, to other Arab states, or to foreign countries).¹⁶

¹¹ Article 236 of the 2014 Egyptian constitution prescribes that "the state shall ensure the drafting and implementation of a comprehensive plan for the economic and urban development of the underprivileged outlying regions (including Upper Egypt, Sinai, Matruh, and Nubia) within ten years of this Constitution's effective date, as regulated by law, through participation in development projects on part of the primary beneficiaries thereof, i.e., the local population. The state shall work to draft and implement initiatives to return the Nubian people to their ancestral lands and to develop these regions within ten years, as regulated by law". See: Arab Republic of Egypt, Parliament, *Dustūr Jumhūriyyat Miṣr al- 'Arabiyya*, April 2019, art. 236, p. 100, accessed on 22/05/2023, at: <https://shorturl.at/kBLS7>

¹² Sidqi Rabia, *al-Nūba bayn al-Qadīm wa-l-Jadīd* (Cairo: National Printing and Publishing House, 1964), pp. 48-51; Zaki, pp. 69-74; Ahmed Shetawy & Mohamed El-Shafie, "The Myth of Nubia, Egypt: A Vivid Potential or Desert Mirage," *Sustainable Building Conference SB13-Cairo* (2013), p. 7.

¹³ Farook Ahmed Mostafa, "al-Nūba wa-l-Tanmiya wa-l-Taghayyur," in: *Muqaddima wa-Dirāsāt Anthrūbūlūjiyya*, vol. 3 (Alexandria: Dar Al-Marefa Al-Gamaiea, 1993), p. 73.

¹⁴ Mohamed Abbas Ibrahim, *al-Thaqāfāt al-Far'īyya* (Alexandria: Dar Al-Marefa Al-Gamaiea, 1985), pp. 44-46.

¹⁵ Farouk Abdelgawad Shuwayqa, "Dirāsa fī 'Īkūlūjiyyat al-Nūba al-Miṣriyya ka-Bī'a fī Ṭawr al-Takwīn," *Journal of the Faculty of Letters*, vol. 33, no. 1 (1976), pp. 153-154.

¹⁶ Louis baron Costaz, "A Study on Nubia and the Nubians," in: *Description de l'Égypte*, vol. 3, Zuhair Al-Shayeb (trans.) (Cairo: General Egyptian Book Organization, 2002), p. 195; Walter Emery, *Egypt in Nubia*, Tohfā Handoussa (trans.) (Cairo: National Center for Translation, 2008), pp. 13-14; Greener, pp. 14, 47; Muhammad Abdu Mahgoob, "al-Tahjīr wa-l-Tawfīn fī al-Mujtama'āt al-Mustaḥdatha: Dirāsa Ḥaqliyya fī al-Mujtama' al-Nūbī al-Miṣrī," in: Hamada (ed.), p. 73.

Figure 1: Map of Old Nubia



Source: Adapted from: “al-Nūba al-Qadīma | Old Nubia,” Facebook, accessed on 01/05/2023, at: <https://shorturl.at/grxZ4>.

2. Stages of the Nubian Displacement

Nubians in Egypt and Sudan were displaced following the decision to submerge a region along the Nile, spanning from the First Cataract in Egypt to the village of Dal in Sudan, under Lake Nasser in order to build the Aswan High Dam. In Egypt, they were resettled in Kom Ombo and Esna, while they were resettled in Sudan in Khashm el Girba in the state of Kassala.¹⁷ The following is a timeline of the displacement:

- The opening of the Aswan Low Dam in 1902;
- The dam’s first raising in 1912;
- The dam’s second raising in 1933;¹⁸ and
- The final displacement in 1964, regarded as the harshest and most difficult, as Nubians were forced to permanently abandon their historical homeland, and thereafter endure a loss of identity as a result of the entire Nubia being drowned in the depths of an artificial lake.¹⁹

¹⁷ Zaki, pp. 99-100; Alexander La Bianca, “The Aswan High Dam: Backbone of Egypt’s Economic Development,” *Fulton School of Engineering* (2014), pp. 2-4; Nicolas S. Hopkins & Sohier R. Mehanna (eds.), *Nubian Encounters: The Story of the Nubian Ethnological Survey 1961 – 1964* (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2010).

¹⁸ Mohamed Mahmoud El Gohary, *al-Anthrūbūlūjiyā: Usus Naẓariyya wa-Taṭbīqāt ‘Amaliyya* (Alexandria: Dar al-Maarifa Al-Jamiya, 1988), p. 443; Lilli Zabrana, “Abandoned Nubian Villages in Upper Egypt: Material Culture in Social Anthropological Field Studies,” *Egyptian & Egyptological Documents, Archives, Libraries*, no. IV (2013/2014), pp. 197-199.

¹⁹ Zaki, p. 172; Zeina Elcheikh, “Interpretation in Cultural Tourism: Nubian Culture in Southern Egypt,” *Furnace*, no. 1 (2015), p. 19.

Moreover, the process was beset by problems, most significantly those relating to the allocation of poor-quality housing; inadequate compensation, quality of life, and work opportunities; and problems with agriculture and livestock caused by environmental factors. Hence, Nubians began to demand that the state meet the promises it made prior to the displacement. Most of these demands have been socioeconomic and developmental:

- To maintain the distinctive character of Nubian culture;
- To construct the return villages in Old Nubia in a timely manner;
- To assist with the cultivation and urbanization of Old Nubia;
- To resolve the widespread problem of residential collapses in New Nubia;
- To grant Nubians ownership of homes in New Nubia;
- To distribute lands and houses to displaced Nubians;
- To recalculate the value of reparations paid out to the displaced;
- To provide the Nubian community with legislative representation; and
- To prioritize the recruitment and employment of indigenous Nubians on development projects in the vicinity of Lake Nasser.²⁰

Accordingly, the circumstances and consequences of the displacement have led Nubians to perpetually view themselves as the victims of an operation that flooded their ancestral homeland to bring prosperity to the Egyptian state.

Theoretical and Methodological Framework

As development projects on Nubian land near Lake Nasser came underway, controversy erupted around conditions in New Nubia, and the repercussions of displacement, accompanied by demands for a return, came to the forefront.²¹ Some openly expressed a desire for return with the initiation of development projects on the lake. Others, given their access to services and work opportunities in New Nubia that were not readily available in new developments along Lake Nasser, saw the demands as unfounded. Most of those who are unwilling to return are young people who lack memories of or emotional attachments to Old Nubia, and have had access to better education and work opportunities in the New Nubian villages. Many of them have started families or have achieved upward social mobility.²² Those who received land and houses are uninterested in returning, while those who received neither and remain dependent on support from the Ministry of Social Affairs are strong proponents of a return and consider the displacement an injustice.²³

Analysis of the attitudes of Nubian community members toward return reveals a generational divide. While many elderly people cling to the idea of return, younger generations have lost sight of it due to a lack of understanding and awareness. Maja Janmyr summarizes the reasons for the limited attempts to mobilize Nubians to return after their displacement. On the one hand, there is the affordance of equal citizenship rights without discrimination between groups in Egyptian society; the absence of formal boundaries splitting Nubians and other Egyptians; growing nationalist sentiments among many pro-state-building Nubians; and the Nubians' feelings of sacrifice for the greater Egyptian good. On the other hand, there is the division of Nubian groups on priorities and strategies for change; the conflict over who has the right to speak on

²⁰ Ahmed El-Qadi, "al-Nūbiyyūn: al-Khuṣūṣiyya wa-l-Aṣāla al-Miṣriyya," *Information Reports*, Information and Decision Support Center, no. 32 (2009), p. 13; Zaki, pp. 146-149, 264-265.

²¹ Mahgoub, p. 59.

²² 23 *Ibid.*, pp. 111-114.

²³ 24 *Ibid.*, p. 115.

behalf of the Nubian people; the generational gap among Nubians; and the lack of institutions that represent their issues and rights²⁴

Similarly, Sayed Hamid writes that part of what has historically weakened the Nubian position is their perennial disunion. Hamid adds that “whilst Nubian culture is simply a broad banner under which to unite Nubians, the village community is the most coherent and inclusive social unit in Nubian society and, hence, the primary factor behind their enfeeblement and fragmentation [as a national group].”²⁵

Janmyr proposes two courses of legal action for Nubians, consistent with state unity and citizenship rights:

1. Demand a return to Old Nubia on the basis that return to ancestral homeland is an internationally recognized right of indigenous peoples.
2. Shift away from “the right to return” in favour of “the right to develop”, which would in itself entail a return. This more neutral option could attract broader support.²⁶

However, in a recent study of the attitude of young Nubians to the issue of return, Mo'taz Muhammad Ali Sadiq notes the extent to which this outlook has evolved, indicating that “55.3 percent of the sample were in favour of returning to Old Nubia. The remaining participants indicated that they were against the idea because they were stable in their current environments”.²⁷ Sadiq concludes that Nubian public opinion is divided between, on the one hand, those facing difficult conditions who wish to return and, on the other, those who are established in their new lives and refuse to leave. Those calling for a return are either elderly people who used to live in Old Nubia or underprivileged young people who hope to relocate behind the dam on account of the land's fertility and the abundance of fish. Sadiq concludes that the question of return is personal; a source of controversy on which Nubians are not in agreement; and a matter of national security first and foremost.²⁸

Therefore, there has been a historical disagreement among Nubians on the issue of return, its value, and its feasibility – whether within a single generation due to divergent interests, between generations due to the varying availability of opportunities to earn a living with dignity, or according to places of residence in New Nubia or other governorates to the north, where there are better life opportunities in comparison with what some see as the “adventure” of returning.

This study uses Clifford Geertz's interpretation of cultures, which explains the latent meanings that give rise to outward behaviour.²⁹ This will only be possible through a comprehensive understanding of the society's culture.³⁰ This approach helps better understand young Nubians' actions and initiatives to return to Old Nubia, questioning whether this movement has relied primarily on political culture. Accordingly, the study uses the thick description approach that Geertz employed on the webs of significance that constitute culture to conduct a thorough analysis and interpret cultural phenomena. Because thick description is

²⁴ Maja Janmyr, “Nubians in Contemporary Egypt: Mobilizing Return to Ancestral Lands,” *Middle East Critique*, vol. 25, no. 2 (2016), pp. 130-133.

²⁵ Sayed Hamid, “Ākhir Liqā' ma' D. al-Sayyid Ḥamid bi-l-Kuwayt,” *Nubity*, 2/3/2009, accessed on 8/9/2019, at: <https://tinyurl.com/mz9smukf>

²⁶ Janmyr, “Nubians,” pp. 139-143.

²⁷ Mo'taz Muhammad Ali Sadiq, “al-Thaqāfa al-Siyāsiyya li-Abnā' al-Nūba fī Miṣr: Dirāsa Maydāniyya li-'Ayyina min al-Nūbiyyīn fī Muḥāfazatay al-Aqṣar wa-Aswān,” Master's thesis, Political Science Department, Asyut University, Asyut, Egypt, 2020. pp. 211-220.

²⁸ Sadiq, pp. 211-220.

²⁹ Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), p. 24.

³⁰ Ahmad Abu Zeid, “al-Rumūz wa-l-Ramziyya: Dirāsa fī al-Mafhūmāt,” *Al Majalla Al Ijtima'iyya Al Qawmiyya*, vol. 28, no. 2 (1991), p. 177; Hussein Fahim *Qissat al-Anthrubulūjya: Fuṣūl fī Tārīkh 'Ilm al-Insān*, World Knowledge Series, no. 98 (Kuwait: National Council for Culture, Arts, and Literature, 1986), p. 234; Scott Hudson et al., “Symbolic and Interpretive Anthropologies,” *Department of Anthropology, College of Arts & Sciences* (2023), p. 3.

concerned with the significance of observations in their cultural context, it becomes necessary to attend to the historical, social, political, and economic context for an accurate interpretation.³¹

The study also uses qualitative data gathered through open-ended interviews (individual and group) conducted from November to December 2020. The sample group consisted of young Nubians between the ages of 18 and 35 who reside in three displacement villages in Nasr al-Nuba, Aswan Governorate. These young adults, representing the largest segment of the return movement, are the children of those who were displaced after the construction of the High Dam. The villages were selected to be representative of the three Nubian ethnic groups. Participants from a variety of educational, social, and vocational backgrounds were selected to participate in group roundtables, 18 young adults (six from each village), and individual interviews. The research also relies on interviews with several young informants from different Nubian communities. In addition to the fieldwork, the study utilizes content analysis to examine articles and social media content by Nubian activists that reflect the demands, attitudes, and priorities related to the issue of return. The content was also used to identify interview topics. The study further analyses historical scholarship on Nubian society, the deep rootedness of its problems, and the evolution of proposed solutions.

The Political Culture of Young Nubians: Concept and Resources

Most scholars attribute the establishment of political culture as a theoretical and analytical concept to Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba's seminal work on civic culture, where they define political culture as "specifically political orientations – attitudes toward the political system and its various parts" and "the particular distribution of patterns of orientation toward political objects among the members of the nation".³² Moreover, Lucian Pye defines it as "the composite of basic values, feelings, and knowledge that underlie the political process".³³ In the Arab context, Kamal El-Menoufi defines political culture as "a set of predominant political values in society that defines the attitudes, feelings, and behaviour of individuals, framed by their relationship to the political system".³⁴ This study employs this definition to emphasize that a society's political culture is not a coherent, immutable fact, given that there are numerous political subcultures, and that national political culture forms from the fusion of these diverse subcultures.³⁵

There are two foundations for political culture: *formal institutions* such as the media, education, defence sector (military and police), and political parties, and *informal institutions* such as families, friend groups, clubs, and NGOs. Although all such channels are important, some perform more consequential roles than

³¹ El-Sayed El-Aswad, *al-Anthrūbūlūjiyā al-Ramziyya: Dirāsa Naqdiyya Muqārīna li-l-Ittijāhāt al-Ḥadītha fī Fahm al-Thaqāfa wa-Ta'wīliḥā* (Alexandria: Monchaat Almaref, 2002), pp. 117-121; Nagwa El Shayeb, *Dīnāmiyyāt Taghayyur al-Turāth al-Sha'bī fī al-Mujtama' al-Miṣrī: Dirāsa li-'Ādāt al-Ṭa'ām wa-Ādāb al-Mā'ida*, Heritage and Social Change Series (Cairo: Cairo University, Faculty of Arts, Social Research Center, 2002), p. 31; Mary Le Cron Foster, "Symbolism: The Foundation of Culture," in: Tim Ingold (ed.), *Companion Encyclopedia of Anthropology* (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 370-371.

³² Gabriel A. Almond & Sidney Verba, *The Civic Culture: Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963), pp. 12-13.

³³ Mentioned in: Saliha Kebbabi, "al-Huwiyya wa-l-Thaqāfa al-Siyāsiyya ka-Madkhal li-l-Taḥawwul al-Dīmuqrāṭī fī al-Sharq al-Awsaṭ," *Human Sciences Journal*, no. 46 (2016), p. 240.

³⁴ Kamal El-Menoufi, *Mafḥūm al-Thaqāfa al-Siyāsiyya: Dirāsa Naẓariyya Ta'ṣīliyya* (Cairo: Egyptian Center for Futurological and Strategic Studies, 2008), p. 34.

³⁵ According to Stephen White, "vertical" political subculture can be defined as relating to the social or demographic characteristics that its members have in common, like distinguishing between "mass" political culture and the "elite" political culture of decision-makers and their associates. Meanwhile, "horizontal" political subculture essentially coincides with sub-regions and affiliations. See: Stephen White, "Political Culture and Political Sub-cultures," in: *Political Culture and Soviet Politics* (London/Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1979), pp. 143-165.

others.³⁶ Political socialization is among the most influential factor in the formation of political culture,³⁷ as it is a central determinant of individual political behaviour.³⁸

The roles institutions play in the formation of Nubian political culture for the younger generation vary greatly. Informal institutions have been the most important mechanisms for shaping and transmitting political culture for the younger generations. Conversely, the role of formal establishment has been marginal due to the decline, limitations, or regulation of the function of those institutions within Egyptian society and, in recent years, avoidance of public debate on points of contention on the Nubian issue.

The Nubian Return Movement

1. The Nubian Movement before the 2011 Revolution

In the 1990s, there were attempts in Egypt to designate Nubians as a persecuted minority. The Ibn Khaldun Center for Development Studies organized in 1994 a conference in Cyprus on the “Problems of Minorities in the Arab World” after failing to host it in Cairo. One of the conference’s themes, the “Question of the Nubian Minority”, is regarded as the first academic attempt to address the issue of Nubians as a minority group in Egypt. The subsequent International Coptic Conference (November 2005) in Washington, DC was the largest event at which the Nubian issue was discussed outside of Egypt, where the “International Campaign to Save [the Monuments of] Nubia in Egypt and Sudan” was launched. The appeal included language that inflamed Egyptian public opinion.³⁹

The document received 236 signatures from Egyptian, Sudanese, and international figures, serving to direct attention to the problems faced by Nubians in Egypt, and successive Egyptian governments have begun to deal with the Nubians’ requests more effectively. The appeal’s language is an interesting depiction of Nubians’ self-image and their perception of the Other – whether other Egyptians who gave rise to the crisis, the international community with the power to “save” humans as it has saved monuments in the past, or the Arabs who do not have the right to join them in their ancient homeland.

2. Mechanisms of Mobilizing Young Nubians on the Return Movement

a. Socialization

Responses from the research sample indicate that parents are the primary source of mobilization to entrench the idea of return in young Nubians. Parents inculcate Nubian history and culture in their children regardless of where they live, insisting on instilling in them “the idea of return” as part of their cultural heritage. The most important methods are the uninterrupted narratives of the glory of Old Nubian civilization and the injustices that have befallen Nubians historically, including multiple poorly implemented displacements,

³⁶ Aliya El-Hussein Mohamed Kamel, “al-Thaqāfa al-Siyāsiyya bayn al-Rafḍ wa-l-Takayyuf lada al-Shabāb al-Sūdānī: Dirāsa Sūsiyū-Anthrūbūlūjiyya Maydāniyya,” *Annals of the Faculty of Arts, Ain Shams University*, vol. 45 (January-March 2017), p. 168.

³⁷ Randa Emad Mohamed Sabri et al., “Ta’ thīr Mu’assasāt al-Tanṣīhī ‘a al-Siyāsiyya ‘alā Tashkīl al-Thaqāfa al-Siyāsiyya fī al-Mujtama’ al-Miṣrī,” *Faculty of Commerce Journal of Academic Research*, no. 66 (2019), p. 3.

³⁸ Ahmed Tohamy Abdelhay, “al-Thaqāfa al-Siyāsiyya lil-Taḥawwul al-Dīmuqrāṭī,” *Majallat al-Dīmuqrāṭiyya*, vol. 8, no. 31 (2008), pp. 103-107.

³⁹ The following are some examples of the language used: “Halt the incessant cultural and ethnic cleansing operations in Nubia”; “The governments of Egypt and Sudan are working in full coordination to destroy the coherent fabric of Nubia[n culture]”; “The Egyptian government carries out divisive policies and employs cultural cleansing tactics by promoting non-Nubian Arab settlement on Nubian lands”; “Nubia currently faces a real and grave threat, and Nubians cannot bear this perpetual, clandestine massacre alone”; “The protection of Nubians, the pioneers of history, is also an international responsibility”; and “We, the undersigned, implore the civilized peoples [of the world], the United Nations, and international organizations to immediately come to the rescue of the Nubians, their lands, their culture, and their heritage”. See: Haggag Oddoul, “al-Nidā al-‘Ālamī li-Inqādh al-Nūba,” *Odoul*, Facebook, 02/01/2019, accessed on 02/01/2019, at: <https://tinyurl.com/2p8kvzs6>

as well as successive promises to improve their living conditions or facilitate their return to their ancestral homeland. One participant recalls:

My parents were the biggest proponents of the return and always reminded us of the tragedies they went through: during the displacement, or life here at first. And this has absolutely had an effect on many young people, but later a lot of other things happened that caused the idea to gain traction with the youth. There's no work here, first of all. There's nowhere to live [if you get] married – and all the while, the land of your ancestors in Old Nubia is being doled out to strangers.

Just as this assessment reveals the crucial role of parents in instilling the idea of return in their children, it also demonstrates the significance of official bodies. Consequently, the younger generations have come to realize that nothing is happening; as one participant stated, “If it amounts to nothing, as usual, there won't be a Nubia anymore”.

The socialization process, with the emphasis on Nubian cultural heritage, is one of the largest social factors behind the formation of Nubian political culture. Based on the society's political culture, this process has shaped Nubians' political behaviour regarding various issues facing them. It could be argued that the Nubian youth's socialization has equipped them to participate in political life responsibly and mindfully of the dimensions of their shared issues, and has helped promote loyalty to Nubian identity.

b. Nubian Identity

The relationship between identity and political culture becomes clear through the way in which the former is employed when adopting behaviour that represents the latter.⁴⁰ Individuals derive their sense of identity from a perception that they share selected principles, characteristics, and goals with many other members of the collective.⁴¹ One of the essential components of political culture is the perception of identity (individual and collective). Collective identity, which refers to the sense of belonging to a given homeland or people,⁴² is a crucial aspect of social movements.⁴³ Further, new social movements are often marked by the inclusion of identity-based claims. A shared search for identity⁴⁴ is part of how such movements take shape, as applicable to the Nubian case.

The employment of “Nubian identity” to mobilize on the issue of return is evident in the desire to preserve it by upholding and passing down Nubian heritage and habits of life, highlighting them in various situations, and instilling in children the history of Ancient Nubia, the iniquities of the displacement, the inevitability of the return, the wish to construct Nubian-only villages as cultural revival, and a sense of Nubian distinctness. Additionally, there is an emphasis on speaking and studying the Nubian language to prevent its extinction.

Despite the cross-generational changes affecting Nubian society, some still insist “that Nubians have not lost their identity, Nubia will endure, and Nubians will remain united in their commitment to their nation, and language”.⁴⁵ Young Nubians have inherited and gravitated toward a largely romanticized conception of ancient Nubian society and the “general imagined pattern” of the desired community they hope to establish in their ancestral homeland.

⁴⁰ Kebbabi, p. 240.

⁴¹ Abdullah El-Shaher, “al-Thaqāfa al-Siyāsiyya wa-Dawruhā fī I'ādāt Takwīn al-Wa'y al-Waṭānī,” *Journal of Political Thought*, vol. 19, no. 66 (2018), p. 16.

⁴² El-Manoufi, p. 28.

⁴³ Kate Nash, *Contemporary Political Sociology: Globalization, Politics and Power*, Dhabib Mohammed Al-Dawsari (trans.) (Riyadh: King Saud University Press, 2017), pp. 204-208; Mario Diani, “The Concept of Social Movement,” *Sociological Review*, vol. 40, no.1 (1992), pp. 421-440.

⁴⁴ Sayed Faris, “al-Ḥarakāt al-Ijtīmā'iyya al-Jadīda wa-l-'Unf: Baḥṡ fī al-Anthrūbūlūjiyā al-Siyāsiyya,” *Annals of the Faculty of Arts, Ain Shams University*, vol. 45, no. 3 (July-September 2017), p. 135.

⁴⁵ Sayyid al-Hassan Mohammad Khair Idris, *Kayfiyyat al-Hifāz 'alā al-Turāth al-Nūbī* (Nasr al-Nuba: Aniba, 2010) [unpublished].

c. Nubian Associations

Nubian associations are non-governmental organizations with a significant impact on their society – in social and economic matters, as well as politics. They function to maintain the continuity and cohesiveness of Nubian society. These associations initially aimed to assist displaced Nubians in confronting the challenges of stability and to connect them with their native milieu. These groups are a manifestation of the cohesion and solidarity that holds Nubians together. According to Mohamed Abbas Ibrahim,

membership was restricted to a given tribe at first, then developed into village associations based on regional affinity. Nubian associations, as well as the family, have also preserved the distinct Nubian cultural heritage by providing a sensation of cultural specificity relative to the rest of the population in the city.⁴⁶

After the displacement, the idea of establishing Nubian associations, leagues, and clubs (both within and outside Nubia, and even overseas) emerged and had a major role in engendering social solidarity between Nubians from the same villages and families and connecting them with one another, their families, and relatives in the displacement villages of Kom Ombo. Nubians have worked to preserve their social cohesion through grassroots efforts,⁴⁷ sustaining their distinctiveness as an ethnic group based on a common, unique culture.

These associations played a major role in mobilizing around the issue of return by linking members of the Nubian community to the concerns of their community and their families, whether on social media or through direct demonstration.

d. Social Media

Social media is significant in the formation of political culture for young Nubians, who use these platforms widely; this is readily apparent in the impact it has had on wider Egyptian political culture.⁴⁸ Digital communication and internet access have affected the course of political events in two ways: by offering freedom of expression, and by disseminating information rapidly. The political interactions, debates, and discussions made possible by new media have allowed for a different sort of consciousness among young social media users.⁴⁹ Generally speaking, studies indicate that since the mid-1990s, the rate of change in political culture has accelerated with the rise of social media, resulting in cultural transformations in individual socialization.⁵⁰ The internet, hence, allows the younger generation to collectively form opinions on public affairs.⁵¹

Respondents mention “Nubian online communities” as one of the most important platforms for discussion at present. This once took the form of forums run by Nubian activists, then developed alongside social media. Currently, dialogue happens through several applications and sites, such as Facebook and Twitter which are ubiquitous across Egyptian society. Today, every Nubian village and association, whether inside Egypt or abroad, has an online presence.

⁴⁶ Ibrahim, pp. 75, 152-153.

⁴⁷ Muhyiddin Sherif, *al-Nūba: Hikāyāt wa-Dhikrayāt* (Cairo: Dar Al Oloum Printing, 1986), p. 33.

⁴⁸ Ahmed Mohammad Abdulrahman al-Ayedi, “Ta’thīr al-‘Awlāma ‘alā al-Thaqāfa al-Siyāsiyya al-Miṣriyya wa-Dawruhā fī Qiyām Thawrat 25 Yanāyir,” *Journal of Financial and Commercial Studies*, no. 4 (2017), p. 104.

⁴⁹ Mona Gaber Abd El-Hady Hashem, “Miṣdāqiyyat Tanāwul Ṣiḥāfat al-Muwāṭin li-Qaḍāyā al-Ṣirā’ wa-Dawruhā fī Tashkīl al-Thaqāfa al-Siyāsiyya li-l-Shabāb,” *Egyptian Journal of Media Studies*, no. 60 (2017), p. 350.

⁵⁰ Noha Tarek Abbas Hassan, “al-Taghayyur fī al-Thaqāfa al-Siyāsiyya al-Miṣriyya wa-Thawrat Yanāyir 2011: Dirāsa Maydāniyya li-l-Shabāb al-Miṣrī,” *Journal of Independence*, no. 8 (2017), p. 161.

⁵¹ Ali Layla, “Ta’thīr al-Faysbuk ‘alā al-Thaqāfa al-Siyāsiyya wa-l-Ijtimā’iyya li-l-Shabāb,” *Pillars of Knowledge Journal*, vol. 1, no. 1 (2013), pp. 128-143.

These sites have better acquainted young Nubians with the society of Ancient Nubia, through an assortment of posts, photos, and graphics. They have also managed to reunite Nubians of Egypt and Sudan under the banner of Nubia, and it is common to encounter conversations and exchanges of information between young people of both nationalities on subjects related to Nubian society. Moreover, these platforms have enabled young non-Nubian Egyptians to learn about Nubian culture, customs, and traditions. They have performed a central role in mobilization on the issue of return after the 2011 Revolution, by defining the issue and identifying the challenges of displacement through disseminating information and images, and by exchanging ideas on the Nubian movement, its tactics, and outcomes. According to one of the respondents:

There are lots of pages that talk about the subject, like *The Lands of Nubia* and *Voice of Nubia*... all the Nubian pages call for mobilization on the issue. There are pages calling for demonstrations to regain the land, address detainees' issues – bringing up the issue in private Nubian groups is a way to move things forward, to mobilize on Nubian pages there are lots of subjects, most importantly emotionally provoking young Nubians.

Another participant offered an example, stating:

Those who heard about the tambourine detainees [mu'taqalī al-dufūf] were unaware of the nature of their demands. What mattered to them was that they were watching young Nubians being detained on social media. It was sheer bigotry toward their countrymen.

Most of those pages have sidestepped the issue in recent years due to transformations in the public sphere in Egypt, contrary to the roles they played in the post-revolution Nubian movement. Presently, their activities are limited to posting about the history of Nubian society and its unique culture. Yet other communities, mostly accessed by young people, continue to share posts on the displacement. These pages emphasize the issue, clinging to hope of return.

e. Living Conditions and Services

Because the chronic discontent about living conditions and the state of services in New Nubia⁵² underscores the difficulty of displacement, it contributes to mobilization on the return issue. This led to the persistence of this issue despite the state's efforts to sweep it under the carpet. Young Nubians disagree in their evaluation of living conditions, social services, and the role thereof in drawing attention to the issue of return. Some respondents are entirely unsatisfied with all services in the displacement villages – which are either unavailable, insufficient, or substandard, or which fail due to poor execution or lack of maintenance. They feel neglected by the state, which they perceive as unwilling to address their primary concerns. Other respondents argue that conditions in the new villages today are improved and that it will take time before ongoing projects begin to bear fruit.

Services and facilities available in both the displacement villages and in Old Nubia play a crucial role in mobilizing on the return. Although Old Nubia is no better off than the new villages, in terms of the availability and efficiency of services, there is an implicit acceptance of its condition among these young people. They will not suffer greatly in the event of a return, as conditions there are no different than in their current places of residence. There is hope that the situation could improve if Nubians return to Old Nubia, whether due to individual or state efforts. Here, some respondents expressed sentiments such as “services and facilities have nothing to do with the return”, and that “all regions have their problems, even [Cairo]. So long as there are problems here and there, we have the right to try our luck somewhere else”.

⁵² For more details, see: Farook Mostafa et al., *Awlawiyyat al-Hājāt al-Ijtimā'iyya fī al-Mujtama' al-Nūbī: Dirāsa bi-Muḥāfaẓatay Aswān wa-Qinā* (Cairo: National Centre for Social and Criminological Research, 2010); Ahmed Abdelmawgoud El-Shenawi, “al-Awḍā' al-Ma'īshīyya fī al-Nūba al-Jadīda bayn 'Awāmil al-Istiqrār wa-Dawāfī' al-'Awda,” *Egyptian Journal of Social and Behavioural Sciences*, no. 7 (April 2023).

The question of services might serve as a motivation to return, not as a disincentive thereto, in the sense that poor services in the displacement villages could be a reason to relocate to Old Nubia. Poor or lacking services in Old Nubia, however, will not be a factor in rejecting the idea of return; rather, it may serve as an impetus to improve those services to make the return a success.

3. The Nubian Movement Post-2011 Revolution

The 2011 Revolution is widely considered a turning point in the struggle for Nubian rights. Official state discourse has attempted to respect Nubians' demands as legitimate claims and to implement or, at the minimum, take them into consideration. Several high-level meetings between Nubian leaders and the heads of all post-revolution governments have been held to devise satisfactory solutions to these issues. For most Nubians, however, this has not made any difference on the ground.⁵³ These meetings spanned almost all 2012 presidential candidates, who repeatedly promised Nubians that their troubles would be resolved, whether in the displacement villages or by offering solutions allowing them to return to their ancestral lands. As a result, young Nubians have developed an awareness of the importance of rallying behind the issue, and of the value of their votes in driving it forward.

There is a consensus on the pivotal role the 2011 Revolution performed in vitalizing and reinforcing the Nubian movement. Despite being restricted to some lawyers, popular leaders, and a few youth activists, this movement was to change drastically when it started to attract more young Nubians, as the revolution offered an ideal model of peaceful change. Such circumstances helped drive many young Nubians to defend their right of return.

Nubian youth political culture at that juncture was marked by a set of characteristics: active involvement, women's participation, non-violence, and organizational capabilities. Nubian activism, moreover, emerged in an Egyptian public sphere overwhelmed with protests and demonstrations on various factional issues. The most important developments on the Nubian question included:

a. The 2012 Constitution:

Nubian activist Manal al-Tayyibi called for the Nubian question and right of return to be expressly provided for in the constitution. When her request was denied, she resigned from the Constituent Assembly.⁵⁴ The issue was later rectified in the 2014 constitution.

b. The 2014 Constitution:

Nubian author Haggag Oddoul was selected to serve on the "Committee of 50" [*Lajnat al-Khamsīn*] tasked with amending the constitution. An article was introduced relating specifically to Nubians and other minority ethnic groups; the first explicit acknowledgment of Nubian rights. Nubians gained several long-awaited privileges and now have their own representative at the Egyptian Parliament.

All current Nubian youth demands can be reduced to the implementation of this constitutional provision. One participant stated: "All we want is the rights that the state lays out in the constitution... we weren't the ones who wrote it". Although these provisions were to be a turning point for the Nubian issue, the article has yet to come to fruition nine years after its ratification. Moreover, ambitions to return on the part of many Nubians came up against land sales in Old Nubia as part of the "1.5 Million Feddan Project", pursuant to Act 355⁵⁵ and parliamentary approval through the passage of Resolution 444 (2014), thereby

⁵³ Mohyeldeen, p. 32; Shetawy & El-Shafie, p. 2.

⁵⁴ Gaweesh, p. 9.

⁵⁵ al-Qadiyya al-Nūbiyya wa-l-Ḥuqūq al-Thaqāfiyya: Mu'taqalu al-Dufūf Namūdhajan (Cairo: HRDO Center to Support Digital Expression, 2017), p. 14.

designating the lands of 16 ancient Nubian villages as military borderlands and prohibiting their former inhabitants from ever returning.⁵⁶ Following this decision, some Nubians resorted to escalation alongside previous efforts toward the restoration of Nubian rights.⁵⁷

c. The Return Caravan:

In November 2016, the Nubian Union⁵⁸ organized the “Nubian Return Caravan” [*Qāfilat al-‘Awda al-Nūbiyya*]: a procession of cars, beginning in the displacement villages of Nasr al-Nuba to the lands of Old Nubia behind the dam, in blatant protest of Resolution 444, as well as to call for the right of return, enumerate the demands of the Nubian people, and object to the sale of land in Old Nubia under the 1.5 Million Feddan Project.

d. The Tambourine Detainees:

In September 2017, Nubian groups organized a concert featuring tambourines, the most widely used instrument in the Nubian musical tradition. To object peacefully yet unambiguously to the resolutions preventing them from returning to their ancestral land, concert goers sang traditional songs about the displacement and called for the implementation of the constitutional provisions dealing with their rights and the establishment of the High Committee on the Nubian Resettlement [*al-Hay‘a al-‘Ulyā li-I‘ādat Tawṭīn al-Nūbiyyīn*]. The concert ended abruptly with a raid by security forces, and many attendees were arrested.⁵⁹

4. Youth Perception on Past Movements

The responses of participants implied a strong sense of frustration at the disappointing results of past movements⁶⁰ that failed to achieve their desired objectives, with some achieving personal gains by currying favour with officials. Hence, many participants attribute the disillusionment afflicting young Nubians to “the attitude of this class of beneficiaries and their lack of political will to implement the return”. Yet they agree that official bodies have at best half-heartedly worked to carry out the return, which is constitutionally stipulated. Overall, the youth are unaware of the state’s rationale on the matter.

5. Key Accomplishments of the Nubian Movement

One of the gains of these movements (and the post-revolution phase in general) is that Nubians realize the limitations of the mass *démarches* available to them. One participant recalls that “we discovered our potential, as well as our limitations... we had big dreams”. The Nubian youth were also able to evaluate the *de facto* leaders of the movement in real-life contexts through which to assess their integrity. Current reality reflects what can be called “confusion and renunciation” of the cause on the part of young Nubians. This is due to a distrust of some former leaders and the absence of new ones to rally around, who can form a powerful bloc and attain novel gains to revive the cause.

Many youth believe that the current disbursement of “reparations” is one of multiple achievements accrued from previous movements, but as a mere “by-product”. The return is the only true remedy for the issue in their view, and accepting reparations denotes to formally acknowledging their far-reaching relinquishment of the cause, which in turn undermines mobilization around fundamental issues at play.

⁵⁶ Gaweesh, p. 11.

⁵⁷ al-Qaḍiyya al-Nūbiyya wa-l-Ḥuqūq al-Thaqāfiyya, p. 14.

⁵⁸ An entity formed after the final displacement in 1964, headquartered in Nasr al-Nuba county, that includes representatives from all the villages of New Nubia. It was established with the objective of offering a framework of cooperation for Nubians in the displacement villages that addresses the problems they face and connects the Nubian displaced community to their homeland. The Union has branches in other governorates and abroad that gradually expanded to allow the displaced to help their relatives in the villages overcome the challenges of life, especially regarding lack of income and work opportunities.

⁵⁹ al-Qaḍiyya al-Nūbiyya wa-l-Ḥuqūq al-Thaqāfiyya, p. 16.

⁶⁰ This is consistent with the results of another study, whose sample of young people and political activists refer to their frustration with the results of the 2011 Revolution, their declining satisfaction with conditions in Egypt, and the desire to emigrate on part of some; see Hassan, p. 161.

Young Nubian Political Culture and the Continuation of the Return Movement

1. The Current Nubian Movement

Changes in Egypt's public sphere after June 2013, and its closure to public demonstration and opposition of state policies and crackdown on freedom of expression whether through traditional media or new media, in addition to the clampdown against some Nubian activists, gagged the Nubian movement, if temporarily. This pattern is not exclusive to the Nubian return issue, but reflects Egyptian society nationwide. Advocacy efforts essentially came to a halt or moved online. Some veteran activists now content themselves with Nubian history and reposting old material on Nubia or the displacement. Following accusations of treason, some have stopped addressing the cause altogether.

Furthermore, state policies in recent years have succeeded in fragmenting the core of the movement through a set of policy decisions – most importantly appraising and disbursing those reparations among those historically aggrieved by the dam construction and the broader displacement process (or their descendants). Subsequently, many displaced Nubians were satisfied with these compensatory gestures, which somewhat improved living conditions and developed the displacement villages as part of the Dignified Life [*Ḥayāh Karīma*] initiative.⁶¹ Some argue that this has negative implications for return.

2. The Nubian Movement: Historical Rights and the Duties of Citizenship

A citizen's attitude to national and local allegiances is reflected clearly in the depth of their sense of citizenship; the extent to which they favour public interests over private ones and national over local interests (as was evident from the population's outlook at the time of the High Dam's construction and their acceptance of the displacement); and the degree of awareness as to the causes of private, local, and national issues.⁶²

In this context, the involvement of young Nubians in the Return movement may be understood as a matter of articulating their political culture, and a manifestation of their citizenship. Further, the return issue can be situated within the conceptual framework of rights and duties, the basic tenets of citizenship, which is why some Nubians demand their rights be respected and decry discrimination of their cause. The current situation also underscores the depth of the transformation in Nubian public opinion toward national, public interests, their most basic rights having been disregarded by various state bodies. This poses a risk to societal unity, as “the real problem [begins] when cultural heterogeneity takes on a distinct political presence, which becomes more complex when this group is concerned with defence [of their rights]”.⁶³

Young Nubians base their demands for return on both the provisions of the Egyptian constitution and the historical promises that the state has made over the years. Both the young and the elderly attest that the state once repeatedly promised them that they would return to their lands or be adequately compensated. One participant characterized these assurances as having “evaporated from one government to the next, all the way down to the constitutional provision that's on its way to doing the same”. Participants also mention other justifications, such as Nubian historical rights, the state's allocation of land in Old Nubia for non-Nubians, perceived injustices, that spur many people to action and, in their view, exacerbate the

⁶¹ A national project to improve living conditions and provide the Egyptian countryside with services to improve quality of life and empower people to live a dignified life. According to available official statistics, EGP 700 billion has been allotted in expenditures. For details, see: “‘An Ḥayāt Karīma,” *Ḥaya Karima*, accessed on 01/05/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3HsQuB9>

⁶² El-Manoufi, p. 36.

⁶³ Burhan Ghalioun, *al-Mas'ala al-Ṭā'ifiyya Mushkilat al-Aqalliyāt* (Doha/Beirut: ACRPS, 2012), p. 39.

problem. One participant stated that “the Nubian cause is an issue of an identity, an entity. I want to feel like I exist, like I’m an individual. It’s also an issue of rights, but for other people that’s all it is”.

The role of political culture in the recent Nubian movement is clear and participants in the displacement villages keep abreast of the return issue on pragmatic grounds. Many take part in marches or vigils for the cause or in opposition to government decisions, proving themselves participants, not mere observers, whether or not they wish to return. Some young people have adopted a strong defensive attitude toward Nubian rights without any awareness of what those rights imply. It is an “inherited consciousness”, that arises from the suffering, exploitation, and underestimation endured by past generations.

The Return: Expectations and Reality

The idea of return raises multiple questions: Is it a romanticized notion or practical and actionable? Can it be realized from the grassroots, or must there be a state-level blueprint? Would this return apply only to Nubians, or could it succeed despite encompassing a variety of culturally and ethnically distinct minorities in Egyptian society? Some, therefore, suggest that there be “Nubian villages and other non-Nubian villages throughout the Lake Nubia region”.⁶⁴

1. Current Attitudes toward Return among Young Nubians

Many participants in this study state that they are willing to return to Old Nubia “as soon as today, if that was possible”. Others expressed a desire to return under specific conditions, most importantly the need to first complete their studies, have access to alternative employment opportunities, and equip society to support as high a standard of living as in the cities. Here, the understanding is that young Nubians would be allocated their own parcels of land to become integrated and better equipped to create a society “marked by Nubian values stemming from the core of Nubian civilization”. This argument highlights the degree of conviction among a segment of the Nubian youth that the return will not be for Nubians alone, which the state has emphasized through numerous decisions treating the region as part of Egypt writ large – not as the exclusive property of a segment of Egyptians.

None of the participants in the study alluded to the idea of “getting used to life in their birthplace and present place of residence in the villages”. It seems that parents have succeeded in instilling in youth that this is not where they are meant to live, although there have always been those calling for the return as a matter of “identity and of an entity” that must be preserved, not eradicated. While they represent the strongest, most determined faction on the issue of return, they are currently the fewest in number. After 60 years of displacement, the cause seems to have lost its esteem in the eyes of many “due to [the passage of] time, not passivity”.

2. Proposals on Executing the Return Process

In overcoming the challenges besetting the return process, some Nubians have advocated for a so-called “voluntary return”. This entails a self-funded return to the riverbanks whereby those wishing to return are responsible for their and their relatives’ livelihoods, while making sure that elevated plots along the Nile would be designated for the construction of homes. Shared agricultural and transport plans would also be essential to the success of the new settlements. Considering past experiences, many Young Nubians strive for self-sufficiency independent of the state, as is evident from the characterization of this initiative as “voluntary”. This is not to say, however, that there is consensus among the Nubian youth on the merits of

⁶⁴ Riyad & Abdel Rasoul, p. 12.

taking part in that initiative; as one participant expresses, “may God guide the youth of Nubia and [help them] cooperate to make this idea a success”.

Moreover, respondents provided a set of proposals to implement the return process, chiefly that the displaced living in desert regions be the first to return, with the process of return conducted village by village to maintain unity and returns to places of origin where possible and known. Alternative plots would be provided for descendants of villages submerged by Lake Nasser and infrastructure development would be prioritized to ensure the provision of essential services.

Conclusion

This study concludes that much of Nubian political culture is based on a sense of belonging to the Nubian community. Nubian culture continues to have a major impact on the younger generation through the socialization process, inculcating them with authentic values, customs, and traditions.

For young Nubians, the 2011 Revolution and the political values it promulgated (however briefly) led to the dawn of a new political culture whose values and norms have contributed to revitalizing the issue of return. The political culture of the Nubian community has largely been shaped by circumstances and developments within broader Egyptian society and especially within Nubian society that have affected their worldview and opinions of the political regime. The Nubian movement has evolved alongside the political culture of Nubian individuals, which has seen an outgrowth in pro-change political values (especially among young people) due to political shifts in Egyptian society. In contrast, past movements were stimulated by poor economic conditions in the displacement villages.

Political culture is not the only factor that explains the new Nubian movement. In particular, the family has played a role in justifying the inherited cause of Nubian rights and affirming Nubian identity and its distinctiveness. Nubian clubs and associations have likewise served to preserve the coherence and unity of the Nubian community in Egypt and abroad. Finally, social media platforms (namely Facebook and Twitter) continue to play a major part in mobilization, disseminating information, or at the very least, keeping the spark of the movement alive until the opportunity to expand arises. Moreover, the state has worked to curtail the effectiveness of the Nubian movement – at times with security restrictions – leading to its recent stagnation.

Notably, “push” factors related to the return play a major role in determining those who wish to do so, perhaps to a greater extent than “pull” factors. The justifications for the return indicate that if the displacement communities had been adequately prepared and offered greater advantages, or if official institutions had taken interest in youth participation in lake Nasser investment projects, many young people would lack interest in return in the first place. Official agencies also played a twofold role in bringing the Nubian cause forward: by drawing the attention of young Nubians toward development opportunities and investment projects in the community, and by issuing a series of resolutions while disregarding potential backlash based on their pacifistic nature.

There is no consensus on how to implement Article 236 of the constitution without either eroding Nubian rights or harming state interests. Furthermore, young Nubians lack the political instruments or lobbying power necessary to address such a sensitive issue, especially in light of present conditions in Egypt. Some young Nubians report a degree of “detachment” from the issue and a general sense of the futility of the demonstrations for the return, which may be attributed to a discrepancy between theory and action. Other factors include the contrasting political inclinations of groups within the movement, their priorities, and differences over who ought to represent the Nubian community. The generational divide

has also triggered a degree of conflict over the most effective trajectory and how to engage with state proposed solutions.

More research remains to be conducted to arrive at a comprehensive understanding of the issue. Such studies ought to analyse diverse samples of young Nubians in other governorates, as their attitudes to the return vary on account of circumstances in the societies in which they were born and raised. Amid enduring obstacles to a return, these young people lack the impetus to take such a risk.

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