

SPACE, COLOR AND QUALITY OF LIFE IN A NUBIAN ENVIRONMENT.

Diana Kamel and Aleya Abdel-Hadi

Abstract

The Egyptian Nubians relocated after the construction of the High Dam South of Aswan to a completely different setting, adjusted with difficulty to their new environment and changed part of it to suit their needs. This paper is a longitudinal study; it deals with the issue of continuity in the patterns of lifestyle within the present Egyptian Nubian community. The aim is to seek evidence on such continuity and to explain the repercussions of previous socio-economic values on the actual residential built and lived-in environment. The methodology is based on earlier studies that were done before relocation and immediately after, also on site visits made by the authors to detect the current aspects of the built-environment. The field study focuses on changes made to the interior and exterior spaces, on the use of decorative patterns and color of the walls and on the residents' lifestyle. The tools for data gathering are annotated photographs and semi-structured interviews. The cases are chosen from a random sample in one of the 33 villages that constitute the Kom-Ombo site – the village of Eneba (Aniba). Results show evidence of change in all investigated aspects with a slight continuity in some of the culturally related values.

Keywords

Patterns of lifestyle; Cultural authenticity; Residential built environment.

Introduction

Over the past half-century, Egypt has undergone fundamental changes in its built environment. In the name of progress and modernization, an old and homogeneous urban culture has been replaced by patterns, which were borrowed from the industrialized countries of the West, thus leading to a totally alien environment (Christians et al. 1984: 408). Similarly, the Egyptian Nubians, 'a definable group', once described as a closed society, were relocated after the construction of the High Dam South of Aswan to a completely different environment. They adjusted with difficulty and made some changes to their new place.

The 'definable groups' who were once closed/tribal, relatively small, isolated and unacculturated societies: 'vulnerable ethnic minorities', are found in different parts of the world; the rainforest Indians of South America and the pygmies or bushmen of Central and South Africa. Other more heterogeneous tribal populations are the nomadic pastoral societies of the Sahel region, of the Eastern, and Western Africa, and the 'tribal' peoples of

India and Southeast Asia. These latter groups, which sometimes number in the hundreds of thousand or millions of peoples, are integrated into national and regional political economics, but still maintain a strong sense of ethnic identity and cultural separatedness. Some sources estimate that there are over 250 million tribal or indigenous peoples worldwide living in more than seventy countries (Burger, J. 1990: 18; Davis, S. 1993: 7-8). In this sense, as a 'definable group', the Nubians lived isolated from the Egyptian society and the common Egyptian way of life; in their lands, they did not benefit from civil services, such as the medical, educational and telecommunication services; they did not witness or live any change and/or advancement concerning their political and human rights as the majority of Egyptians did. The only Nubians integrated into the Egyptian population were those who went to the Egyptian cities for work. As such, the Nubian case raised a great interest to researchers on the psycho-socio-anthropological and architectural levels. The building of Egypt's High Dam in the 1960s erased innumerable historic treasures, but it also forever obliterated the ancient land of the Nubians. In 1963-64, they were removed 'en masse' from their traditional homelands in southern Egypt and resettled more to the North in the upper Egyptian areas (Fernea, R. and Gerster, G. 1973; Dafalla, H. 1975).

Much of the life of old Nubia revolved around ceremonialism, and in their remarkable study which has become a standard text in the fields of anthropology and cultural psychology, Robert A. Fernea and John G. Kennedy – anthropologists – together with Hussein M. Fahim, Armgard Grauer, Fadwa al-Guindi, Samiha al-Katsha, and Nawal al-Messiri

discussed some of the most important and distinctive aspects of Nubian culture in Nubian Ceremonial Life (Kennedy, J. 2005). Moreover, the Nubian unique architecture which closely reflected the lifestyle of its inhabitants was documented before submersion by travellers (Lane, E. W. 1830; published in 2000), the Egyptian State (MCNO 1960; MSA 1963), archeologists (Abu Bakr, A. 1963), architects (Fathy, H. 1964 & 1966), international painters (Roberts, D. 1856; Usick, P. 2002; Veillon, M. and Rodenberg, J. 2005); Egyptian painters such as Hussein Bikar, the brothers Adham and Seif Wanli, Tahia Halim and others in the 1960s and the "renowned Egyptian photographer Antoine Albert who documented Nubia and the Nubians in the different stages before, during and after relocation" (Attia, R. 2008 also see CULTNAT).

Contextual Background

Nubia's geographic location: Nubia was an empire that extended along the Nile River from what is now Aswan in Egypt to present-day Khartoum in Sudan 2500 years ago. The Nubians of Egypt were settling south, along the Nile coast (350 km), between Aswan and Wadi-Halfa. That area of settlement is now submerged by Lake Nasser due to the High-Dam construction south of Aswan in 1956. The Egyptian Nubians have been relocated to the Kom-Ombo region in Upper Egypt, north of Aswan in 1964 within an area stretching sixty kilometers north-south (MSA, 1965).

Nubian life before relocation: Nubia has always depended for its existence on the Nile, and most people have always lived beside the river. Although the land along the river is very

fertile, the Nubian flood plain is much narrower than in the rest of Egypt, meaning that the land has always been less productive and the population has always been smaller. Because of its long cultural history, the folk heritage of Nubia is rich, varied and wonderfully original. It has distinctive features since it is the result of three mingled groups that make up the Nubian people: The Kenuz settled to the north close to Aswan, depended primarily on trade rather than agriculture due to their desert nomadic origin. Kenuzi homeowners had to adjust to a different topographical situation as they were forced progressively by Nile waters to move up their houses farther away from the flat plateaus on the bank to the stony hills near the mountain. Their homes appeared as row houses to utilise all available space. Executed entirely in mud brick, they used the barrel vault as a distinctive architectural feature. The Fedija Nubians, on the other hand lived more to the south up to Wadi-Halfa on the Nile banks where they cultivated the land and owned separate independent large houses with an almost square layout built around a large central rectangular open courtyard. Loggias and spacious one storey rooms surrounding the court were well designed for both winter and summer climates; and lastly, the tribe of Aliqat originally from Najd, moved to Nubia between the Kenuz and the Fedija, in the Wadi el-Arab region. "The houses in middle Nubia are little known, they seem not to have been greatly different from those in the northern and southern region" (Fernea, R. and Gerster, G. 1973: 51). Although the three tribes have different languages, yet they more or less intermingled by marriage. The Nubian community is a cooperative society: associations or (gama'iyyas) were and still are an important communal form to meet, take

drastic decisions concerning their community and give mutual help in cases of marriage, death or house construction. The Nubians have this motto: "one man cannot build a house, but ten men can easily build twenty houses". Nubian women too had a strong cooperative role with men in painting and decorating their house interiors.

Nubian Architecture: old Nubian's residential environment had characteristics that were closely related to the surrounding ancient Egyptian monuments. The Nubian houses were built of stone, clay and sand; the flat roofs were commonly built of palm leaves (jareed) and grain stalks and the arched domes were of clay bricks. The walls of the house especially the façade were decorated with ornaments and paintings of flags, flowers, birds and animals. Crockery was often used for wall decorations; a plate usually occupied the centre of the façade. The decoration of its exterior doorway, or (bawaba), was a mix of vivid colors and textures of adobe brick filigree, figurative and geometric images in mud, white lime-plaster relief, and wall-mounted objects like ceramic plates, automobile headlights, mirrors, cow horns and dried crocodiles. While the full range of these decorative materials has shrunk in recent years, the impulse to draw attention to one's home, and to its doorway as a symbol of the family, remains strong (El-Hakim, O. 1993:15-40). The old Nubian built-environment was a reflection of cultural authenticity: it was successfully responsive to users' needs (biological-physiological and cultural); its architectural forms fostered socialization among members of the community, achieved self-image and identity, it also realized privacy and thermal comfort.

Nubian life after relocation in the 1960s: from the previous studies which deal with the effect of the Nubians' relocation in new standardized prototypes, planned in rows, built for them by the Egyptian government, it was found and evidenced that they made important changes within their housing units which better suited their social needs. It is a well-known fact that wherever boundaries in a region increase in a strong and visible way, the more this community has a distinctive character and personality. If these boundaries are weakened, then the characteristics and personality of the place will vanish. The relocated groups have mingled with each other and with members of the Egyptian rural and urban society in the new areas; they receive all the appropriate services and have access to modern trends of living. This new exposure has caused a change of priorities among the newer generations of Nubians in relocation areas: they now favour oneself and their immediate family; their allegiance to the group has weakened (Fahim, H. 1975). The questions are:

- To what extent have those changes affected their built-environment nowadays in terms of space shape, size, relationships and furnishings?
- What are the wall treatments – color and decorative patterns – used indoor and in the exterior façade that are still reminiscent of the old values?
- What are the changes that occurred in their lifestyles?

Purpose of the Study and Methodology

This study deals with the issue of continuity in the pattern of lifestyle within the present Egyptian Nubian community with the aim of seeking evidence on such continuity and to explain the repercussions of previous socio-economic

values on the actual residential built and lived-in environment. It is a longitudinal study; it draws from the related literature, the Nubians' lifestyle and their built environment before relocation (old Nubia) and soon after relocation in the 1960s. It is also based on site visits by the authors to detect the actual aspects of the built-environment. The field in-depth qualitative study, exploratory in nature is done on a random sample in one of the 33 villages that constitute the Kom-Ombo site: Eneba (Aniba). It focuses on changes that are obvious in both the exterior and interior spaces, on the use of patterns and color of the walls and on the residents' lifestyle. The tools used for data gathering are:

- Annotated photographs of the interior spaces of the actual visited residences, and the surrounding exterior space.
 - Semi-structured interviews with the residents enquire on the demographic characteristics, the duration of residency and the description of the residence. The interviews also focus on the level of present satisfaction with: the new location, the dwelling unit, and on the residents' future plans concerning renovation of their units.
- Data analysis depends on several factors:
- The tribal background (Fadija and Kenuz) as their old houses and habits are well documented in the related literature which helped in the longitudinal assessment.
 - The father's occupation: farmer, craftsman or laborers/ employee.
 - The family members' level of education.
 - The extent of exposure outside the local context.

Space in the Nubian House

In old Nubia, social structure, people's economic condition, topography and climate were basic considerations in house designs.

Winter months in that area are quite cold with a steadily blowing north wind; hence, the living areas were placed to face south and west in order to receive as much sun as possible. On the other hand, because of the summer heat, which pours in from the south and west, the walls of the living areas were high, which created a shady patch close to the wall itself. For similar reasons, the roofed open areas in the courtyard located on the south or east-end were open to the north and west to allow access to late evening breeze; they offered an enduring living-and-sleeping area during the heat of the summer. "Houses varied in sizes, but were usually composed of a big walled courtyard with rooms built at the further ends of the yard. Near the main gate, a room was usually used for men guests locally known as Madyafa or Sabeel that opens on the outside by a terrace. The courtyard was the hub of all women activity where there were several big pottery or metal pots for storing flour and other cereals. Furthermore, within the courtyard, a sheltered area from the sun and wind functioned as the main living open area" (Riad, M and Abel-Rasoul, K. 2007: 38). Spaces inside the house were spacious; they accommodated few pieces of furniture that consisted of one or more beds Angarib used for sitting and sleeping purposes, wooden chests for storage and straw dishes used as trays for food during meals. The guest room walls were decorated with hand maid straw dishes, decreasing in size patterns from top to bottom and with storage containers ornamented with shells hung from the ceiling.

Spaces in the Nubian house after relocation in the 1960s are smaller. They are repartitioned around one small courtyard and consist of two rooms only, a kitchen and a space for animals.

The bridal hall and the guest room which are typical of a Nubian house have been moved out. The row houses provided by the government are not responsive to climatic considerations, there is no good positioning of openings in accordance to orientation; the construction is in reinforced concrete which resulted into thermal uncomfortable and to acoustical infringement on privacy. The post occupancy evaluation done in the 1980s and 90s by several researchers on the relocation houses in Kom Ombo reveals that they restructured their new housing units and the adjacent exterior spaces to provide more privacy, more space for social hospitality and to host the different rituals that express their strong cultural allegiance; they also redecorated and colored the empty new façades in their old style (see Figure 1); (Atalla, H. 1981; Fahim, H. 1981; El-Hakim, O. 1993).

The results of the semi-structured interview done by the authors of this paper on Eneba (Aniba)'s residents reveal similar house renovations to what has been documented some twenty years ago in terms of spaces also of type and way of furnishing. It shows the extent of residents' dissatisfaction of their houses even after the renovations they made. It is noteworthy to add that the result of the answers on the demographic characteristics of the chosen sample show that the sample is formed of a combination of both Fedija and Kenuz tribes (see Chart 1).

Chart 1, illustrates that 100% surveyed Kenuz residents renovated their new house, on the other hand, 88% of Fedija made the same renovation. Furthermore, 40% of Kenuz and 48% of Fedija were completely dissatisfied with their housing units even after renovation.

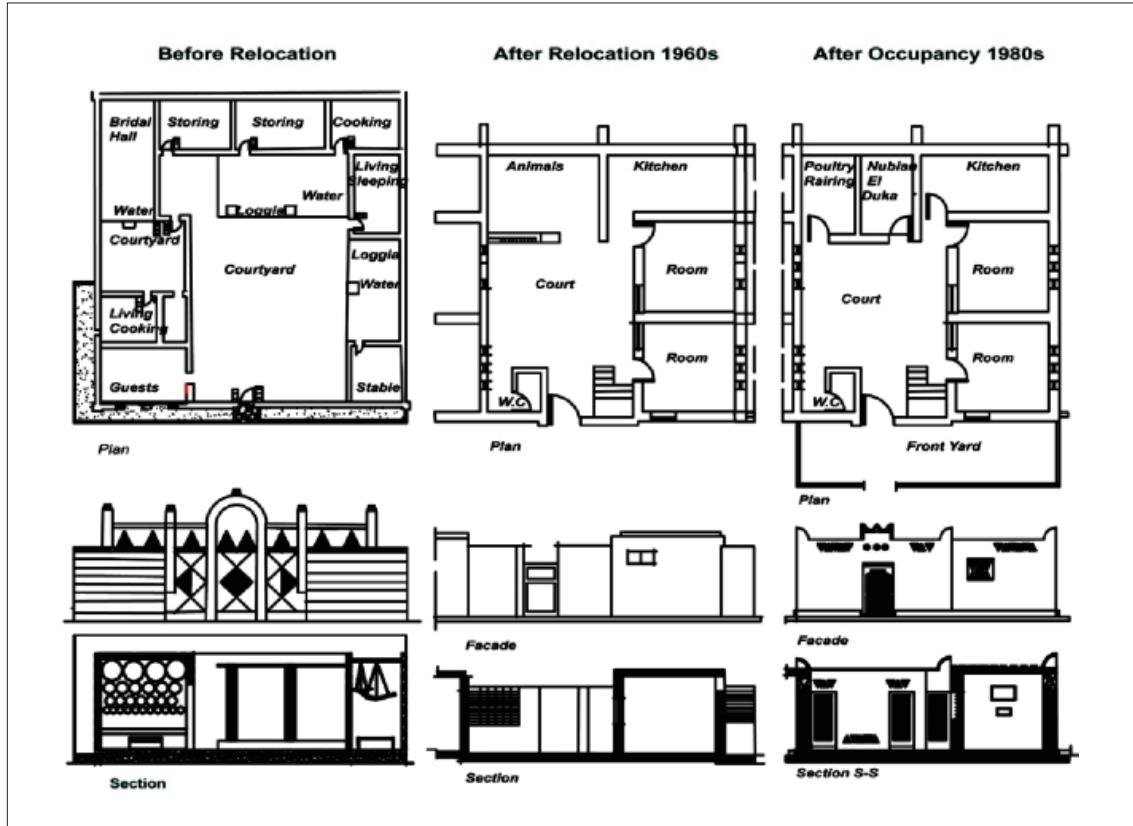


Figure 1: The three stages of the Nubian House: old nubian house, prototype for relocation, prototype restructured after occupancy. (Source: Authors).

Current changes as observed in Eneba 2007:

The semi-structured interviews and photographs which are taken on-site evidence several renovations. The most common renovated elements collected by the authors are:

- Constructing an outside yard surrounded with a wall fence.

- Constructing a built-in level outside the façade or (mastaba) for men gatherings.

- Dividing animals room into two small rooms, one for poultry and the other for storage.

- Closing the large windows and constructing narrow clerestory ones.

- Decorating façades and interior courtyard walls.

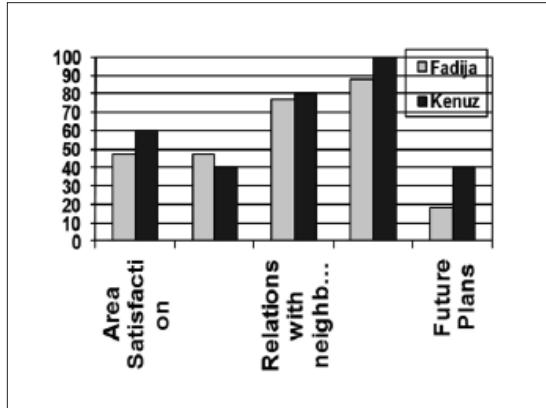


Chart 1: Eneba's Residents' Satisfaction. (Source: Fadlaja and Kenuz).

- Changing the color of interior and exterior wall-painting.

Continuity Evidenced in the Façades of the New Settlements

Entrances after renovation are highlighted with pillars, they still remain a vital and dominant elements on façades. The changes that have been done refer to the old Nubian architecture, while the full range of the old decorative materials has shrunk in recent years, the impulse to draw attention to one's home, and to its doorway as a symbol of the family yet remains strong. The "chicken-and-shrub" design in the old Nubian façade (see Figure 2), becomes a friezes that defines the bottom of a band of decoration that goes all around the house (see Figure 3 - Eneba village in 2007) (Werner L. 2006).

Interior Design in the old Nubian style show wall-patterns organized by covering the entire walls with hand maid straw dishes, especially



Figure 2: Entrance Highlight – Pillars in Old Nubia. (Source: Fernea, 1966).

the guest room which is called Madyafa as represented in the following sketch (see Fig. 4); those dishes decrease in size from top to bottom.

Continuity Evidenced in the Interiors of the New Settlements

The habit of hanging straw baskets and clay containers still prevails, whereas dishes in the present houses have almost disappeared; they are mostly substituted by decorated framed pictures on the walls. Nonetheless, we can see them concurrently ordered in the same old rhythm: from top to bottom, decreasing in size (see Figures 5 & 6: Eneba village, 2007).

Color in the Nubian House

The exterior color scheme in the old Nubian houses as was shown in several documents and available photos, and in reference to what is illustrated in the previous section on old Nubian



Figure 3: A current façade in Eneba 2007. (Source: Authors).



Figure 5: Hanging Straw baskets. (Source: Authors).

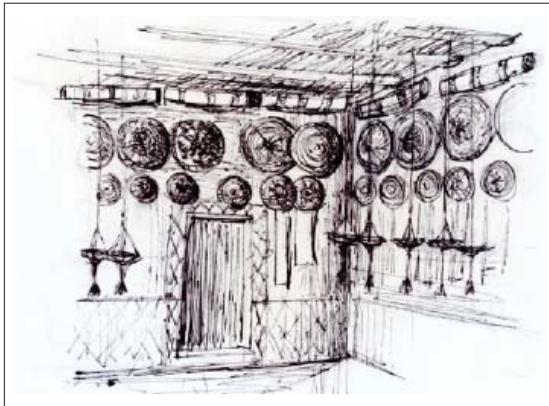


Figure 4: Interior of a Madyafa. (Source: Diana Kamel).



Figure 6: Interior walls patterns (Source: Authors).

façade (see Figure 2), reveals an earthy color scheme varying between yellow, brown, dark-brown, white and yellow-grey. In this case, the scheme can be described as having saturation contrast. "The nuance of saturation contrast does not distract the eye from characteristic details, but tends to enhance them. Contrasts in saturation add interest without deformation

of form" (Kopacz J. 2003: 45-55).

In the present exterior color scheme, the observation in the field plus the results of the structured interview done by the authors on Eneba (Aniba)'s residents show disappearance of the exterior multi-color paints. Moreover, it displays their new color scheme (see Chart 2),

which is very limited compared to the old one.

In Chart 2, (44%) of Fadija and (60%) of Kenuz use yellow as their exterior color scheme, whilst (22%) of Fadija illustrate green, and (20%) of Kenuz prefer blue and red, for their house exterior. Some other colors have been mentioned in small percentages such as grey and white. However, evidence shows the dominant use of yellow in façades (Eneba, 2007).

The interior color scheme in the old Nubian houses exhibits a cheerful and delightful decoration which spreads from the portals to the walls and into the interior, especially the women's quarters. Here on the mudwall, "one finds painted and plastered ships, fish, scorpions, birds, camels, date palms, and flowers; suns, moons, and stars; crocodiles and lions, mosques and prayer carpets" (Gerster, 1963).

In the present interior color scheme, the results of the structured interview done by the authors with Eneba (Aniba)'s residents demonstrates the interior color scheme (Chart 3):

In chart 3, peak points of Fadija and Kenuz are (38 %) and (40%) demonstrating blue for their

interior color scheme; whilst white, red and beige equally represent (20%) for Kenuz. On the other hand, white, red, green and beige are observed to be less than (10%) for Fadija. There is evidence however that the use of soft and light blue in interiors is dominant in the two sub-cultures. "Cool, de-saturated and light colors are considered to increase the experienced spaciousness" (Nemcsics, 1993); thus, the color selection in current Nubian interiors helps increasing the feeling of spaciousness in their limited spaces.

Continuity Evidenced in the Use of Color in the New Settlements

Color is an exceptionally true interpreter of people's tendencies to self or group mood. The abundance in using yellow in exteriors is apparent in the two sub-cultures (Fadija and Kenuz). Yellow maintains a reputation as the happy hue. It is an inspiring color, considered to be warm and joyful, radiant, cheerful, and approachable, generating a positive impact on its witness. People identify yellow as the color representing hope, wisdom, optimism, spiritual enlightenment and mental well-being (Kopacz, 2003: 78). It is a successful interpreter

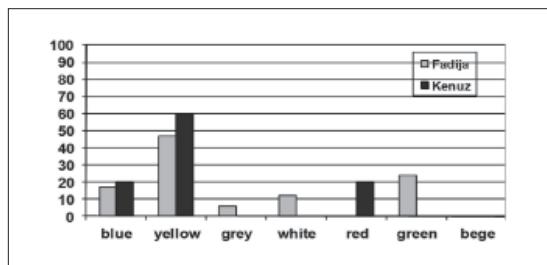


Chart 2: Eneba village: exterior color scheme of Fadija and Kenuz (Source: Authors).

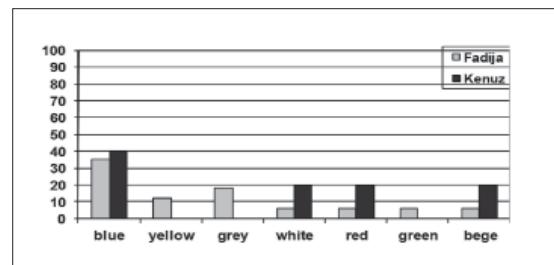


Chart 3: Eneba village: interior color scheme of Fadija and Kenuz (Source: Authors).

of self-image and identity for the Nubians who are ceremonial people; they always strive for uniqueness and still give an attractive and approachable color to their houses. Light and soft blue on the other hand is mostly used in interiors; it is the color of a clear sky, a symbol of optimism and better opportunities (Sloane, 1989); it also creates an atmosphere of peace and serenity, and most of all, it is insects repellent. Therefore, the use of yellow and the concept of dividing the external façades into horizontal areas remains an evidence of continuity. Conversely, the mud color of the old interiors decorated with wall hangings or painted in bright colored motifs are currently replaced by a plain light color mostly blue.

The Nubians' Style of Life-Some Continuity

As mentioned before, old Nubians have long standing traditions; men conversing outdoors, a habit maintained in the new houses by building Mastabas near front doors; also interior furniture is quite similar to the old one and represents continuity even from ancient times (see figure 7 & 8). Nonetheless, change is also quite discernible in their current physical and social

surroundings; data analysis reveals that the age of households' heads mostly ranges from forty to more than sixty, when age is correlated with education; the younger are the more educated.

Occupation changing from laborers and/or land cultivators to professionals correlates to heads of households' education level; few of them are university graduates. However, in this longitudinal study, the argument is not how to avoid change, but how this change is accepted and survived, not only in the physical sense, but also in terms of self-respect, of personal worth, group identity and peaceful cooperation with one's fellowman that makes life worthwhile for the individual. As we have proven in Chart 1, only (22%) of Fadija and (20%) of Kenuz have been able to apply some of their cultural heritage, it means that almost (80%) cannot apply it. Their relocation shows some acculturation as they have somewhat -in the third generation- acquired new habits from the local saeedi pattern of lifestyle and some of the less elaborative features that are reminiscent of the new local architecture of

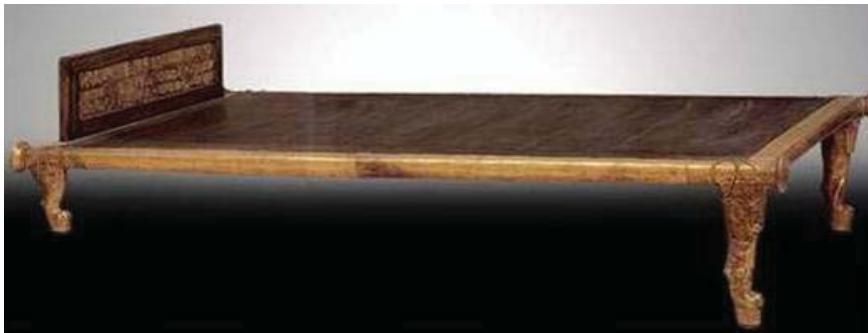


Figure 7: Ancient Egyptian Bed. (Source: NA).



Figure 8: Nubian Bed - Angarib. (Source: Authors)

the Kom-Ombo region. Although they tried to renovate some elements, yet (50%) of Fadija and (40%) of Kenuz are not satisfied with their new residences, they are still dreaming of their old houses; likewise, (18%) of Fadija and (40%) of Kenuz have no future plans for more renovation in their present houses. Selected comments such as: "we prefer to live on the Nile banks - there, we had a regular income from our own palm manufacture, here we are merely employees - there, we had our own inherited agricultural land, here we do not even possess one (qirat) - here there is a high percentage of unemployment"; such comments explain the main reasons that are behind their ongoing will to go back to the old premise which now is the place around Lake Nasser in order to regain their independent and unique identity.

Conclusion

The Nubians are mindset about their heritage; in old Nubia, social solidarity is one of the important principles of their life style, they share and cooperate in funerals and weddings. Their cooperation is a social phase; it strengthens the

bonds of brotherhood and love; it revives in the hearts of everyone the feeling of reassurance to one another (Metwally, 1990: 22). As they are deeply concerned about the possible loss of Nubian culture and cohesion, they formed groups to rejuvenate the arts of the Nubian past in painting, in writing poetry and in composing music and singing. They took from the new situation only what they need and want and rejected elements that do not correspond to their inherited values. The key success to continuity in the Nubian society is partly due to the Egyptian society which has made many alien minorities a part of itself throughout its long history. It also rests upon the nature of the Nubians themselves, their high adaptability and adjustment to new situations and at the same time, retaining those values that have always shaped their uniqueness. The Nubians' ongoing constant communal activities through their social clubs Gama'iyyas play a key role in their struggle for upgrading their villages and their upward mobility in the labor and the professional market. It also helped them have constant dialogues until to date with the authorities to go around Lake Nasser and settle there.

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