

| The Nubia Museum's Role in the Community

by Ossama A. W. Abdel Meguid

Ossama A. W. Abdel Meguid holds a degree in museology from the Reinwardt Academy, Amsterdam, in the Netherlands. He is director of the Nubia Museum in Aswan (Egypt). He has also worked as curator of the Aswan Local Museum. He has many publications such as 'An Old Nubia Museum at Sehel Island', in Nubia and Sudan, British Museum Magazine, 2003; 'Museums, Civilizations and Development', ICOM Encounter, Amman, 1994; and 'Nubia Museum's Security System', a paper presented at the ICOM General Conference, Seoul, 2004.

The museum and community in sustainable development¹

Museums are products of society and when they are in the mainstream of professional development, they actively serve society. Service involves responding to obvious demands, such as those for education, entertainment and civic pride, as well as to the deliberate affirmation of shared social values.

As a society changes, its culture changes in order to satisfy different needs. Those who would strike new balances call on our social and cultural institutions to address the challenge of the present. The museum must consequently evolve in its role and thereby continue to serve society. To maintain its integrity, however, it must not waver from its main purpose. No other institution preserves significant objects from the past. If this should cease to be its main concern, the museum will no longer exist; it will have become something else.² Museums are



19. The Nubia Museum was built with the help and supervision of UNESCO, using elements from Nubian cultural heritage in its design.

unique institutions with potential both to develop and to explain new knowledge and its significance to the general public, thereby maintaining awareness of the social context of its production. Museums have the potential to participate in the shaping of our collective future by contributing their research, exhibition programming and heritage collections to collaborative programmes in the interest of society as a whole. Some may claim that museums do not have the right to participate in shaping society.³ However, in the face of rapidly growing needs to examine environmental, cultural, and socio-economic problems, people are turning to institutions that might address global problems at the local level. Museums are among those institutions with the opportunity of making a real difference.⁴

The Nubian Community

Nubians have a much higher proportion of African blood than Egyptians, amounting perhaps to 50 per cent of their total genetic make up. In dress and manner they follow the time-honoured conventions of the Arab world. Although proud of their distinct ethnic identity, Nubians also consider themselves Arabs, and most can trace their descent from the Prophet or from one of the early caliphs. Arabic is the second language of most of the male population, and the only written language. Like most Africans, Nubians are in fact fairly recent converts to Islam. They are not converts from paganism, for they were Christian throughout the Middle Ages, and before that, adhered to a succession of state cults of Egyptian origin. Nubia was called *Balad El-Aman*, the land of safety and

security, as a result of the structure and function of Nubian society and its adaptation to the environment along the shores of the Nile.⁵

An important aspect of the Nubian community is the communal ownership of waterwheels, palm trees, fields and cattle by members of different families and even villages. Limited economic resources forced the Nubians to cooperate rather than to quarrel over rights and shares. This necessity also influenced social relationships and interactions because shares in property could not be sold but were bequeathed. Therefore, it would be in the interest of the owner of part of a waterwheel, who consequently owned a share of the crops it irrigated, to acquire part of the land on which the crops were planted. He would try to achieve this by marrying off his son to the daughter of the landowner; thus, the bride would bring a share of the land to the bridegroom's family. Economic necessity produced a strong sense of cooperation and solidarity in Nubian society.

This people lived hundreds, perhaps thousands of years, south of the city of Aswan, until the High Dam was built, flooding their homes and covering the entire area. The government resettled the Nubians in new communities on new lands north of Aswan near Kom Ombo. The construction of the High Dam made Nubians the object of national attention. At the same time, it permanently separated the Nubians of Egypt from those of Sudan as a result of their resettlement in both countries. Moreover, many families that formerly maintained their physical presence in Nubia were uprooted and re-established themselves in an urban environment.

The Nubia Museum and transmission of traditional knowledge

Since its opening, the Nubia Museum has embarked on a series of programmes designed to make it a dynamic institution and an integral part of Aswan society. Having deliberately moved away from the outdated concepts of a museum being a static place for the exhibition of artefacts alone, the Board and staff are pursuing a strategy to ensure that the museum is part of and responds to the Aswan community. This community strategy includes extensive local and international promotion, the offering of special awards and extended visiting hours for locals, the implementation of a school programme unit that enables children to conduct research on Nubian history, and the community utilization of museum facilities for art, drama and other cultural activities.

Since the resettlement process of the early 1960s, during the construction of the High Dam, the Nubian population has faced innumerable challenges related to the maintenance of its culture and traditional ways of life, as well as earning a livelihood. In this process of re-adjustment the rich cultural heritage of the Nubian community has suffered. Of particular concern is the general neglect of art and handicraft production as the community adapted lifestyles to cope with a new environment. Nubian arts, crafts, and folklore embody and reflect the history and beliefs of this ancient people.

The situation is such that very few people below the age of twenty are knowledgeable in these traditional arts and their associated folklore

RESEARCH AND CULTURAL POLICIES

and history. Currently, members of the older generation with knowledge and skills are passing away. The museum has recognized the potential for a major loss of Nubian cultural wealth with the passing of this older generation, and is seeking effective ways of stemming this loss. A feasible approach is to facilitate opportunities for the older generation to educate and train

education and cultural services, and lack of representation in decision-making. With the goal of addressing the root causes of poverty, the museum project focuses on increasing community access to basic services and enhancing human capabilities in order to improve the quality of life of the community's most vulnerable households. In order to address the multi-faceted nature of



20. Interior of the Nubia Museum with the colossal statue of Ramses II from Gerf Hussein.



21. Interior of the Nubia Museum representing a Nubian wedding ceremony.

interested members of the younger generation. In an attempt to resuscitate Nubian handicraft skills, and involve young Nubian women in income-generating activities and improve basic literacy, the museum has proposed conducting a nine-month pilot training programme to transfer skills and traditional knowledge from senior to younger Nubian women.

The Nubia Museum, poverty and illiteracy alleviation

Poverty is not just a matter of low income; its many aspects include inadequate access to health,

poverty, the project works in close partnership with local Community Development Associations (CDAs). The project provides advocacy capabilities and technical assistance in: (a) accessing basic services (water and sanitation health, education and micro-credit) and (b) strengthening the CDA's capacity to represent their constituencies and link with other civil society organizations in order to voice the needs of vulnerable households. Through museum assistance, CDA working teams have received training in project design and resource mobilization and have engaged women in poverty-reduction activities. Community advisers have learned to prepare and share messages to promote

safe pregnancy and delivery. They are also able to empower women who have limited literacy skills to prevent malnutrition for themselves and their children. In addition, some CDAs have been trained to play a pivotal role in leading poverty-reduction initiatives in collaboration with other partners within their local environment or beyond. Partnership makes a difference and a multifaceted approach holds the key to success for everyday victories over poverty.

Towards environmental issue awareness

The museum, in co-operation with the Environment Studies Unit of the South Valley University in Aswan, supports local CDAs in the districts of Nubian villages in Aswan city to form an environmental network. The network enables communities to become environmentally literate in order to identify needs and develop strategies, and obtain and pool resources to address those needs efficiently and effectively and to strengthen community members' environmental advocacy capabilities. The museum helps to develop solutions to environmental problems such as solid waste disposal, and water and air pollution. It promotes mutually identified strategies. With greater awareness, community members are able to ensure that their solution is effective.

Based on a request from the Ministry of State for Environmental Affairs and the Egyptian Environmental Affairs Agency, the Academy for Educational Development has facilitated the organization of the Agenda 21 Children's National Poster Contest. The Agenda 21 Posters contest, a drawing competition revolving around the theme

of 'Caring For Our World', was organized at national level under the auspices of the First Lady, Mrs Suzanne Mubarak, as part of Egypt's preparation for the World Summit for Sustainable Development in 2002, in Johannesburg (South Africa). The drawing competition involved children between seven and twelve years old. It aimed at raising their awareness of sustainable development, the objectives of Agenda 21 and the Rio+10 preparations. Children were invited through 'the Green Corner Network' to submit drawings that reflected their concerns about the global environment and development issues. The collection of winning entries from all over the world was exhibited at the World Summit. The Museum and Academy for Educational Development have produced a set of materials to publicize the contest and encourage children to participate by creating drawings that reflect their own perspectives and concerns about the Egyptian as well as the global environment. These publicity materials included five posters portraying five main environmental themes and a children's folder containing a sticker entry form, a descriptive flyer and four pages on vital environmental issues. In order to enhance communication efforts regarding the main global environmental and development concerns, a travelling exhibit of the best sixty posters, representing regional and national winners, was displayed on the Nubia Museum premises in May 2003.

| NOTES

1. The following publications have been used as references: *'Museums and their Communities; Art, Ethnography and Interpretation'*, Salzburg Seminar, Session 277, August 1989.

RESEARCH AND CULTURAL POLICIES

'Museums and Communities: The Politics of Public Culture', Conference held at the International Center of the Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., 21–23 March 1990.

'Museums and Societies in a Europe of Different Cultures', European Conference of Ethnological and Social History Museums, Paris, 22–24 February 1993.

'Museums and Communities', 17th General Conference of ICOM, Stavanger, Norway, 2–7 July 1995.

Ivan Karp, Christine Mullen Kreamer and Steven D. Lavine (eds.), *Museums and Communities: The Politics of Public Culture*, Washington D.C., Smithsonian Institution, 1992.

Marcella Brenner, 'Training for Museum and Community Awareness', ICTOP Meeting, Canada, 1982.

'The Museums and the Needs of People', ICOM/CECA Annual Conference, Jerusalem, Israel, 15–22 October 1991.

Ames M.M., 'Breaking New Ground: Measuring Museum's Merits', in *International Journal of Museum Management and Curatorship* Vol. 9, No. 2, 1990.

2. G. Ellis Burcaw, *Introduction to Museum Work*, p. 203, Altamari Press, 1983.

3. Alan R. Emery, 'The Integrated Museum, A Meaningful Role in Society', in *Culture*, Vol. 44, No. 1, 2001, p. 70.

4. G. Lawrence, 'Remembering Rats, Considering Culture: Perspectives on Museum Evaluation', *Museum Visitor Studies in the 90s*, London, 1993.

5. Robert Fernea, 'Old Nubia Ballad - Aman 'the pleased land', Islamic Nubia prior to the High Dam' in *Nubia Museum Thematic Programme of Exhibition*, UNESCO, 1982.