

The Nubians

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An ethnic group in Africa, numbering over three hundred thousand, the Nubians live in Sudan and Egypt. They are descendents of the ancient Nubians, who inhabited the region from Aswan (Egypt) and the first cataract (waterfall) of the Nile River to Khartoum (capital of Sudan) in the south beyond the sixth cataract. After key excavations by archeologists such as Charles Bonnet and Matthieu Honegger of Switzerland, we know that in the Nubian region an ancient civilization with palaces, temples, and pyramids (tombs) flourished as long ago as 7000 B.C.E. As many as 223 Nubian pyramids were discovered in the ancient cities along the Nile in Sudan (Kerma, Napata, Nuri, Naga, and Meroe), which is twice the number of pyramids in Egypt. To date, archaeologists have confirmed the existence of three successive kingdoms in the ancient Nubian region (also sometimes called "Kush"): the Kingdom of Kerma (2400–1500 B.C.E.); Napata (1000–300 B.C.E.); and Meroe (300 B.C.E.–300 C.E.). In short, the Nubian culture thrived from about 7000 B.C.E. to about 1500 C.E., when it was conquered by Muslims.

Egyptian objects found in Nubian graves attests to close, but complex Egyptian-Nubian cultural ties from prehistoric times. Throughout Egyptian history, the Nubians have been viewed either as a conquered race or a superior enemy. In armed conflict, Nubians were skilled archers. Egyptian pharaohs exported gold,

ebony, ivory, incense, minerals, and metals back to Egypt, as well as Nubian slaves. (One should remember that African slavery was well entrenched long before the European explorers brought African slaves to the New World in the fifteenth century). Much of the gold in Egyptian statues and artifacts came from Nubia.

Experts believe the name “Nubia” derives from the ancient Egyptian word for gold (“nbu”). When Egypt’s government collapsed in 747 B.C.E., Nubia’s King Piankhi came to its aid and established the largest empire on the continent. Nubian (or Kushite) kings ruled Egypt as its twenty-fifth dynasty (712–657 B.C.E.). In the fourteenth century C.E., the Nubian government centered in Dongola (Sudan) collapsed, and Egypt divided and dominated the region. Over the next few centuries, several invasions took place, and several smaller kingdoms were established. The Egyptians extended control over northern Nubia while—in the sixteenth century—southern Nubia was controlled by the Kingdom of Sennar (named the Funj Sultanate after the ethnic group), which ruled from 1504 to 1821. In 1523 the Sennar monarchy converted to Islam, shunning the consumption of alcohol, which had been customary during festivals. By the time the kingdom collapsed, Arabic had been adopted as the official language.

In 1820 Muhammad Ali Pasha, as viceroy of Egypt under the Ottoman Turks, sent an army led by his son Ibrahim Pasha to conquer the Sudan. By 1821 the Funj surrendered to his forces, and the Sudan from Nubia to the Ethiopian foothills became part of Muhammad Ali’s expanding empire. Egyptian and Sudanese historians debate the benefits and motives of this invasion. Certainly, Muhammad Ali was interested in the Nubian gold and slaves (to be conscripted into his army)

that the Sudan could provide and wished to control the vast territory of Sudan south of Egypt. His tax collection amounted to the confiscation of gold, slaves, and livestock. Opposition to his rule became intense, resulting in the killing of his son Ibrahim Pasha and the eruption of rebellion, which he quickly suppressed. Yet, under Muhammad Ali, Sudan acquired its present-day political borders. He laid the foundations for close commercial and cultural relations that would benefit the peoples of both countries. His reforms in currency exchange and customs policy stimulated trade. Construction of silos, warehouses, shipyards, and wells along caravan routes created new industries for Sudan, capitalizing on its local forestry resources. He also established monopolies on Sudanese commodities (livestock, pelts, glue, ivory, senna, and ostrich feathers). Within Egypt itself, he cultivated cash crops such as cotton, which he sold to Great Britain at marked-up prices. He cultivated good relations with European merchants, on whom he was dependent for the sale of his exports. Among other things, he also promoted the development of the educational system, specifically of medicine and the arts.

In 1882 the British occupied Egypt and were not expelled until 1956, four years after a group of reform-minded military officers—including Gamal Abdel Nasser—launched a coup overthrowing the dynasty founded by Muhammad Ali. The new Nasser government placed men with more understanding of Sudanese aspirations in power in Cairo. On 12 February 1953, Prime Minister Nasser signed an agreement with Britain granting self-government for the Sudan and self-determination within three years for the Sudanese. Three years later, the Sudan became an independent republic with an elected representative parliament.

In addition to his Arab nationalist and anticolonial sentiments, Nasser—like Muhammad Ali before him—was bent on reform. One of his key aspirations was to construct the Aswan Dam (1958–1970), which he promised the people would reduce the risk of flooding along the Nile River and modernize rural Egypt by generating electricity. Unfortunately, in addition to causing ecological problems, the dam forced several hundred thousand Nubians to abandon their ancestral lands and flooded many of Nubia’s priceless archeological remains. In fact, Old Nubia literally lies submerged beneath Lake Nasser, a vast man-made reservoir (550 kilometers long and 35 kilometers across at its widest point) in southern Egypt and northern Sudan. New Nubian villages can now be found, both on the west bank of the Nile near the town of Kom Ombo, fifty miles north of Aswan, as well as on Elephantine Island in the River Nile, located just downstream from the first cataract. Rather than rebuilding their homes, some of the displaced Nubians fled to the large cities such as Cairo.

International observers predicted that the Nubians’ distinct culture (language, dress, dances, traditions, and music) would die after such massive displacement. On the contrary, the tragedy sparked in Nubians—especially musicians—a determination to preserve and propagate their culture. Hamza el-Din (1929–2006), the “father of modern Nubian music,” entranced audiences worldwide with his single-line melodies plucked on an oud or Arabian lute (e.g., “Escalay: The Water Wheel,” 1971). His influence on African Americans intensified when he resettled in Berkeley, California. The Nubian singer Mohamed Mounir (b. 1954) exerts great influence, especially among teenagers in the Arab-speaking countries, advocating in

his lyrics—after 11 September 2001—peace between the Islamic East and secular West. The Nubian drummers Mahmoud Fadl, Ali Hassan Kuban, and others have updated Nubian music with electronic instruments. Today “Nubian” has symbolic meaning, encompassing Africans, African Arabs, African Americans, and people of color in general.

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