Chronos- Revue d’Histoire de l’Université de Balamand, is a bi-annual Journal published in three languages (Arabic, English and French). It deals particularly with the History of the ethnic and religious groups of the Arab world.

Journal Name: Chronos

ISSN: 1608-7526

Title: Cultural Tourism between Identity and Income. The Case of the Nubian Village of Gharb Soheil

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To cite this document:


Permanent link to this document: DOI: https://doi.org/10.31377/chr.v33i0.98

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CULTURAL TOURISM BETWEEN IDENTITY AND INCOME. 
THE CASE OF THE NUBIAN VILLAGE OF GHARB SOHEIL

ZEINA ELCHEIKH

Introduction

The Nubians’ historical area of settlement was between Aswan in Egypt and Dongola in the Sudan, on which they developed several outstanding civilizations, going back 5000 years (Emberling 2011: 6). In the 1960s, the majority of Nubians in Egypt and in Northern Sudan were forced to leave their ancestral lands, when the construction of the Aswan High Dam began, and when Old Nubia was consequently submerged. This shift in place caused many changes in their traditional practices and their economies, which had strong connections to their historical lands, and affected as well their cultural identity (Hopkins and Mehanna 2010: 5).

Today in Aswan — the internationally famous tourist destination in southern Egypt — “Nubianness” seems to become a “trademark” used by many to attract visitors; any dark-skinned taxi driver or felucca owner pretends to be a Nubian to persuade a tourist of his offer for services, and any merchant says that his goods are “genuinely handmade Nubian products” in order to sell them. Moreover, whenever a tourist reaches Aswan, (s)he will definitely be asked whether (s)he wants to visit a Nubian house or a Nubian village.

Tourism activities associated with this trend have created, on the one hand, new job opportunities among Nubians. Yet on the other hand, the tourism industry has also caused visible changes in the lifestyle and

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customs of the Nubian community some villages (either directly or indirectly associated with these activities). Traditional architecture and decoration of the Nubian villages in Southern Egypt started to be considered an “asset” for the promotion of cultural tourism, a factor nevertheless bringing income of Nubians working in this industry. Packaged tours have started to include Nubian villages and have also played a major role in “polishing” and “simplifying” Nubian cultural traditions, so tourists can easily understand and consume them. Moreover, the political and economic situation leading to a sharp decline in the tourism sector in Egypt has imposed additional (and significant) challenges on Nubians seeking their living from this industry. In other words, they are: living through the dilemma of how to communicate their culture to visitors and how to maintain their source of income.

This paper aims to explore the model that Gharb Soheil possibly brings for other Nubian villages in southern Egypt through tourism-related cultural and economic revival. It aims to assess the impact of cultural tourism on the local community in the Nubian village of Gharb Soheil, from both socio-cultural and economic perspectives: in which way does the community benefit from it, and how does it affect, either positively or negatively, the Nubian identity.

Scope of the Research, and Limitations of the Study

When the construction of the Dam was decided, the temples of Abu Simbel were among the first monuments to be rescued. The salvage of the temples began in 1964 (The UNESCO Courier: 1964, 19), and when they were reconstructed on higher ground in the late 1960s, the airport of Abu Simbel was opened for tourists and a new town was established. The submerged original Nubian village of Abu Simbel (known in the past for its fisheries) is nowadays a touristic town where many Nubians run bazars and other facilities for tourists coming to visit the temples. The visits usually lasts two hours, unless the tourists decide to stay overnight in one of Abu Simbel’s hotels or Nubian houses. The town of Abu Simbel is a place of history that has been developed into a tourist destination because its proximity to a prominent attraction. However, other Nubian villages with no similar glorious monuments in the vicinity began years ago to make use of their cultural heritage to attract
and accommodate tourists. In order to explore the experience of tourism in a Nubian village, the village of Gharb Soheil was chosen for the following criteria:

- It was not affected directly by the construction of the High Dam in the 1960s. The effects of the first Dam’s construction in 1902 and additional building in 1912 and 1933 did not cause relocation. The village was only moved uphill and remained in its original environment; it was therefore assumed that cultural identity still survives, and customs and traditions are still followed in their original place.
- The village was recently chosen by the tourism business to put Nubian villages and culture on the map of tourism destinations around Aswan, and promoted even by several agencies in Cairo which package tours to southern Egypt.
- Gharb Soheil does not have any specific archaeological monuments or sites in its immediate surroundings. It was therefore an opportunity to explore how an ordinary Nubian village would act in tourism and how Nubians there would make use of their traditions in this regard to gain a living.

This paper was part of Master’s thesis at the University of Stuttgart, in which the role of the Nubia Museum in Aswan had been as well discussed. The work was restricted by the limited time to conduct this research, the slow networking and reaction of many key informants, and the small sample of Nubian interviewees in this study. Therefore, the findings of this research therefore cannot be necessarily generalized to other “Nubian” villages.

Cultural Tourism

Tourism by definition involves a journey, a passage through time, space and through a diversity of cultures, peoples and pasts, and that ‘being amongst people who use different language, eat different food and behave in different ways’ is the essence of tourism (Robinson and Picard 2006: 10, 83). According to Smith (2003: 9-10), this ‘whole way of life of a particular people or social group with distinctive signifying systems involving all forms
of social activity, and artistic or intellectual activities’ reviews in a way how culture is considered in the context of tourism.

McIntosh, Hinch and Ingram (2002: 39) see that tourism for local communities is perceived as ‘a step towards building new meanings for traditional practices and reaffirming values’, and eventually as a source of ‘economic empowerment and cultural independence’. Therefore, it is important to assure an ‘appropriate level of authenticity and cultural integrity in product development and marketing’, and that the ‘indigenous uniqueness’ has to be communicated ‘in an acceptable and suitable manner’. However, the host communities in tourism settings face ‘dilemmas related to the satisfaction of tourists' demands and the preservation of local identities’ (UNEP), which raise questions on how local cultural identity is transmitted to visitors, and how a balance between cultural identity and economic benefit can be created.

Socio-cultural and Economic Impacts of Cultural Tourism

As a leading generator of cultural exchange, tourism offers many experiences that range from sightseeing of monuments and historical relics, to making acquaintance of other people’s life and culture. Tourists bring in the destinations they visit their own customs and habits. They also come with the aim of experiencing different cultures. In this regard, Robinson and Picard (2006: 8) find that the importance tourism holds ‘cannot be solely judged in terms of the hedonistic recompense it brings to the individual’, and ‘cannot be solely expressed in relation to the economic benefits that can undoubtedly generate’.

Grünewald (2006: 2) sees that the concept of the impacts of tourism ‘began to receive attention not only from the social sciences and economics but also from the entrepreneurs themselves that applied political, economic and even symbolic capital in certain societies’. Nash et al (1981: 462-465) found that ‘the touristic encounter in its simplest form is a series of transactions between hosts and touristic guests’, and that tourism may be seen to affect any transcultural social systems in which it is embedded.

Although it was argued that ‘tourists interact little with local residents in their host countries’ and that their contacts are mostly ‘limited to those servicing tourism, and are strictly of an impersonal business nature’ (Eraqi 2007: 194), cultural tourists have increasingly begun to pay more attention to
the culture, customs and everyday lives of the people in the destinations they visit, causing a cultural dialogue and interchange.

However, this cultural exchange is confronted by many challenges, related mainly to the differences between the way of life for tourists and locals. The conduct of tourists (e.g. alcohol, clothing...) may lead sometimes to imitation forming an intruder behavior which may cause clashes with values of the host communities. Crokern (2004: 14) finds that ‘communities like heritage tourists because they spend money, and the industry is a relatively low impact from of economic development’, and that the local community under tourism, becomes progressively more involved in the broader national and international systems, and parallelly loose its local autonomy (Cohen 1984: 385).

Authenticity, Commodification and Commercialisation in Tourism

McIntosh, Hinch and Ingram (2002: 39-42) found that the cultural experience offered in a commodified tourist setting may be authentic or a careful representation of certain aspects of a groups’ identity. In what concerns cultural adjustment and continuity, Cohen (1984: 388) discusses a variety of “transitional arts” created for the tourist market and meriting attention on their own terms as “genuinely new artistic creations”. Authenticity is often referred to as “genuineness”, and in the context of cultural tourism it needs to be further discussed. In view of that, Anne M. Jennings (Cultural Anthropologist) mentioned (email interview, 15 July 2013):

“I have yet to read a good definition of the word “authentic”. Does it mean "old fashioned"? Does it mean "unchanging"? But cultures are always changing, so how can we use that word about culture? Perhaps we should only use the word when talking about museum displays. Or perhaps we should retire the word.”

Cohen (1984: 387) finds that tourism has two opposing effects on the customs. Tourism plays a significant role in preserving and revitalizing traditions, and at the same time it is criticized for transforming them. In the tourism industry, customs and the arts go through changes as they need to be addressed to tourists (or the “new ‘external’ public” according to Cohen)
who do not share — or even know about — the cultural background and traditions of the host community. He also finds that for the benefit of tourism “dances and rituals have been shortened or embellished, and folk customs or arts altered, faked, and occasionally invented”.

In this regard, linking the tourism products with the “demand and supply” model opens a debate on how these “products” are introduced to the market. A process that has been widely discussed in terms of ethnical arts, crafts and souvenirs, within the framework of “commercialization”. Cohen (1989: 161) argued that the commercialization of ethnic crafts is ‘neither an isolated nor uniform process’. He debated that it is a complex interlink of several economic, religious, cultural and political aspects, ‘the configuration of which shapes its particular course to a significant extent’.

**Nubian Culture as an Attraction for Visitors**

Nubia and Nubians were noted in many travel literature accounts in the 1800s, such as John Lewis Burckhardt’s *Travels in Nubia* in 1819. It was portrayed not only as a land with a rich history, but also as a place marked by the distinctiveness of its people’ traditions and culture. In his book, Dafalla (1975: 50-51) described how the Executive Secretary to the International Action Committee for the Preservation of Nubia in 1961 requested a visit to a Nubian house, when he was strolling through the fortress of Buhen:

“When Prince Sadr el Din Aga Khan visited Buhen in 1962, he declared a wish to visit a Nubian house. It happened that the house of one of the sailors of the boat in which we crossed the river lay in the village next to Buhen. When I told him of the intention of the great guest he was pleased, and welcomed us to visit his house. We entered each room in turn and left no corner unvisited, even the kitchen. The visiting party could not hide their impressions about the high standard of cleanliness. We then dropped into two houses at random, and the result was the same.”

This interest was noticed by Fernea and Rouchdy (1986: 378) in the late 1980s when ‘Nubian tourist guides and tourist shops’ became ‘a regular feature in Aswan, added to the Kenuzi felluccas, which for many years have
offered a boat rides to foreign visitors'. Moreover, Fernea and Rouchdy (1986: 378) described the role of the cultural center in Aswan, in featuring ‘Nubian dances and songs throughout winter tourist season, (which) were choreographed in the folkloric tradition seen in Cairo theatres’. At that time, following the interest in Nubian traditions shown by the tourism industry in southern Egypt, some commodification was reported to have been taking place as a ‘packaging of expressive forms for the consumption of others’, with Nubian dance acts featuring in every hotel and night club of Aswan, as well as certain ones back in Cairo, as Fernea and Rouchdy (1986: 378) detail:

On one of the expensive tourist boats anchored in Aswan, we witnessed what was to us an extraordinary performance once given at a supper club when the Soviet Ambassador to Egypt happened to be present. The Nubians wearing bandana headgear more typical of American Old South than of Old Nubia, danced to the beat of drums in a well-choreographed number, joined by a free-from finale by sturdy uninhibited young Egyptian men from the audience (medical students on a holiday, a waiter told us). The whole affair, costume, dance and music, seemed much more related to newly prosperous Egyptians’ views of “traditional” Nubian than anything ever expressed by Nubians in Old Nubia.

This tendency of increasing flows of tourists to Nubian villages has been noticed in the past 10 years. As Anne Jennings (email interview, 11 April 2013) describes:

“Tourists were coming to Nubia long before Nubians decided to refurbish their arts and crafts. When I first lived in the village (West Aswan) in 1981-82, women were selling their crocheted items to tourists.”

This point was also brought about by a tour guide in Aswan, (telephone interview, 31 May 2013), who mentioned that the beginning of including Nubian houses and villages in the tours schedule dates back to late 1980s and early 1990s, when tourists who visited the botanical garden Gezirat el-Nabatat (Botanical Garden) on the island in Aswan started to enter the neighboring Nubian houses and have a cup of tea. Jennings (email interview, 10-17 April 2013) observed the flourishing tourism activities in the Nubian village of Gharb Aswan (West Aswan) in southern Egypt. In this regard she said:
It is true that there are negative aspects to tourism, but it brings in money, which the villagers really need. At the times when I complained about all the tourists, the villagers pointed this out to me. What other options do they have right now? So, when thinking about the effects of tourism on the village, we should remember to weigh the good with the bad.

**Gharb Soheil: a Nubian Village and Focal Point for the Tourism Industry**

Gharb Soheil is located on the western bank of the Nile, approximately 15 Km to the south of Aswan. The village was called *Gharb Soheil* (West of Soheil in Arabic) because of the island of Soheil opposite to it. Gharb Soheil was not affected by the High Dam, but it was relocated twice to a higher level as a consequence of Aswan’s first Dam and its heightenings. Households in the village have several sources of income: formal employment; fishing; agriculture (which is not widespread); and more recently tourism.

Local residents of varying abilities are involved in the tourism industry, either on a seasonal/permanent or full-time/part-time basis. Although part of Gharb Soheil’s population is engaged in other sectors unrelated to this industry, the majority are involved in tourism in one way or another (e.g. rental of rooms, hotels, feluccas, taxis, handicrafts, crocodiles, folklore and dancing performances, brokers and middlemen, etc.).

*Fig. 1: Local young girl with a camel, at the tourists’ area in Gharb Soheil (Zeina Elcheikh 2013)*
**Arriving and Staying at Gharb Soheil**

Gharb Soheil has become a part of packaged tours to Aswan by travel and tourism companies: tourists head south to the village by boats, and spend either a day or half a day’s time. According to manager of a tourism company in Cairo (telephone interview, 12 March 2013):

Most of my clients who are the happiest to visit Gharb Soheil and other Nubian villages are Afro-American. Some of them even believe that they have Nubian origins. They ask sometimes to organize events during their visits, such as camel races.

The packaged tours that include Gharb Soheil in their programs are mainly based on previous arrangements between the travel agencies and Nubians in the village. As part of these packaged tours, the role of involved locals is to mainly enhancing the welcome and to show available services to visitors. The program of such packaged tours is usually advertised in the blog of Gharb Soheil (2013), as follows:

1. Visitors arrive to the village from its northern side (Barbar area) by boats, and enter the village either walking or riding camels,
2. Afterwards they visit the “community development society”, a have a 15-30 minutes Nubian language lesson,
3. They visit a Nubian house and get introduced to aspects of Nubian families’ daily life (food, beverages, henna, handicrafts...) 
4. Visit of the Crocodile House, where crocodiles of all sizes can be seen,
5. Special activities and musical performances upon the requests of tourists/company.

Tourists coming on their own can reach Gharb Soheil either by boats/ felucca, or by taxi from Aswan and tour the village, more or less in same fashion, since almost all taxi drivers will lead them to the tourist area of the village.

Overnight accommodation in the village can be arranged as follows:

- in a local hotel (a cluster of Nubian houses arranged for this purpose on several spots of the Nile’s bank);
- in privately owned Nubian houses which offer bed and breakfast and other meals and services upon request (visitors usually stay with the family);
- or in camping facilities.

In the case one stays in privately owned Nubian houses, according to a tour guide (telephone interview, 31 May 2013):

“The owner of the privately rented houses should submit photocopies of the guests’ passports to the tourism police (in case they are not Egyptians), especially European tourists or those coming from nationalities considered suspicious, such as: Afghanistan, Iran, Pakistan, etc.. However, many owners purposely avoid this administrative procedure for two main reasons: evading taxes, and fearing that it could create mistrust between the tourists (whom there are struggling to get nowadays) and themselves.”

In these private Nubian houses, the guests share part of the family’s home as well as their way of life. In this sharing procedure, privacy issues are raised up sometimes. Guests often have to share washrooms and bathrooms with the family. Moreover, the part of the rental houses allocated for visitors and tourists’ accommodation is at times not equipped with lockers or any safety devices.

Traditional Nubians meals and bread appear to be served only upon request. The served meals are typical traditional Egyptian meals, which the owner of the house serves with vegetable garments seen in all other hotels, and in imported dishes used only for tourists.

Tourism and the Village’s Arrangement

The majority of the tourist locations are concentrated in a small part of the village, mainly on the Nile’s bank, from where visitors usually reach the village with boats coming from Aswan. Other facilities such as guesthouses and Nubian houses are dispersed within the village. The area of Gharb Soheil on the riverbank, with its tourism facilities looks like an enclave set and equipped for tourists, and mainly hosts tourist facilities (feluccas, bazars,
restaurants, “Nubian houses”, camels, hotels). Through a walk within the village, it was clearly noticed that the residents running businesses along the Nile bank are those frequently encountering tourists. On the other hand, those living in the village uphill rarely meet visitors. This is especially the case with women (usually very isolated) who rarely notice the presence of foreigners in the village.

The picturesque arrangement of the village differs according to whether one finds oneself in the tourist enclave or on the non-touristic area uphill. This discrepancy of use of the village’s spaces, from a touristic viewpoint, considerably influenced the appearance of the village. From an architectural perspective, the houses near the tourist area were constructed using elements of Nubian architecture. In many cases, and in order to advertise the tourist function of the structures, additional elements and shapes (sometimes exaggerated) were included in the designs. On the other hand, from a decorative perspective, the patterns in the tourist area (and its immediate proximity) no longer make use of the traditional symbols seen in traditional Nubians decorative arts, but they have become more commercial.
Products and Crafts

Nubians were known for their crafts (beaded necklaces and accessories), and colorful crocheted bags and hats. These traditional crafts and baskets were made in the past by for daily use, and for decorating their houses (mainly the nuptial rooms). These crafts have often become gifts, especially for their non-Nubian friends, as mentioned by the interviewees. However, the bazars and shops in Gharb Soheil are stuffed with all kind of products and souvenirs to be found in their great majority in almost every shop in Aswan or Cairo, apart from the Nubian crafts and some masks and wooden sculptures exhibiting more Sub-Saharan African features. Women of the village who live far from the tourist enclave go to sell their handmade products (beaded necklaces and bracelets, colorful head coverings, bags and other crocheted products), together with Egyptian-made and even Chinese-made souvenirs. Many ladies in the village usually make Henna tattoos and dyes for brides as part of their ceremonials, and are nowadays offering their services to female tourists as well.

Fig. 3: Local lady from Gharb Soheil selling handmade necklaces and crocheted items, as well as other Egyptian-made souvenirs (Zeina Elcheikh 2013)
Cultural Festivals

With the efforts of some locals working in tourism at Gharb Soheil, the First Nubian Festival was launched in the village on the 20th of February 2013. This festival was a one-day event that included many activities: races (camels, donkeys and horses), local food, Nubian traditional zaffa (wedding dances), Sudanese troupe, and a local Nubian singer. A few months later, this event was followed by another festival called el-Noba bel Alwan (Nubia in colors), which took place between 26 June-5 July 2013. This festival, in addition to the usual tourism activities and camping organized in the village of Gharb Soheil, has a broader aim: coloring and decorating the houses of all Nubian villages within a period of 4 years. This initiative intends to revitalize traditional Nubian decorative arts, and has been essentially implemented by women and children in the villages. The village of Gharb Soheil and the Nubian island of Hessa were the starting point for this initiative, and, according to May Gad-Allah, the contact person and coordinator of the festival, it is hoped it will be expanded whenever funds are available (telephone interview, 1 July 2013).

Discussion

Speaking about a Nubian tourism experience in this paper can be seen from two angles: from a tourist’s viewpoint and from a researcher’s one. Cultural tourism’s aim is not only seeking a time for pleasure and leisure, it is also a way to explore other peoples’ cultures. Cultural tourism is an exchange between cultures and places; it therefore requires a multidisciplinary approach when it comes to research on the matter.

The key assets of Gharb Soheil as a tourist destination and attraction can be summarized as follows: landscape and natural scenery (Nile, rocks,...); a more or less typical Nubian village; area of serenity; tourism festivals organized by the locals; safari, races and camping; traditional customs (handcrafts, dances,...); small attractions in the surroundings related to popular history and myths; practice of some therapeutic traditions.

Nubian villages in Old Nubia were known for the architecture of their houses: spacious, with several large rooms around a courtyard for extended family members and guests. The main façade of the house was usually
decorated with colorful geometric symbols referring to a variety of Nubian beliefs. These features still exist in many houses Gharb Soheil; however, the majority of them were built with a focus on shape and form to retain a “Nubian” atmosphere for tourists. This is also seen in many decorated facades that have lost the symbolic significance of traditional decorative patterns, and became “advertisements” of sorts.

Cultural tourism activities would not attract local communities unless they are completely benefitting from it. However, what benefits or profit mean here needs to be clarified. Cohen (1984: 384) stated that tourism frequently benefits local people who are directly involved, and that it ‘may cause hardships for the rest of the population’. This has been noticed in Gharb Soheil. Nubians who are living in the proximity of the touristic “enclave”, or run their business there have constant chances to meet tourists (who usually go only to this area). This creates a bigger opportunity for them to sell their goods and offer services, and therefore increases their incomes.

Gharb Soheil’s experience was seen as a successful model, and according to Ahmad Saleh Ahmad, the General Director of Abu Simbel Monuments and Nubian Temples at the Egyptian Supreme Council of Antiquities, (telephone interview, 4 June 2013) there were plans to apply this model to other Nubian villages. When he was asked on how the successfulness of Gharb Soheil was measured, the answer was ‘in the economic benefits it brought to the locals’. However, given the sharp decline in the tourism industry in Egypt -which has inevitably affected the Nubian areas-, the sustainability of tourism is a critical issue to be discussed. Many local Nubians working in tourism became dependent on incomes they earn from the tourist activities they work in. The declining tourism sector jeopardized the stability of livelihoods, and it can be said that it brings the risk of commercializing of the Nubian villages or even worse: transforming them into tourist traps.

Tourist events and festivals in Gharb Soheil have been organized with the intention to promote Nubian culture and identity. The aims of cultural festivals were two-fold: promoting Nubian culture, and revitalizing tourism in the village which has been badly affected by the sharp decline in this sector. Although such an initiative aims to recuperate a missing visual aspect of the traditional Nubian architecture, it could unintentionally “disneyfy” Nubian villages and gives them a brand that on the one hand remodels them, but on the other eliminates their various distinguishing features.
Cultural exchange between Nubians in Gharb and foreign tourists, imported some modernized patterns. A local lady who helps her husband in the tourism business they run in the village (interview, 17 March 2013) mentioned that although she is satisfied with the profit they gained from tourism, she is afraid that her kids get influenced by the behavior and dressing fashions of the foreign tourists:

All the women in the village are dressed in a conservative way, in our normal daily life we do not see people dressed like the foreigners. I am afraid that this could have bad effects on my kids.

As a result, the community becomes accessible to changes that have not been created in the course of time, but have been increased by tourism.

Conclusions

Cultural Tourism offers a strong motivation to preserve and enhance the aspects of cultural identity. The generated profits can be a conduit to support initiatives for maintaining the survival of material and immaterial heritage. However, the challenge is to make a profitable tourism business running with minimized negative side-effects on the local communities, if these effects would not be easily avoided.

The risk that Nubian culture is facing through tourism, as seen in Gharb Soheil is the loss of two main assets. First, the simple social values of hospitality shared by the locals (for which Nubians are well-known) is threatened by becoming only a “service” tourists and visitors are paying for. Second, the ideal image of Nubian village life, and that of the village, is being debased because these are becoming “something to see”.

Nubian villages are not (yet) theme parks or unauthentic tourist spots. They involve an authenticity revealed by the presence of Nubian themselves, the continuity of traditions and customs in their daily practices, their insistence on maintaining their language, and keeping their identity. However, the level of authenticity depends on many factors, where in the economic one, need and greed play a role.

Therefore, cultural tourism must be managed thoughtfully to sustain its base of attraction. In order to achieve this goal, it is essential to understand the needs and desires of the host community. If a balanced relationship between
identity and income in the tourism industry is to be sustainable, it has to be harmoniously managed taking into account the interests of the community.

September 2014
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