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Nubia and Nubians: The 'Museumization' of a Culture

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Citation

Simone, M. C. de. (2014, February 12). *Nubia and Nubians: The 'Museumization' of a Culture*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/23598>

Version: Corrected Publisher's Version

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Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

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Title: Nubia and Nubians : the 'museumization' of a culture

Issue Date: 2014-02-12

SUMMARY

Nubia, located in what is now the northern part of the Republic of the Sudan and Upper Egypt, is among the most excavated corners of the world. Here, for over a century, there have been ongoing large-scale archeological rescue operations spurred on by an extensive program of damming the Nile, which is leading to the gradual disappearance of the territory under water. This dramatic chapter in the history of Nubia threatens not only the loss of valuable knowledge about Nubia's place in the archeological record, but is also causing the displacement of local populations and the subsequent changes in their traditions.

This heightened archeological interest in the area has yet to have a similar impact on the representation of Nubia in museums. If this trend is not reversed, museums will become 'the only and sole alternative' venues where Nubian culture can still be admired and understood. Therefore, the responsibility of museums has never been greater. In forgotten nooks and crannies and in dark, dingy basements throughout the museum world, the artifacts of Nubia need to be sought out and released from the smothering dust of time so that they can be properly displayed in exhibitions that reveal the wealth of history and culture inherent in each of them.

The 'museumization' of Nubia, which I define loosely as covering the trend of museums around the globe to include exhibitions of Nubian culture and artifacts, is not an easy task. The geographical location of Nubia, the history of its archeological discoveries and the most recent developments that are encroaching on it have made it a contested field in etymological, geographical, linguistic and historical terms and approaches. In a nutshell, the display of Nubian collections in museums requires a profounder knowledge and major awareness of what the term 'Nubia' entails.

The objective of this research is to analyze how, as a concept and archeological presence, 'Nubia' has been dealt with so far, and with what battles it has to contend now that museums are changing their identity and trying to adapt themselves to the political trend of this century which is all about conflict of identity.

The 'analytical tour' of Nubian collections, presented in this research, includes museums within and beyond the boundaries of Nubia. It sheds light on how Nubia has been understood, created and silenced in the most important venues and smaller contexts. This analysis of the display of collections also serves to improve understanding of how Nubia has been conceived behind the scenes in the most important museums.

The Nubian collections kept in these museums display great diversity, ranging from prehistory to modern times. They testify to the fascinating history acted out in this area by peoples of different backgrounds, with divergent technical expertise and political structures; peoples who have interacted with each other over millennia, forming the tradition and the culture of Nubia.

The manner of acquisition and the history of display policies and exhibitions have both supported the argument that the traditional interpretation of Nubia has been derived more from sociopolitical and academic consideration and contexts rather than from the significance of historical evidence itself. If Nubia *in situ* is gradually being submerged by the waters of dams, in museums it is being submerged either by attractive Pharaonic artifacts in majestic Egyptian galleries or by the dust accumulating in forgotten storage depots.

This research has demonstrate that great progress has been made in the recognition and appreciation of Nubia and its culture, in particular thanks to the Salvage Campaign of the sixties. The Nubia Museum of Aswan, the only one, up to date, designated as a such, is the most striking example of this progress. In many other museums the significance of the contribution of this

culture to our understanding of the development, on all levels, of human civilization is going to require a more vigorous effort if the pieces of the puzzle that has been presented in this thesis are to be properly arranged. Cogently, the research also points out that the emphasis on the archeology of Nubia has always dominated scholarly research, obscuring other aspects of Nubian life and culture. The interactive exhibition of archeological materials and present-day artifacts and traditions of the living communities that produced them offers more opportunities for rediscovery and educational enrichment.