

THE HONEST BAWAB: CONTRADICTIONS IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF A NUBIAN IDENTITY IN EGYPT

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At their core, stereotypes can be viewed as categorizations. Psychologists claim that these categorizations operate at the cognitive level and serve as mechanisms and strategies used to reduce the time spent processing the meaning of the various amounts of stimuli encountered (Mackie et al 1996: 45). At the same time, they have been seen as a means of differentiating one's own group from other groups (Mackie et al 1996: 45). The differentiation and distinction that occurs when we stereotype can be positive or negative but often people don't view them as problematic unless there are bad connotations or stigmas that can be used to justify prejudice, discrimination, and rationalize inequalities.

This paper discusses stereotypes in general and the case of the Nubian in Egypt. It begins with an overview of the present literature about the Egyptian and then provides an analysis of the Nubian experience based on preliminary ethnographic research that was conducted in Egypt for six weeks during the summer of 2001. The goal of the research was to determine if the stereotype of the Egyptian Nubian as discussed in this literature was still in existence, and if so, what it meant in regards to the issues of race and color in Egypt.

In considering the case of the Egyptian Nubian, it is important to first explain who they are as a people. In general, Nubians are those whose native villages extended along the Nile River from the first cataract at Aswan south into the Sudan through the region known as Dongola (Fernea 1974). Linguistically, they can be divided into two groups, which are the Kenuz, who speak a dialect of Matoki in Egypt and Dongalawi in Sudan, and the Fadicca, who speak a dialect called Fadicca in Egypt and Mahasi in Sudan. Nubian speakers. In cities, they sometimes are marked by their clothing which is the white gallibayas and turbans for the men working and the gallabeya sufrā, a two layered garment that is made up of a long sleeved cotton dress covered by a smock made of opaque fabric called a gallbaeya sufrā.

According to existing literature, the stereotype of the Nubian is positive and negative. Eve Powell, a historian at the University of Georgia, primarily concerns the Sudanese community between 1875 and 1919. During this time, many Sudanese worked as doormen, soldiers, guards and servants. Due to economic conditions, male Nubians from Aswan worked alongside these men in cities like Cairo and Alexandria around this time. As effective laborers, scholars such as Robert Fernea, note that Nubians at this time became associated with "slavery and servitude in the public mind" (Fernea, et. Al 1991). And in this context, the stereotype of the Nubian as the honest and faithful servant was developed.

The negative stereotype of the Nubian as the infantile and incomprehensible buffoon came about around this same time with the construction of the character Al-Barbary, or Muhammad the Nubian by Ya'qub Sanu'a, a playwright and journalist. This character was known for unnecessarily alarming his employer while he was supposed to be guarding his home against the surveillance of the Egyptian government. According to Powell, this Nubian was comical to Egyptians because of his fearfulness

and his inability to speak Arabic properly. This would become the archetype of the Nubian in Egyptian cinema that can be seen in filmstthroughout the twentieth century.

The real and sometimes overemphasized linguistic problem contributed to the view that the Nubian is as an individual outside of the norm of the rest of the society. They are Egyptian but somehow not always Egyptian enough. Until this day, comments by non-Nubian Egyptians imply that they are still seen as separate and Egypt is attempting to assimilate them and rectify public opinion with cartoon characters such as Bakkar, who is a Nubian boy from a southern village who is meant to represent the Egyptian child's love of country (Smith 2000).

Ethnographic Data

During the summer of 2001, I conducted a six week ethnographic study of Nubians in Cairo by talking with students and faculty at the American University in Cairo, the employees and volunteers at the Nubian Documentation Center, members of Nubian associations or gamaiyyas, their contacts and acquaintances. I conducted unstructured or semi-structured interviews with 41 people, of which 10 were Nubian, 15 were Cairenes, or Egyptians from Cairo, 10 were Southern Sudanese, 2 Ethiopians, 3 Somalians, 1 Ghanaian. The weakness of my data is the small sample size. Second, it is the short length of time that the study was conducted. My variation of the non-Nubian Egyptians' socioeconomic status and non-Egyptians is not diverse enough. The Egyptians are primarily middle to uppermiddle class Egyptians from the city of Cairo. The non-Egyptians are primarily refugees, except for two Sudanese who work the United Nations and the Ghanaian who is a university student.

According to my study, I found that Eve Powell's analysis of Nubians sometimes applied for the non-Nubian Egyptians at American University. Typically, the stereotype of the Nubian as it once conceived still remained among staff members above forty years old. Nubian signified a male servant, usually a bawaab. The most common descriptions were that Nubians were clean, loyal, or honest. Several of them expressed a love for Nubian music and dance.

The faculty and students at the university that I came in contact with tended to have had more exposure to Nubians. There had been several lectures on campus about their culture and history. Some of the non-Nubian Egyptian students that I came in contact with were aware of the Nubian associations located near the campus. Because the Nubian villages were inundated in 1964, these students may have come in contact with a third generation of Nubians who have been living in Cairo their entire lives. This Nubian generally speaks Arabic fluently, often only using Nubian language for particular contexts within their community, namely in the home with their family, at Nubian weddings and festivals. As a result, 4 out of the 10 had an image of the Nubian that was more complex than that of the bawaab. 3 of the others mentioned bawaabs, and the remaining seemed to be clueless about Nubians as a people. They had heard of them but said that they didn't know anything about them. While no one expressed anything negative about Nubians to me, radio programs and television shows that portrayed them as comical or unable to speak Arabic properly were still being broadcast. Therefore, this aspect of my study would require a larger sample size and more time to gauge whether these sentiments remain strong.

One discussion that I had revealed that the Nubian male has sometimes been stereotyped as asexual. An informant recounted the story of an argument that she had with her husband over the Nubian driver she hired for her husband. Her mother is a widow and had been living alone for over a year. During that time, she had been responsible for helping her run errands. But a new opportunity arose where she would not be able to assist her any longer so she hired a Nubian to be her mother's chauffeur unbeknownst to her husband. One day her husband rushed in to the house angrily complaining about her mother's new servant. She said at first she thought he was upset that they had hired someone without consulting him more but it turned out he was disturbed because the servant was black and he was not sure from where he had come. When she said he was from Aswan, she said her husband's entire demeanor changed. Relaxed, he said, "Oh, then he is a Nubian. He should not be a problem." When questioned about what he meant by a problem, she said her husband hinted at being concerned about a black servant making advances at an unprotected female. But, seeing that this was only a Nubian, he felt more self assured.

In dealing with Nubians, I found that they was a variation in the communication styles. If they were working in positions that were more tourism based, such as on feluccas, hotels, or as bawabs, they tended to be more reluctant to comment about non-Nubian Egyptians. The 5 who I spoke to like this ranged in age from 20-65. In describing non-Nubian Egyptians, three made statements that implied that they did not approve of them very much, such as "The others are not so good." Or "You can't always trust them." At the same time, when I asked them to describe how the characteristics of the Nubian, they used the discourse of non-Nubians over 40. They spoke of themselves as honest, loyal, hardworking, and clean. This they felt made them distinct from others in Egypt.

The remainder of the Nubians with whom I spoke were college educated. They were well aware of Nubian history and culture, and some of them were actively engaged in documenting it. The most illuminating interview that I conducted was with a Nubian man in his mid-fifties. As a child, he had the opportunity to travel back and forth across the Egyptian-Sudanese border to a place called Adbara, which he said had been the headquarters of the Sudan Railway. As a result, he had gained exposure to diverse groups of people. He said that he always felt that Nubians were distinct from others because "they kept a sense of isolation and insulation." By this he was referring to the fact that they perceive of themselves as Nubian first, that they don't intermarry much, and one of the ways in which some of them identify other Nubians is through language. Therefore, if one loses the language, some of the people in the community no longer consider them to be Nubian. The implication being that that individual has transgressed the ethnic boundary and has assimilated into Arab culture, which is not considered to be desirable.

In discussing whether this could be considered prejudice towards Arabs, he said he felt he would not consider them to be discriminatory towards Arabs because of Islam. Specifically, he said, "It is all complicated by Islam. Because of the unity between Arab and Islam, to be anti-Arab is to be anti-Islamic. The more Arab authenticity the more Islamic you are." When asked how he explained this contradiction to his children, he said, "I have tried to teach them that it is not the distinctiveness but the commonality that is important. This is not necessarily the view of the community as a whole. There are ripples of racism. Nubians look down on Southern Africans and look up to Egypt and the Middle East."

To consider the image of the Egyptian from an outsiders perspective, I interviewed Northern and Southern Sudanese, Somalians, and Ethiopians about non-Nubian and the Nubian Egyptian. While they all tended to have strong opinions about Egyptians, only a few had much to say about Nubians. In general, they felt that Egyptians were greedy and concerned mostly about money, and if you had no money they were extremely rude people. Whereas the Somalians and Ethiopians expressed this, they were not as adamant as the Southern Sudanese and the Ghanaian about racism. The Southern Sudanese and Ghanaian considered Egyptians to be racist and felt that rarely were they able to be in the city of Cairo without experiencing some form of verbal assault from an Egyptian. Women complained of being physically molested, i.e groping by Egyptian men. Northern Sudanese, however, simply felt that Egyptians were just impolite people.

This idea coincides with the analysis put forth by Anita Fabos, an anthropologist at the American University in Cairo, about the discourse of the Sudanese in Cairo. In order to explain their negative experiences, she says that they emphasize “notions of proper gender relations and the enactment of traditional values such as hospitality, modesty, and generosity.”

In talking with a Sudanese informant, I found this to be the case. When asked to describe Egyptians, she said, “Egyptians don’t respect people much. The majority don’t care much at all. Foreigners, they tease them. If you are of a different nationality, they don’t respect you.” When asked to elaborate, she said, “ They are rude. They laugh at people because they think you don’t understand.”

When I asked if this could be applied to Nubians as well, she said no. Even more interesting was that she felt that Nubians, even those born in Egypt, were really Sudanese. “Those in Egypt are originally from Sudan. They go back and forth. There is no difference. They settle in Halfa to get jobs. Some go to the cities but they are all the same.”

Why would a Sudanese person claim that they were the same as a Nubian when an Egyptian, and possibly a Sudanese Nubian, would deny common ethnic identity? Existing scholarship about this suggests that there is a ranking of Black Africans in the Middle East with Ethiopians on the top, Nubians in the middle, Sudanese, then sub-saharan Blacks.

At the same time, this is further complicated by Arab nationalism, which argued that Arabs constituted one ethnic unit. According to Francis Deng, author of War of visions: Conflict of Identities in the Sudan, this meant that all of those associated with Islam began to attempt to claim Arab ancestry. In the case of the Nubian and Sudanese like this informant, they engage in a process of negotiating their identity where sometimes they want to be associated with Arabs and at times they prefer to be isolated and to construct their identity in opposition to the Arab identity. In opposing it, it sometimes means attempting to form links and connections where they do not exist.

Conclusions

In conclusion, I have offered a brief overview of the stereotype of the Nubian in Egyptian experience as presented in the existing literature and discussed what I found from a preliminary ethnographic study. The Somalian, Ethiopian, Sudanese, Ghanaian, and other African communities in Cairo of particular importance to the Nubian discussion because it allows us to assess the difference

in the way dark skinned peoples experience and conceive of Cairo. While this research will require a more in depth study with a larger sampling size, it is significant because it illuminates some of the ways that Arabs construct Blackness in their imagination, and the way it is played out in their discourse and daily interactions with dark skinned peoples. In general, scholars have denied the existence of racism in the Middle East, but research with populations such as the Nubians will allow us to gain an understanding of the ways in which ideas about race, color, social and economic class function and are perpetuated through stereotypes.