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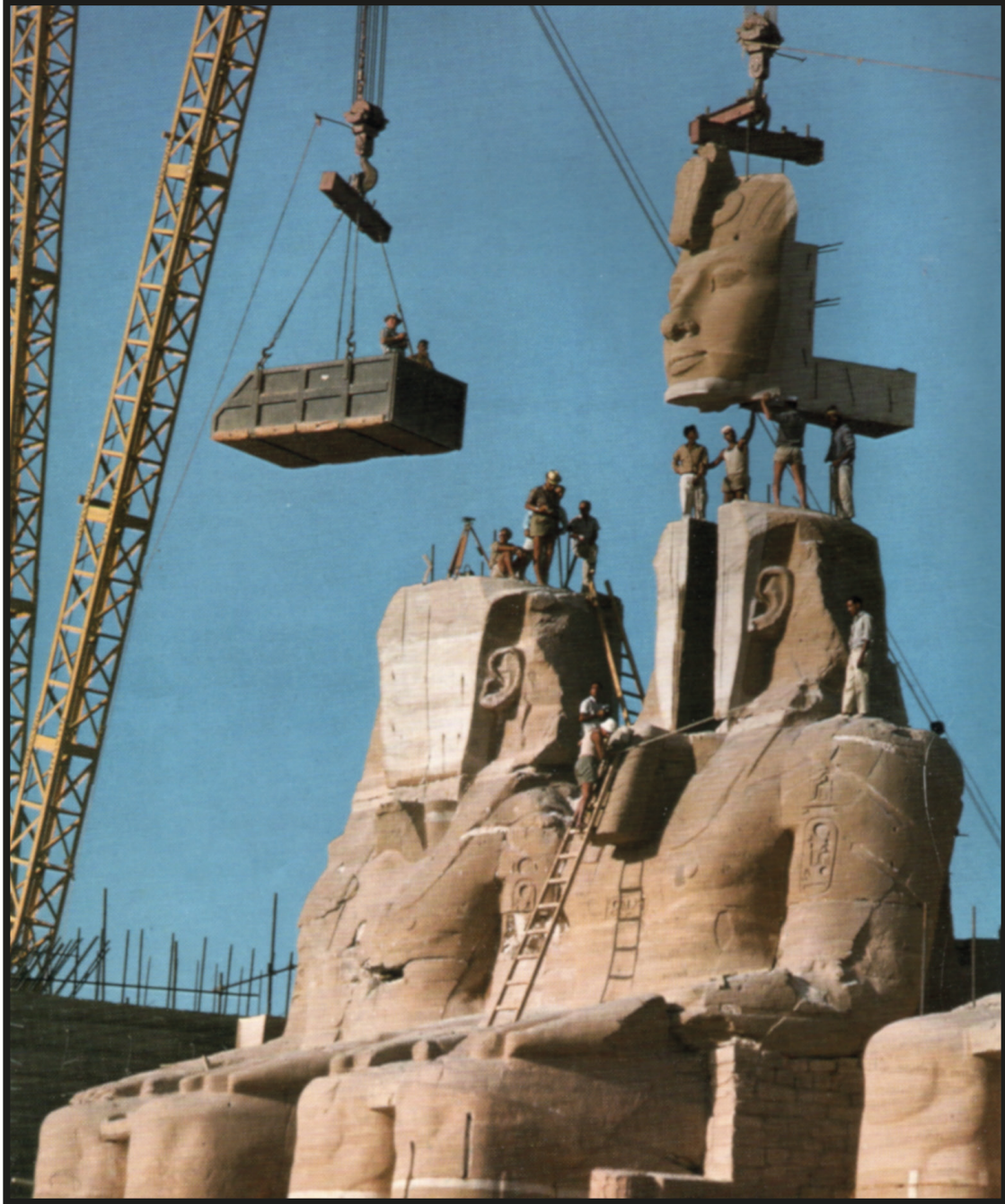
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THE FACE OF RAMSES II IS LIFTED INTO PLACE AT THE SITE OF REASSEMBLAGE OF THE GREAT TEMPLE OF ABU SIMBEL IN ASWAN, 1967. PHOTO COURTESY OF: FORSKNING & FRAMSTEG. WIKIMEDIA COMMONS.

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# The High Dam at Aswan: History Building on the Precipice

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This paper seeks to show the historical roots of the narrativisation of the High Dam at Aswan as a clash between tradition and modernity. It investigates rhetorical tactics employed in official publications of the United Arab Republic (U.A.R.) which enshrined the construction of the High Dam within a triumphalist historicist teleology. UNESCO was the mediating force in Aswan that was entrusted with a “salvage mission,” which was unprecedented in scale and scope: documenting and protecting the Ancient Egyptian artifacts and monuments in the region, endangered by the construction of the High Dam. A parallel scrutiny of UNESCO's rhetoric and actions during the time period from its first appeals for financial support to the international community in 1960, to the official end of the salvage mission in 1980, reveals striking similarities in the ways in which UNESCO rationalized the construction of the High Dam and the U.A.R.'s rationale of national modernization. The government and UNESCO facilitated institutional amnesia of the human costs incurred by the Nubian communities that lived in the homes submerged under Lake Nasser in the pursuit of aggrandizing political agendas. The paper makes use of primary sources such as the U.A.R.'s Yearbooks, official speeches made by President Gamal Abdel Nasser, and writings and speeches of crucial officiating members of UNESCO.

## *Introduction*

In the summer of 1956, Egypt's reluctance to adopt an explicitly pro-Western rhetoric and its growing relationship with the Soviet Union finally came to a head after months of tense deliberations. At this time U.S. policy makers decried the “fallacy of hoping to play off the West against the U.S.S.R.,” and on July 9<sup>th</sup>, the Eisenhower administration rescinded its offer to fund the construction of the High Dam at Aswan.<sup>1</sup> Later, historiography revealed more subtle and complicated internal constraints that the new revolutionary regime in Egypt faced which deter-

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<sup>1</sup> Silvia Borzutzky and David Berger, “Dammed If You Do, Dammed If You Don't: The Eisenhower Administration and the Aswan Dam,” *Middle East Journal* 64, no. 1 (2010): 84–102.

mined the directionality of its foreign policy. The High Dam was a keystone in the Revolutionary Government's agenda of structural development for the nation as it would enable agricultural expansion and industrialisation throughout the nation. On an intraregional level, the regime was cementing its position in the Arab-Israeli conflict as a stronghold of Pan-Arab nationalism, as well as asserting its leadership in the non-aligned movement.<sup>23</sup> These political stakes would boil over into the subsequent crisis surrounding the nationalisation of the Suez Canal on July 26<sup>th</sup> when Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser (1918–1970) asserted that the dam would be built using revenues from the Canal in order to avoid foreign domination over Egypt's economy.<sup>4</sup>

Prior to the United States' withdrawal of economic support, the Soviet Union approached the Egyptian government with a more generous offer which would be reiterated, and finally accepted, in 1958.<sup>5</sup> In 1959, at an event commemorating the start of the work on the High Dam at Aswan, three years after the Suez Canal crisis, Umm Kulthum performed for the first and only time her song "The Story of the Dam."<sup>6</sup> Umm Kulthum, known as "The Voice of Egypt," was instrumental in bolstering popular support for the Egyptian government's projects as a public figure with immense cultural and political influence in the Arab world.<sup>7</sup> In "The Story of the Dam" Umm Kulthum extolls the wealth that the High Dam would bring to the people. She celebrates her close friend and the socialist leader of the United Arab Republic (U.A.R.), Gamal Abdel Nasser, for having created miracles through his determination. In her song, the High Dam not only represents a technological dream turning into a reality, but also embodies the will of Gamal Abdel Nasser to bend the "South" and the "North" to a pivotal point in the Earth's story despite more literal setbacks in procuring funding from a certain Western "friend." In the "Story of the Dam," Nasser speaks metaphorically through the voice of Umm Kulthum to the audience: "I am a builder and I feel strong by Allah and the truth, and rightly reclaim the [Suez] canal." The song emphatically states

<sup>2</sup> Hussein M. Fahim, *Dams, People and Development: The Aswan High Dam Case* (New York: Pergamon Press, 1981), 25.

<sup>3</sup> Fahim, *Dams, People and Development*, 13.

<sup>4</sup> James E. Dougherty, "The Aswan Decision in Perspective," *Political Science Quarterly* 74, no. 1 (1959): 40–41, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2145939>.

<sup>5</sup> Karel Holbik and Edward Drachman, "Egypt as Recipient of Soviet Aid, 1955–1970," *Zeitschrift Für Die Gesamte Staatswissenschaft / Journal of Institutional and Theoretical Economics* 127, no. 1 (1971): 137–65, 150; Borzutzky and Berger, "Dammed If You Do, Dammed If You Don't," 97.

<sup>6</sup> Isa Mitri, "November 26th 1959 Cairo University \*Story of the Dam\*", Sama3y Web forum, June 2005, <http://www.sama3y.net/forum/showthread.php?t=17909>. "The Story of the Dam" was composed by poet Aziz Abazah.

<sup>7</sup> Virginia L. Danielson, "Umm Kulthūm," in *Encyclopedia Britannica Online*, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Umm-Kulthum-Egyptian-musician>. Umm Kulthum is also said to have been involved in fundraising efforts for the UNESCO mission to save the Nubian monuments by giving a concert near the Pyramids, as noted in: Paul Betts, "The Warden of World Heritage: UNESCO and the Rescue of the Nubian Monuments," *Past & Present* 226, suppl. 10 (January 2015): 112, <https://doi.org/10.1093/pastj/gtu017>.

that what Nasser proclaims physically manifests right before one's eyes. "History" watches what the "lion," i.e. Gamal, will do next. The building of the High Dam is the building of History, the active construction of an epoch. The High Dam stands between a past era of struggles and a bountiful future.

This triumphalist narrative of the High Dam contrasts deeply with the story of the Nubian community's displacement, one that has until the present day failed to gain full acknowledgement or reparation.<sup>8</sup> The High Dam flooded the Nubian villages, which were located along the Nile Valley between the region of Aswan, Egypt and the Dal Cataract in northern Sudan. Despite certain benefits gained on levels of health and education, the community's relocation to insufficiently and hastily designed habitats, the last of which occurred in 1964, caused breakdowns of social organisation that resulted in immense psychological stress.<sup>9</sup>

This paper seeks to show the historical roots of the narrativisation of the dam's construction as a clash between tradition and modernity.<sup>10</sup> It investigates rhetorical tactics employed in government sponsored publications on the High Dam which enshrined its construction within a historicist teleology. One great example of this are the Yearbooks of the U.A.R. which were published annually by the Information Department in the Ministry of National Guidance to provide a detailed informational overview of the social, cultural, political, and economic developments of the past year. The Yearbooks and other government publications facilitated an institutional amnesia of the human costs incurred by the Nubians whose homes and communities would be submerged by the newly formed Lake Nasser.

UNESCO was called in to mediate in Aswan and was entrusted with a "salvage" mission. The mission's unprecedented scale and scope included documenting and protecting the ancient Egyptian artefacts and monuments in the Nubia region which were endangered by the construction of the High Dam. UNESCO used this campaign to its strategic advantage to cement its internationalist institutional identity. A parallel scrutiny of UNESCO's rhetoric and actions during the time period from its first appeals for financial support to the international community in 1960, to the official end of the "salvage" mission in 1980, and official U.A.R. rhetoric reveals striking similarities. UNESCO justified the legitimacy of a shared world heritage, and the U.A.R. rationalised the developmental pathway

<sup>8</sup> "Egypt: Dismiss Charges, Uphold Constitutional Obligations towards Nubians," Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies, March 12, 2018, <https://cihrs.org/egypt-dismiss-charges-uphold-constitutional-obligations-towards-nubians/?lang=en>. In September 2017, 32 Nubian activists were arrested during a peaceful march on Nubian Unity Day, demanding Egypt's Constitution to uphold legal obligations as set forth by Article 236 to "recognize the Nubian right to return to their homelands in the south of Egypt...within ten years."

<sup>9</sup> Fahim, *Dams, People and Development*, 76.

<sup>10</sup> Betts, "The Warden of World Heritage." The effects of this narrativisation can be seen in scholarly literature. Historian Paul Betts, for example, in an article published in 2015 asserted without clarification that "[t]he conflict between old and new became even more pronounced in the wake of the Egyptian Revolution in 1952" (103).

of national modernisation; both parties preferred sweeping narratives focusing on the good of an intangible collective.

In the first two thirds of the paper, I give a broad overview of the ideological and political rationale underlying the grandiose meta-narratives of the construction of the High Dam and the UNESCO “salvage” mission: the Dam as a passage way leading the region, and the nation at large, from a past rurality to a future urban modernity, and the rehabilitation of a ruined past in a new internationalist present. First, I examine Nasser’s politics in the context of the newly established United Arab Republic, to show how the Aswan Dam was part of a master design of modernisation and Arab nationalism. Second, I look at several key participants in the UNESCO “salvage” mission to Aswan to demonstrate how UNESCO rhetorically aided in the U.A.R.’s image-making around the dam. Third, I bring the above two contexts together, by discussing how the Nubian communities were represented empirically and emotionally, and how these representations in turn affected the Nubian communities’ self-perception and historical identity. Finally, this paper suggests where one can find the stories of the Nubian community, hidden as they are, under “temples” and “crops.”<sup>11</sup>

*Gamel Abdel Nasser, the United Arab Republic and the High Dam at Aswan*

On July 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1952 an army coup helmed by the Free Officers dethroned King Farouk I, establishing a Revolutionary Command Council composed of 11 officers, one of whom was Gamel Abdel Nasser, future Prime Minister and later President of the U.A.R. In *Gatekeepers of the Arab Past*, a work surveying trends in historiography in 20<sup>th</sup> century Egypt, Yoav Di-Capua argues that in post-monarchic Egypt the focus was on constructing a new image of the state by using historiography to demonstrate the historicity of the present moment.<sup>12</sup> To this end, the pre-revolutionary era was treated as both a blank slate and a convenient yardstick, always complementary, to measure current achievements.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>11</sup> International Council of Museums, “ICOM news: Bulletin d’information du Conseil international des musées—International Campaign for the Preservation of the Monuments of Nubia; An Appeal Launched on 8 March 1960 by the Director-General of Unesco,” February 1960, 7. The at-the-time Director, Vittorino Veronese, stated in his appeal that “[i]t is not easy to choose between a heritage of the past and the present well-being of a people, living in need in the shadow of history’s most splendid legacies; it is not easy to choose between temples and crops.”

<sup>12</sup> Yoav Di-Capua, “Controlling History: The 1960s,” in *Gatekeepers of the Arab Past: Historians and History Writing in Twentieth-Century Egypt* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2009), 282–310, <https://www.ucpress.edu/book.php?isbn=9780520257337>. In Chapters 7 and 8 of his monograph on 20<sup>th</sup> century historiography in Egypt, Di-Capua discusses the impact of “state-manufactured historical meaning” on the intellectual networks and institutions at this time (272). He emphasises that “the operational basis of pluralistic historiography” was undermined by the regime’s tactic of limiting the normal circulation of information and ideas (264).

<sup>13</sup> Di-Capua, “Controlling History,” 286–287.

The expansion of government control over the media as well as cultural programming was fundamental to an orchestrated amnesia towards the monarchic past as well as events pre-1954.<sup>14</sup> The Information Department was created in 1952 to safeguard the discourse in the information battle against imperialism and Zionism, whether in official circles, press offices abroad, national newspapers and news agencies, or broadcasting and television.<sup>15</sup> The Department described itself as the “frank spokesman of the Government,” and its Yearbooks aimed to provide “first-hand information.”<sup>16</sup> Ideologically, the Yearbooks embodied Nasser’s agenda and the government’s party line. Close readings of the U.A.R. Yearbooks from 1959—the first anniversary of the U.A.R.—to 1965 provide a plethora of examples demonstrating a rhetoric of institutional erasure of the plight of the Nubian communities through a calculated ignorance and apathy. The Yearbooks contrast the new government’s initiatives and achievements in the construction of the High Dam with the incapability of the previous regime. The first edition of the Yearbook (1959) propounds “When the Revolution took over, the economic conditions of the country were in a state of chaos bordering on total collapse... So an entirely new policy had to be laid down.”<sup>17</sup> In particular, great emphasis is placed on the industrialisation of the country to “liberate its economy from the grasp of larger foreign powers,” through control over its natural resources.<sup>18</sup> The 1965 Yearbook states that “the idea of building the High Dam was long contemplated and dreamt of by many people, yet nobody dared to do anything about it seriously until October 8th, 1952 when the Egyptian Revolution decided to study the project in preparation for its implementation.”<sup>19</sup> In fact, attempts to harness the Nile river began with the construction of the first dam at Aswan in 1889; the dam was first expanded in 1912, and again in 1933.<sup>20</sup>

It is important to contextualise the decision to build the High Dam in a broader spatial, temporal, and post-colonial milieu to avoid presenting a purely authori-

<sup>14</sup> Di-Capua, “Controlling History,” 261. In 1954, the first President of the newly formed republic, Muhammed Naguib, was deposed. Capua notes that immediately following Naguib’s deposition, Nasser and Salih Salim, one of the Free Officers, hurried to the radio building in Cairo to erase tape recordings of Naguib’s speeches, or any containing a mention of his name. This physical erasure followed a precedent set after the Revolution in 1952, wherein films, books, statues, and poems from the monarchic past were eliminated.

<sup>15</sup> United Arab Republic/Maslahat al-Isti‘amat, 1959, *U.A.R. Yearbook* (Cairo: Information Department, 1959), 505.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 506.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 83.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>19</sup> United Arab Republic/Maslahat al-Isti‘amat, 1965, *U.A.R. Yearbook* (Cairo: Information Department, 1965), 87. The pre-revolutionary past is often coded in terms of a “dream,” which then allows for the codification of the present as an era of fulfilment of dreams. In the 1960 Yearbook, the start of construction work on the High Dam project is described as a “dream come true.” United Arab Republic/Maslahat al-Isti‘amat, 1960, *U.A.R. Yearbook* (Cairo: Information Department, 1960), 660.

<sup>20</sup> Fekri A. Hassan, “The Aswan High Dam and the International Rescue Nubia Campaign,” *The African Archaeological Review* 24, no. 3/4 (2007), 75.

tarian history. Historian Ahmad Shokr notes that looking at the construction of the High Dam through a “Third World,” post-war economic framework shows Nasser’s policies grew out of “preexisting knowledges, institutions, and practices in domains as varied as social sciences, economic policy, and state building.”<sup>21</sup> Of particular interest amongst the elements informing decision-making at the national level is development discourse, “[surviving] the demise of colonialism and [retaining] a strong appeal among national elites and newly independent governments in the post-colonial period, as it did to their colonial predecessors.”<sup>22</sup> The global discourse on development helps explain the U.A.R.’s preoccupation with proving itself primarily through numbers and statistics.

The Nasserist regime’s balancing act between the national and international stakes involved in the construction of the High Dam demonstrates how, as anthropologist Seteney Shami notes, the role of the state adapts to international pressures and trends. The state’s position within the international system results in “an interactive process that continuously informs decision-making on the national and local levels.”<sup>23</sup> This interactive process is sensitive to new forms of knowledge, such as in the case of collective population displacement, which had increased globally at this time.

Collective population displacement is defined simply as a process that involves the dislocation and/or settlement of people from their normal habitat by a superior force.<sup>24</sup> Shami places collective population displacement within a regional comparative framework, and argues that often in the 1970s and 80s, population displacement in the Third World context was seen as a catalyst to change a traditional society to a modernised one.<sup>25</sup> The application of modernisation theory as the main explanatory concept was later critiqued by scholars, especially anthropologists and ethnologists, who conducted individualised case studies into the human costs of displacement from development projects.<sup>26</sup> The theoretical positions adopted in the academic and scientific studies affected the state’s policy-making as well as the recipients’ short-term and long term responses.

Shami cites a government publication from 1964 that posits “the experience of displacing the people of the Nubia and the process of their resettlement is a model

<sup>21</sup> Ahmad Shokr, “Hydropolitics, Economy, and the Aswan High Dam in Mid-Century Egypt,” *The Arab Studies Journal* 17, no. 1 (2009): 10. This article provides a great survey of how one can take a *longue-durée* approach to water politics on the Nile River, and changes in thinking about rivers and river development in the post-revolutionary years in Egypt.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>23</sup> Seteney Shami, “The Social Implications of Population Displacement and Resettlement: An Overview with a Focus on the Arab Middle East,” *The International Migration Review* 27, no. 1 (1993): 10.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 20. Much literature on the Nubian displacement stems from a project conducted by the Social Research Center of the American University in Cairo between 1961 and 1965, entitled the “Ethnographic Survey of Egyptian Nubia.”



for the successful experiments upon which a socialist society prides itself.”<sup>27</sup> The Nubian communities’ displacement from the banks of the Nile River was framed within expressions of self-sufficiency and progress. In the 1965 Yearbook, under the section heading “Building New Nubia,” the Nubians’ displacement is given a positive spin as “emigration.” The Yearbook states:

The Nubian community which lived for centuries behind a thick wall of isolation has been fated to embark upon the largest emigration operation in the twentieth century. Until the end of June, 1964, 50 thousand inhabitants had emigrated from the land of Nubia to the reclaimed territories in Kom Ombo, 400 kilometres away from their native land. To resettle them comfortably, the State built 33 new villages comprising over 16 thousand housing units, in addition to an administrative capital and public utilities.<sup>28</sup>

The text argues that this “emigration is an inevitable stage that the Nubian community must pass through to join the ranks of modernised society, from isolation to integration.” The Yearbook employs numbers such as the number of pounds used in house building expenditures, indemnities, and the number of reclaimed *feddans* to demonstrate the successful nature of the Nubians’ resettlement, and expresses satisfaction that “landless inhabitants have now been provided for the first time.”<sup>29</sup>

The High Dam figures in the government of the U.A.R.’s projection outwards to the international community, and it was also an important component of its projection inwards. As Di-Capua states, “Nasserism had a constant need for public demonstration of its achievement...how it actually made history happen.”<sup>30</sup> In scale, the High Dam was the grandest form of public demonstration of the Nasserist regime’s ability to overcome financial difficulties, and therefore a symbol of success.

Brochures published by the Department of Information in Cairo frequently stress the gargantuan nature of the High Dam, and some scholars state that it was often described as “Nasser’s pyramid.”<sup>31</sup> Tom Little, a journalist stationed in Egypt at the time of the Dam’s construction, writes in his book first published in 1965 that the Aswan Dam later became known as a modern-day ‘Pyramid.’ Little remarks upon a “mad ambition to out-pharaoh the pharaohs with a structure to equal all the pyramids put together.”<sup>32</sup> Little mentions that “a notice board at the edge of the plateau overlooking the river marked the axis of the dam and declared

<sup>27</sup> Shami, “The Social Implications of Population Displacement and Resettlement, 21–22.

<sup>28</sup> United Arab Republic/Maslahat al-Isti‘amat, 1965, 96.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

<sup>30</sup> Di-Capua, “Controlling History: The 1960s,” 257.

<sup>31</sup> Betts, “The Warden of World Heritage,” 103.

<sup>32</sup> Tom Little, *The High Dam at Aswan: The Subjugation of the Nile* (London: Methuen & Co Ltd, 1965): 38.

it would be the modern pyramid.”<sup>33</sup> The High Dam’s technological impressiveness was thus attributed to the prestige of its patron, Nasser, and the two became inextricably linked in the popular imaginary.

Little describes the “call to the dam” as being elevated to a patriotic duty, and notes that there was a sense of mission amongst the workers. The 1959 Yearbook includes a segment from Nasser’s speech in Damascus on 24 February 1958: “These are epoch-marking days in our history...we shall all work with determination and solidarity to establish the foundations of the United Arab Republic on the principles of integrity, dignity, fraternity and love.” These foundations were to be based foremost on a “complete faith in pan-Arabism,” which is described as having an “unfailing power [...] independent of race, blood or colour to mould its citizens into genuine Arabs.” The U.A.R. Yearbooks show that patriotism was to be of a specifically “Arab” nature and the High Dam was shaped in the image of the unity of the people of the Nile River (with no mention of Sudan, or the other upstream nations that shared the Nile with Egypt).<sup>34</sup>

In a speech addressed to the “Brothers of the People of Aswan,” during a trip to Aswan on July 18<sup>th</sup>, 1954 before construction work began on the Dam, Nasser promises that if the Nubian communities practice patience, the first province and city to benefit from the Dam will be Aswan. In his peroration, Nasser stresses that there must be an equilateral adherence to the objectives of the revolution, and employs the rhetorical tactic of contrasting the present with the injustices of the “abhorrent past.” He emphasises the indivisibility of the “homeland” and that there is no difference between the north of this homeland and its south.<sup>35</sup> While framed as a patriotic call to the “objectives of the revolution,” Nasser’s nationalism exemplifies a hostile attitude towards the diversity of the Nubian communities, and belies a lack of understanding or accommodation of their sociocultural location between the Egyptian and Sudanese borders. The deleterious effect of this rhetoric coupled with UNESCO’s involvement in the region will be elaborated upon in the last part of the paper.

### *UNESCO’s Definition of World Heritage*

This section is primarily dedicated to dissecting UNESCO’s status and prestige as an international heritage organisation, and to questioning the implications of its international campaign in Aswan. Was UNESCO’s project in Aswan “an effort to move archaeology (and indeed civilisation itself) beyond the sphere of imperial-

<sup>33</sup> Little, *The High Dam at Aswan*, 93.

<sup>34</sup> United Arab Republic/Maslahat al-Isti‘amat, 1959, 5.

<sup>35</sup> Gamal Abdel Nasser, “Speech of the President Gamal Abdel Nasser during his Trip to Aswan” (Aswan, 1954), Nasser.org, <http://nasser.bibalex.org/Speeches/browser.aspx?SID=191&lang=ar>.

ism and nationalism once and for all,” as historian Paul Betts argues?<sup>36</sup> In fact, the value of world heritage is mandated to transcend national boundaries, but those critical of UNESCO’s rhetoric argue that such categorisations work to promote cultural nationalism. Cultural nationalism is defined broadly as an ideology that “assigns to each nation a special claim to cultural objects associated with its people or territory.”<sup>37</sup> UNESCO’s designation of a heritage site, whether tangible or intangible, results in a national guardianship. The sites become emblematic of a modern state’s cultural origins, revealing a problematic presentism.

Under the guise of an altruistic mission for ‘mankind,’ UNESCO’s archaeological campaign provided an “aesthetic justification” for intervening in a country, and aided the process of “incubating” political value in the cultural landscape.<sup>38</sup> Architectural historian Lucia Allais thus describes Nubia during UNESCO’s twenty-year long “occupation” as a “microcosm of international order.”<sup>39</sup> The Nubian desert was transformed into an “international archaeological laboratory,” in which new frameworks of cultural authenticity and cultural exchange were established through the reassemblage of historic Nubia.<sup>40</sup>

At the opening ceremonies of the International Campaign to Salvage the Monuments of Nubia held on March 8<sup>th</sup>, 1960, the French statesman Andre Malraux addressed the Director General: “Your appeal is historic, not because it proposes to save the temples of Nubia, but because through it the first world civilisation publicly proclaims the world’s art as its indivisible heritage.”<sup>41</sup> As Malraux aptly implies in his address, UNESCO’s mission in Aswan was significant precisely for its semantic categorisation of ancient sites as the unified heritage of a world civilisation.<sup>42</sup> UNESCO’s campaign made the concept of ‘world heritage’ current in diplomatic culture which led to other campaigns in Italy, Pakistan, and Indonesia.<sup>43</sup> In particular, the salvaging of the Temple of Abu Simbel in historical Nubia became the ultimate “success story” that would establish UNESCO as the “gold standard” in heritage “salvage” missions.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>36</sup> Betts, “The Warden of World Heritage,” 112.

<sup>37</sup> Elizabeth Betsy Keough, “Heritage in Peril: A Critique of UNESCO’s World Heritage Program,” *Washington University Global Studies Law Review* 10, no. 3 (January 2011): 605.

<sup>38</sup> Lucia Allais, “The Design of the Nubian Desert: Monuments, Mobility, and the Space of Global Culture,” in *Governing by Design: Architecture, Economy, and Politics in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Timothy Hyde (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2012). 198.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 191.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 189.

<sup>41</sup> André Malraux, “A Text by André Malraux,” *The UNESCO Courier*, September 1997, 4.

<sup>42</sup> Betts, “The Warden of World Heritage,” 111.

<sup>43</sup> Hassan, “The Aswan High Dam and the International Rescue Nubia Campaign,” 89.

<sup>44</sup> Keough, “Heritage in Peril,” 595. The Abu Simbel mission started motions to draft a treaty in the period 1969–1972, which resulted in the Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage. For a good and succinct overview of the legislative and organisational framework of UNESCO, founded in 1945, see Keough, “Heritage in Peril,” 593–598.

In his address to UNESCO Director General Veronese, Malraux lavished grand compliments on the campaign, and spoke metaphorically to the Nile River:

But see, old river, whose floods allowed astrologers to fix the most ancient date in history, men are coming now, from all parts of the world, who will carry these giants far away from your life-giving, destructive waters...there is only one action over which indifferent stars and unchanging, murmurous rivers have no sway: it is the action of a man who snatches something from death.<sup>45</sup>

Malraux implies that the ultimate control over the Nile river is wielded by UNESCO, who will steal away the archaeological ‘giants’ of history from under the nose of destruction and death. The imagery of impending doom as expressed through the rhetoric of mankind’s cultural heritage in peril, should be analysed in the context of the post-war international order. UNESCO was an institution that budded from post-wartime reconstruction efforts, and its internationalist campaign in Aswan was strategically used as the starting point for a fresh new chapter in world history, one which Malraux calls “the antithesis of the kind of gigantic exhibitionism by which great modern states try to outbid each other.”<sup>46</sup> In his address, Malraux cast the mission in a de-politicised light, and positioned UNESCO on an ethical high-ground, neutral in international politics.

The reconstruction and “gifting” of several of the removed temples from Aswan belies such a postcolonial self-positioning. The reconstruction of the temples themselves was considered by some from an archaeological standpoint of gaining new knowledge, to be scientifically meaningless as these sites had been photographed and measured in detail.<sup>47</sup> The reconstruction served primarily as a demonstration of power—cultural, political, and economic power—in the recipient countries of these removed temples. Out of several groups of temples either moved to nearby sites or to national museums in Aswan and Khartoum, five temples were shipped to Western museums such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City, as a gesture of ‘thanks’ for their financial and technical assistance in the campaign.<sup>48</sup> Allais sharply defines these gifted temples, called “grants-in-return,” as “postcolonial successors of relocated imperial obelisks and exported colonial objects.”<sup>49</sup> The value of these temples abroad lay not in their inherent archaeological significance or as connecting links of human civilisation, but in their re-constitution on site as a monumental expression of placing the present Western self in the direct lineage of these ancient civilisational monoliths.

<sup>45</sup> Malraux, “A Text by André Malraux,” 5.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>47</sup> Betts, “The Warden of World Heritage,” 118.

<sup>48</sup> Allais, “The Design of the Nubian Desert,” 179.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 200.

On March 10<sup>th</sup>, 1980, in a ceremony commemorating the end of the UNESCO mission which took place between the colonnades of the Isis temple, Amadou-Mahtar M'Bow, the Director General of UNESCO, is said to have compared the mobilisation of resources to salvage the monuments in Aswan, to those generated by the ancient Egyptian sovereigns to build the temples.<sup>50</sup> Invisible in UNESCO's historicist logic are the Nubian communities who played active, if not the most heeded, parts in and alongside the deconstruction of these monuments. UNESCO aided in the institutional amnesia of the Nubian communities' cultural needs, by diverting attention from people to monuments and statues. As Malreaux unironically predicted, the UNESCO campaign was "the first attempt to deploy, in a rescue operation, on behalf of statues, the immense resources usually harnessed for the service of men."<sup>51</sup> The parallelism and complicity of UNESCO's mission in Aswan to the Nasserist regime's construction of the greatest dam in history will be explored in the next and last section of this paper.

### *The Nubian Communities*

The Nubian communities underwent relocation on four different occasions in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as their fates were invariably and topographically tied to the development schemes centered around the Aswan Dam. An estimated 100,000 Nubians were relocated in the construction of the High Dam in 1963, and although the majority moved to the "New Nubia" furnished by the Egyptian government, many emigrated to Egyptian cities.<sup>52</sup> The processes of moving people and of moving monuments share many elements, such as periods of intense scrutiny and study, deconstruction, and reconstitution/rehabilitation in a new environment. In this last section, the paper seeks to bring together all the threads of the earlier discussions on the individual agendas of U.A.R. and UNESCO, and assesses their impact on the self-identity of the Nubian communities.

Hassan Dafalla, District Commissioner in Wadi Halfa, Sudan, during the Salvage Campaign of the sixties, describes the situation before the construction of the High Dam:

"Since ancient times the Nubians had clung to their narrow strip of fertile land along the banks of the Nile and perpetuated life in it...They loved the Nile which was their sole life-giver."<sup>53</sup>

<sup>50</sup> Allais, "The Design of the Nubian Desert," 180.

<sup>51</sup> Malraux, "A Text by André Malraux," 6.

<sup>52</sup> Hassan, "The Aswan High Dam," 85.

<sup>53</sup> Maria Costanza de Simone, "Nubia and Nubians: The 'Museumizations' of a Culture" (Ph.D. diss., Universiteit Leiden, 2014), 36, <https://openaccess.leidenuniv.nl/handle/1887/23598>.

Dafalla's account of the Nubians' contentment with the conditions of their past lives stands in contrast to what was presented in official discourse as a resource-deprived isolation from urban modernity.

Betts reasons that "Nubia played host to a dramatic clash between progress and preservation that attracted worldwide media coverage."<sup>54</sup> I disagree with his face value acceptance of this binary as it makes the Nubian communities' experiences even more invisible in a heroic dilemma between progress and preservation. Rather than a natural opposition between the Egyptian government and UNESCO, this "dramatic clash" was consciously and meticulously wrought through a strategic alliance. UNESCO would care for the monuments, out of an apolitical commitment to a cultural world heritage, and the government would care for the livelihood of the people. In this painted image, the Nubians recede into the background as one-dimensional, happy benefactors of national and international interests.

At the time of the UNESCO mission, critics and the Nubians expressed a bitter reaction to the decision to protect temples instead of people; an archaeologist working in Sudan recounts the Nubians' awareness that "statues" had a higher preservation value than the communities themselves, something which communities expressed in surveys even before relocation had begun.<sup>55</sup> In his article, Betts admits in passing that "the evacuation of the Nubian peoples themselves... [is one] dimension of the project [that] is not so well integrated into UNESCO's broader success story of relocating the monuments, and remained relatively invisible."<sup>56</sup> The trauma experienced by the Nubian communities following their displacement is not found in the official records of UNESCO's campaign, nor in governmental narratives that extol benefits to be gained from the dam at the national and regional level.<sup>57</sup>

Longitudinal studies carried out between 1964 and 1982 by social research projects record "widespread indicators of chronic social and psychological breakdown."<sup>58</sup> The Nubians in Sudan, for example, were forced to relocate to the eastern region of Sudan and dispersed across different settlements.<sup>59</sup> An expert of Nubian literature, Christine Gilmore argues that in the Egyptian context, the Nubians' "perceived racial characteristics" in addition to their cultural distinctiveness act as a further "othering" mechanism.<sup>60</sup> Nubians are perceived as the "Other" in ways that do not allow them to locate themselves squarely within the

<sup>54</sup> Betts, "The Warden of World Heritage," 101.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 120.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

<sup>57</sup> Christine Gilmore, "'A Minor Literature in a Major Voice': Narrating Nubian Identity in Contemporary Egypt," *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics* 35 (2015): 56.

<sup>58</sup> Hassan, "The Aswan High Dam," 55.

<sup>59</sup> Gilmore, "A Minor Literature in a Major Voice," 85. And importantly, as Fekri clarifies, "the Nubians as all other peoples, do not belong to a 'race.' They consist of populations characterised by cultural traditions, with various claims to Old Nubian, Arab and Balkan ancestry." Hassan, "The Aswan High Dam," 84.

<sup>60</sup> Gilmore, "A Minor Literature in a Major Voice," 53.

ideological framework of “Egyptianness,” and as a result, are subject to intense racism and other forms of discrimination, spurred on by the institutional amnesia perpetuated in Egypt and internationally.<sup>61</sup>

In a doctoral thesis that surveys how the UNESCO mission at Aswan impacted the flow and positionality of Nubian artefacts in various collections in Egypt, Sudan, and the world at large, Maria Costanza de Simone coins the term “museumisation of Nubia” to denote a process that took place over several eras. First, the European orientalist who laid the foundations of museum work in Egypt fused together Nubian and Egyptian history, crafting an inseparable civilisational narrative.”<sup>62</sup> De Simone maintains that this treatment of Nubia as a mere appendix to Egyptian history was carried over from colonial biases of 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century Egyptology to the time of UNESCO’s mission.<sup>63</sup> With UNESCO’s mission in Aswan came the founding of ‘Nubiology,’ and the rapid re-definition of artefacts worldwide previously known as “Ancient Egyptian” to “Nubian.”<sup>64</sup> Despite this, there has been a dearth of writing on modern Nubians’ culture as the campaign had reinforced a stagnant image of Nubia as an ancient archaeological culture.<sup>65</sup>

The parameters of cultural nationalism set forth by UNESCO are affirmed and used by the modern state. For example, the “Declaration by the Government of the United Arab Republic concerning the international action to be taken to safeguard the monuments and sites of ancient Nubia” specifies that objects that are “uniquely representative of Egyptian civilisation” must stay in the Egyptian national collection. Monuments and artifacts present a convenient and spectacular physical link between the “past” and “present,” one the Egyptian government utilised when it claimed Egyptian sovereignty over Nubian monuments, and culture.<sup>66</sup> Such claims of sovereignty presupposes a hereditary and exclusive relationship between the artifacts and the modern nation, with museums and other institutional forces ultimately directing attention away from uncontrollable human narratives.<sup>67</sup> For example, the Nubia Museum, the first dedicated museum of Nubian civilisation, opened in Aswan on November 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1997.<sup>68</sup> De Simone critiques the location of the museum in Aswan and thus its proximity to archaeologi-

<sup>61</sup> Gilmore, “A Minor Literature in a Major Voice,” 54.

<sup>62</sup> Costanza de Simone, “Wadi Halfa Museum: A Rescue Mechanism for the Nubian Intangible Heritage,” *Égypte/Monde Arabe* 17 (December 2009), 88, <https://doi.org/10.4000/ema.2913>.

<sup>63</sup> De Simone, “Nubia and Nubians.” In her thesis, De Simone notes that even in Ancient Egyptians’ portrayals of the Nubians, “Nubia was the ‘daughter’ of the god Hapy (the Nile) as was Egypt... Egypt is always linked to the Nile and Nubia invariably to the desert: the one fertile, the other barren and dead” (46).

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

<sup>65</sup> Gilmore, “A Minor Literature in a Major Voice,” 53. Nubian literature stands to correct the discrepancies in the meta-narratives surrounding their communities’ displacement, and have been fighting to express a broader conception of Egyptian identity.

<sup>66</sup> Betts, “The Warden of World Heritage,” 113.

<sup>67</sup> Conseil international des musées, “ICOM news—Bulletin d’information,” 10.

<sup>68</sup> De Simone, “Nubia and Nubians,” 7.

cal sites, and not in the resettlement sites. The government's objective with the Nubia Museum could only be to attract non-local and international tourism in the area.<sup>69</sup> The Nubia Museum, constructed on the archaeological knowledge gained from the UNESCO mission in Aswan, became the government's ethnographic "show-window" and fundamentally failed to invite community participation and integration or to provide emotional compensation for displaced community members.

In the past decade, Nubian activists have been vigorously disputing the un-filled promises made by past and previous governments. Maja Janmyr's study of contemporary Nubian efforts to gain the right to return to their ancestral lands argues that mobilisation of Nubian activism has increased significantly since 2005, aided in large part by increased media attention to Nubian issues, concurrent social revolutionary movements, and the establishment of various legal agencies.<sup>70</sup> As discussed earlier, Nasser's rhetoric rested on a framework of development. Through her interviews with both members of older generations of Nubians and youth activists, Janmyr notes an internationalisation of this developmental narrative of a necessary sacrifice for the nation's sake.<sup>71</sup> Development is thus to this day an integral part of discursive battles for the right to return. A major breakthrough occurred in 2014 when the Nubian activism led to the inclusion of Article 236 in the Egyptian Constitution which guaranteed the right of return within ten years as well as the local population's participation and consultation in the development of these areas.<sup>72</sup> In 2018, many doubts have been raised surrounding the Egyptian government's commitment to honouring Nubians' right of return, and more than 5000 families have yet to be compensated for their confiscated homes.<sup>73</sup>

### Conclusion

Egyptian painter Tahia Halim was invited in 1965 to visit Nubia, to make a record of the Nubian community before the scheduled flood. Halim's painting, *Farhat Al Nuba*, The Happiness of Nuba,<sup>74</sup> depicts Nasser on a boat, conferring a bushel of wheat to a boat full of soon to be displaced Nubians. The bushel of wheat could symbolise the promise of wealth and social welfare to be generated

<sup>69</sup> De Simone, "Nubia and Nubians," 89.

<sup>70</sup> Maja Janmyr, "Nubians in Contemporary Egypt: Mobilizing Return to Ancestral Lands," *Middle East Critique* 25, no. 2 (April 2016): 127–46, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19436149.2016.1148859>.

<sup>71</sup> Janmyr, "Nubians in Contemporary Egypt," 141.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 142.

<sup>73</sup> Rana Mamdouh, "Upper Egypt Development Law Shifts Attention from Nubians' Constitutional Right to Return," *Mada Masr*, trans. Salma Khalifah, accessed September 9, 2018, <https://www.madamasr.com/en/2018/06/06/feature/politics/upper-egypt-development-law-shifts-attention-from-nubians-constitutional-right-to-return/>.

<sup>74</sup> Tahia Halim (1919–2003), *Farhat Al Nuba (The Happiness of Nuba)*, 1965, oil and gold leaf on canvas, [https://www.christies.com/lotfinder/lot\\_details.aspx?intObjectID=5882097](https://www.christies.com/lotfinder/lot_details.aspx?intObjectID=5882097).



by the agricultural expansion, enabled by the High Dam at Aswan. At first glance, the painting suggests a serene and joyful event celebrating the future prosperity of the Nubians. Upon a closer look, one senses an eeriness in the homogeneous white attire of the participants, and there is a compositional emphasis on the ritual that is being performed.<sup>75</sup> The orderliness of the boat on the left is juxtaposed with the tumult of the thousands of Nubians waving small replicas of the flag of the U.A.R.

The submergence of 50,000 Nubian homes on the Nile River banks was framed by many Egyptians as “a past sacrificed for the national promise of modernity generated by the dam.”<sup>76</sup> This emphasis on sacrifice recalls the annual flooding of the Nile ceremony—*Wafaa al-Nil*—which has symbolic roots in a Pharaonic tradition in which people would conduct ritual sacrifice for a good year of harvest. The High Dam at Aswan stopped the flow of time on the Nile River by controlling and containing its seasonal flooding and direct link to the Mediterranean Sea, making ritual sacrifice technologically obsolete while requiring a much greater sacrifice involving an entire ethno-cultural community.

In an edited volume on environmental histories of the Middle East and North Africa, Nancy Y. Reynolds argues that in the U.A.R., mastery over nature was equated in state-sponsored discourse with new life and youth. Hundreds of university youths would volunteer at the construction site in Aswan during their vacations in 1963.<sup>77</sup> The High Dam symbolised a promise of the vivacity it would bring to people’s livelihoods, of once again bountiful resources grown from the blue water of the harnessed and domesticated Nile River. The use of the dam as a tool for historical periodisation was so strong and successful that colloquially, the phrase “after the dam” refers to Nasser’s promise of Egyptian development.<sup>78</sup>

The stories of the Nubian community in Aswan were ultimately buried under the torrents of a new kind of historiography, co-authored by UNESCO and the Egyptian government, inundating the Nubian landscape. These national and international bodies were actively “building” history, but the Nubian communities were the ones to take the real jump of faith from the precipice.

In closing, there are several related topics that were beyond the scope of this paper, but which would have greatly enriched my investigation and would benefit from extended research: a *longue durée* perspective of hydropolitics between Egypt and Sudan, and a cultural comparative history of how the Aswan dam fig-

<sup>75</sup> The white attire resembling the galabeyya in this portrayal of Gamal Abdel Nasser is unique considering that Abdel Nasser is often depicted or photographed in either military regalia or in a Western-style suit.

<sup>76</sup> Nancy Y. Reynolds, “Building the Past: Rockscapes and the Aswan High Dam in Egypt,” in *Water on Sand: Environmental Histories of the Middle East and North Africa*, ed. Alan Mikhail (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 188.

<sup>77</sup> Nancy Y. Reynolds, “City of the High Dam: Aswan and the Promise of Postcolonialism in Egypt,” *City & Society* 29, no. 1 (April 2017): 213–35, <https://doi.org/10.1111/ciso.12119>.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 215.

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ures in the Egyptian and Sudanese popular imagination are two examples.<sup>79</sup> The Nile River and the hydropolitics of dam construction remain central to regional politics, as current conflicts over the construction of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) demonstrate. Today, many Nubians are fighting for the right of return, to reclaim a piece of land on the shores of Lake Nasser, and many others are fighting against the threat of destructive reservoir projects to come.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Hassan, "The Aswan High Dam," 83. For example, Fekri notes that there were "concerns for the relative negligence of the southern sector of the reservoir in favor of the Egyptian sector with its monumental temples and antiquities." Fekri also mentions that UNESCO established an 'Honorary Committee of Patrons' under the chairmanship of King Gustav VI Adolf of Sweden, and the committee members included Queen Elizabeth of Belgium, Queen Frederika of Greece, Princess Grace of Monaco, Princess (later Queen) Margrethe of Denmark, Prince Mikasa of Japan, Eleanor Roosevelt, Dag Hammarskjöld, André Malraux and Julian Huxley; there was also the mission of Prince Sadruddin Agha Khan to President Kennedy. It would be fascinating to follow each one of these members and look at their individual interests and symbolic power gained from participating in this committee.

<sup>80</sup> De Simone, "Wadi Halfa Museum," 37.