The Policies of De-Nubianization in Egypt and Sudan: An Ancient People on the Brink of Extinction

M.J. Hashim

Introduction

This paper deals with the officially explicit and implicit policies aimed at marginalizing the Nubians in both Egypt and the Sudan by, first, driving them away from their historical homelands by systematically impoverishing their region; secondly, re-settling Arab groups in the lands the Nubians left behind; thirdly, pushing the Nubians into Arabization through biased educational curricula at the expense of their own languages and culture; fourth, nursing a culture of complicity among the Nubian intellectuals so as to help facilitate these policies. Three cases will be discussed in this regard; (1) the case of the governor of Asuan, Egypt (the capital of the Nubian region in southern Egypt) in granting leases of land and built homes to non-Nubians; these are the lands from where the Nubians were evacuated under the pretext of building the High Dam in 1964. So far, the incessant complaints of Nubians have fell on deaf ears. 2) The official guarantees made by the then Minister of Interior of the Sudan (General-Brigadier Abdul Rahim Muhammad Husain- presently the Minister of Defense) to the Egyptians regarding the safety of Arab settlers from Egypt into the Nubian basin in northern Sudan. 3) The recent decision taken by the minister of Education in the northern State, forbidding Nubian pupils from uttering a word in Nubian languages within the precinct of the schools.

The paper will also draw on the racist Arab culture toward Nubians, in both countries with special emphasis on Egypt. It will discuss the racist, anti-black approach of Egyptian policies toward Nubians in particular. Concerning Sudan, it will draw attention to the fact that the unethical premises of the slave trade are lurking behind the scene, targeting non-Arab people in general. This paper discusses the recent massacre of Sudanese refugees in Cairo on December 30th 2005, at the footstep of the UNHCR office, and in front of the cameras of international media.

In conclusion, the paper will shed light on how it is possible, and predictable for Nubians in both Egypt and Sudan to join the rising tide of ethnic rebellion in Sudan, thus holding Egypt accountable, along with the Islamo-Arabist regime of Sudan. It concludes with certain recommendations for this conference to adopt.

The De-Population of the Nubian Region in Sudan and Egypt

In 1964 the construction of the High Dam in Aswan was completed, a project that resulted in an area of 500 km along the Nile course (310 km in Egypt, 190 km in the Sudan) being submerged under the reservoir. The reservoir, i.e. the lake, bears two names, 'Lake Nasser' in Egypt, and 'Lake Nubia' in the Sudan. This has lead to the resettlement of about 16500 Nubian families in Egypt (with a similar number of Nubian families on the Sudan side) away from their historical lands. In the case of Egyptian Nubians, the area resettlement was a barren place called Koum Ambo near Aswan. In the case of the Sudanese Nubians the area of resettlement was a place called Khashm al-Girba in middle-eastern Sudan, known to be of rainy autumn, contrary to the Saharan Nubian region.

In 1963 the Aswan Regional Planning Authority (ARPA) was founded by the Egyptian government to be developed in 1966 upon recommendations from both the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) into Lake Nasser Development Centre with a Six Year Plan. In lieu of project findings, the High Dam Development Authority was established in 1975. Developmental planning has continued up to the present time with constant help from the UNDP. Two economical activities have been available to the local people; namely fishery and agriculture. In this regard it is worth mentioning that the majority of the either the fishers or the farmers are not Nubians, but rather are people coming from other areas with the encouragement of the Egyptian government which monopolizes marketing (for fishery, cf. Lassaily-Jacob, 1990; for agriculture, cf. Fernea & Rouchdy, 1991).

The main question here is why the Egyptian and Sudanese government evacuated the area if they were keen on development. No development, even the most mechanized, can be achieved without man power. The Nubians were driven away from their historical home lands on the bank of the Nile at gunpoint. This experience has proved to be very traumatic to them, a matter that their endeavours to go back and resume living in their old villages have been reflected in their vocal music and songs (Mannan, 1990). A new genre of songs of homesickness has been developed of which the late Hamza Eldin (1929-2006) with his melancholic melodies and music stands as an example (cf. www.hamzaeldin.com).

The anti-developmental nature of the depopulation of the Nubian region is demonstrated by the fact that a scheme of compensation had been implemented to redeem the evacuated Nubians. A true developmental approach to the whole project could have been achieved. Nubians could have remained in their historical lands at the banks of Lake Nubia, with new houses built in the same characteristic, architectural and decorative design (cf. Wenzil, 1970). With such an approach one would not be in need for compensation. Even so, the compensation was not enough, as usual in such cases, even though some scholars and officials might argue against that (for the case of Egyptian Nubians, see Fahim, 1972; for the case of the Sudanese Nubians, see Dafalla, 1975).

The Non-Nubian Re-Population of the Region

The Nubians in both Egypt and the Sudan did make many attempts to go back and establish small colonies of settlements and agriculture. They farmed the drawdown areas by pumping water from the reservoir (Fernea & Rouchdy, 1991). However, all these attempts were occasionally aborted by the fluctuating water

level of the reservoir, an action the Nubians believe to be intentionally driven by the authorities who never encouraged them to go back.

By the 1990s, the Egyptian government began following a policy of repopulating the evacuated Nubian regions. It began encouraging Egyptians, other than Nubians, to settle in the evacuated areas around the reservoir lake. It did this while the Nubians were kept away from their own historical lands, living in a pigsty-style of life in their barren area of Koum Ambo. The same thing happened in the Sudan, with tacit encouragement from the government to the Arab Bedouin, who began settling in the evacuated area. The repopulation of the Nubian region in Egypt has become an official policy entrusted to both the Minister of Agriculture and the Military Governor of Aswan. Villages with full facilities and utilities were built by the Egyptian government and distributed to individuals and families from outside the regions with bank loans to start with. The latest development in this regard is the inauguration of the settlement at the old Nubian village of Kalabsha with 150 non-Nubian families, which was opened by the Minister of Agriculture Amin Abaza (cf. al-Wafd Newspaper, 18/05/2006). On 11/06/2006 the Al-Hram Newspaper (the unofficial voice of the government) announced that tens of thousands of feddans were to be distributed in the Nubian region to people other than Nubians. When the Nubians demanded that their lands be returned to them, they received an arrogant reply from the military Governor of Aswan: "If you want your lands, go fetch them beneath the water (cf. Rajab al-Murshidi in Rousa al Yousef Newspaper: www.rosaonline.net)

At the same time, Nubians who were striving to build their own colonies and farms in their old lands began facing obstacles. No one from the international community has come to help Nubians in Egypt. They began voicing their problems through the internet, making use of numerous Nubian websites, which mostly revolve around home-villages bearing their names (cf. www.abirtabag.net; www.jazeratsai.com; www.karma2.com; www.nubian-forum.com/vb; www.nunubian.com).

This racist and Apartheid-like policy has been adopted by the Egyptian government in order to contain the discontent among its Arab population who had been negatively affected by the 1992 Agricultural Law, which came into effect in 1997. This law liberalized land rental and tenure by returning it to its old feudal owners, thus compelling the peasants to re-hire it all, with the threat of rental price increases looming over their heads. During the 1990s the price actually tripled, and recently quadrupled (Roudart, 2000/1). This caused turmoil and unrest among peasants who began seeking other jobs. Migration of peasants to other areas where agricultural schemes existed for reclaimed land, away from their home village, was encouraged by the government. The Egyptian government adopted a policy of inter-migration so as to solve (1) it's the ever-increasing problem of a population explosion, and (2) to compensate those who had been negatively affected by its land liberalization law. Re-settlement in the reclaimed land of the New Valley in Sinai was officially encouraged, a matter the peasants were not enthusiastic about. Reliant on river rain throughout history, such a move was too much for them. That is how the Egyptian government began re-settling them in Nubian regions which were evacuated four decades ago, against the will of its historical people, the Nubians. In doing this, the Egyptian government is consciously pushing Nubians into being completely assimilated and Arabized, a policy pursued by successive Egyptian governments.

The Settlement of Egyptian Peasants in the Nubian Region in Sudan

Those who were affected by the construction of the High Dam, like their brethren in Egypt, were evacuated from their land and resettled in the Eastern region. The environment in their new home was completely different than that of their old home. However, only one third of them were affected by the High Dam, where two thirds of the land still remain unaffected in the old region. Being severely underdeveloped, the Nubian region continued to expel its people to the extent that whole villages are almost empty at present.

In late 2003 news leaked out revealing that high level negotiations with the Egyptian government had been made so as to facilitate the settlement of millions of Egyptian peasants, along with their families, in the triangle of the Nubian basin, Halfa-Dungula-'Uwēnāt. The aim of this move is said to safeguard the Arab identity of Sudan against the growing awareness of Africanism in Sudan generally and among the Nubians in particular. The Sudanese delegation, which was backed by a Presidential mandate, was led by Arabist Nubians, General-Brigadier Abdul Rahim Muhammad Husain (then Minister of Interior, presently Minister of Defense). A cover-up plan named "the Four Freedoms" which theoretically allows the Sudanese and the Egyptians to own agrarian lands and settle in both countries was officially declared. The cover-up plan has come out half cooked as both parties were too eager in their scrambling to create a de facto situation before the Nubians became aware of what was going on. There is no agrarian land to be owned by Sudanese investors in Egypt. But there is land for the Egyptians in the Sudan. On 31/03/2005 a mainsheet press release from the State Minister of Agriculture in Khartoum (Dr. al-Sadig Amara, an Arabist Nubian as well) revealed that 6.1 Million feddans in the triangle of Nubian basin had been sold to the Egyptians (investors and peasants) with long term leases, i.e. investment through settlement (cf. al-Sahafa Newspaper, No. 3892). There is no mention of the Nubians in any of the deals which seem as though they were drafted overnight.

In official visits to Cairo, the two ministers mentioned above held meetings with Egyptian scholars and intellectuals who were sceptical about the viability of resettling millions of Egyptian peasants in the Sudan. Such a scheme, applied in Iraq a few years ago during the war against Iran, resulted in the physical elimination of the peasants immediately after the war ended. However the two flamboyant ministers chivalrously gave their solemn pledges reminding their audience that they are backed Presidential mandate.

The Minister of Defense went out of his way in challenging his audience to bring forward their solutions about tackling the population explosion in Egypt, if not by migrating to the vast areas of the sparsely populated Northern Sudan. Furthermore, lamenting the fact that the Egyptian migration to the Sudan has significantly diminished in the late decades after independence, he drew the comparison that the migration from West Africa has steadily increased. The State Minister on his behalf lamented the hesitation of some Egyptian intellectuals and officials, urging them to expedite moving to the Nubian basin before [sic] other people move there first (for more details, see: http://www.ahram.org.eg/archive/Inde; another source of information is also: http://acpss.ahram.org.eg/ahram/2001/1/1/CONF20.HTM).

As the Nubian Memo to Kofi Annan (cf. Hashim, 2006) stated, the Egyptians wanted the area of the reservoir completely depopulated of its indigenous people (i.e. all the Nubians affected in both the Sudan and Egypt). Disrupting the Nubian society of Northern Sudan and Southern Egypt has been a target for the governments of both countries as the Nubians constitute the only African entity on the Nile from Kösti and Sinnār, up the White and Blue Niles respectively, down to the Mediterranean Sea.

The silencing of an Ancient Tongue: Don't speak Nubian

Nubian languages, like all national languages in the Sudan, are on the brink of extinction (cf. Hashim & Bell, 2005). The state not only did nothing to help enhance and promote national languages, but also looked at them as a threat to national unity. Of over 100 national languages in the Sudan (cf. Hurreiz & Bell, 1975), not a single one of them has been recognized by the sate. State-supported Arabic is encroaching at the expense of a dying national language. Successive governments of post-Independent Sudan have never heeded the calls from concerned bodies such as UNESCO (cf. UNESCO, 1988; or for recent reference, see: http://www.unesco.org/most/ln2lin.htm#resources) for using the national language as means of instruction, especially in primary levels.

Nubian languages, especially the ancient form which was used during the Christian kingdoms, have been in use as the official language of the state and in daily use for centuries, from the 6th century to the up to the present (cf. Hashim & Bell, 2004). However the toll of the systematic onslaught on the national languages that that has been going on for the last six centuries has begun to show.

On the 27th May 2006, Nubians in the Sudan were shocked to discover that the regional Minister of Education in the Northern state had given explicit orders that no Nubian pupil utter a word from the Nubian language, within the precinct of the schools. For decades, right from the beginning of the 20th century, Nubian languages were challenged by the Arabic-oriented school administrations using the infamous Ottoman Turkish Mijidi piaster (*cf.* Hashim, Forthcoming). The obsolete piaster was to be hung from a string, on the neck of the pupil who dared saying a word from the Nubian language inside the school (they were mostly boarding schools). The piaster was to be passed to another pupil only when caught speaking one of the world's ancient languages. Checked twice a day, in the morning and the evening, the holder of the piaster was severely punished; four strong pupils would be summoned to hold the 'culprit's' [sic] hands and feet, while being lashed, ten times. However, this practice stopped as a result of growing protests from the Nubian public two decades ago..

This recent phenomena of official and systematic cultural persecution has caused an outcry by Nubians at home and in the Diaspora, and has gone on without the interference of the international community. The Islamo-Arab government, on federal and regional levels, has not acknowledged increasing protests from Nubians, highlighted by President Omer al-Bashir's arrogance in the early 1990s: "We have assumed power with arms; those who want power, or want to share it, should be men and fight for it". Consequently, the marginalized African people of Sudan in Dar Fur, West Sudan, and the Beja in the East have taken to arms one after the other (with prospect of others in the North following them soon) in order to protect themselves from state-sponsored projects of systematic cultural assimilation, impoverishment and persecution. Before the coup by the Islamic junta on the 30th June 1898, the war zone was confined to the southern region of the South, Nuba Mountains and Ingassana Mountains. However, Nubians in the far North have not joined the rebellion yet. Civil war for the marginalized African people of Sudan was not an alternative but rather a matter of necessity; they were pushed into it by an arrogant regime. Unfortunately this regime now enjoys Anglo-American support whose intervention does little to address the problems within the government and presses the fighting groups to reach with it an agreement that does not solve their problem. Such agreements inject new blood in a regime that has outlived its days.

The 'culling' of Sudanese Refugees in Cairo

In 1990, a year after the coup of the Islamic junta, waves of Sudanese refugees swarmed into Egypt and in Cairo in particular. That was expected and most of the Western countries, which were the prime destination for refugees, closed their doors to them. Western countries did this because of the high cost of supporting waves of refugees who, every body knew, would never go back to the Sudan, as they were seeking permanent settlement in the West. On the other hand Egypt offered nothing to them. Furthermore there was no work available for them there, even the lowest paid jobs. However, by 1995, there were about 4 million Sudanese refugees in Egypt. This was inevitable, as Egypt was the only country granting them asylum. But it was only a matter of days before Sudanese refugees discovered that they fled from the prisons in their own regime to prisons in Egypt. The Egyptian government made it clear to the Western embassies in Cairo that no Sudanese refugees should be given a visa from Cairo. There was good reason for this: such an act would increase the flow of refugees into Egypt.

Then why did the Egyptian authorities open the door for them in the first place? And how did those refugees, while receiving nothing from the Egyptian government manage to support themselves? They were mostly families, with women, old folk and children. The answers to these questions will not only reveal one of the worst exploitations of the misfortunes that befall people, but also reveal the Master-Slave mentality that still characterizes Egyptian conduct concerning Sudan, and the whole of black Africa. The forsaken refugees relied ultimately on money transferred to them from their relations, whether from the rich, petroleum Arab countries or from the West. In 1999, in a visit to Cairo, the present writer was shocked to know that it was common knowledge to every Sudanese and Egyptian intellectual alike, that the hard currency earned by in-land revenue from the money transferred to the Sudanese refugees was much more than that earned from the Suez Canal. That was not the whole story. The money, which was usually transferred by fax, i.e. to be cashed immediately when the answer-back is received, was held by the banks for months before releasing it. The answer to this delay was that they did not receive the money. This answer was given to the claimants who had the faxed 'answer-back' documentation in their hands. faxed to them by their relatives as a document to prove that the money was there in Cairo, in the safes of the Egyptian banks. Holding the money in that way could have never continued for years if it was not sanctioned by the Egyptian government in its policy to make the best out of the Sudanese calamities. In that visit, and in another earlier in 1994, the present writer left Cairo for Khartoum without cashing money sent to him from Saudi Arabia. My visits were too short for such a difficult mission; in each one, I only staved for one month.

By 1998 the international community and the UN became aware of the Egyptian ghetto set up for Sudanese refugees. The UNHCR began a programme of resettlement for the Sudanese refugees congregated in Cairo. The biggest Diaspora in the history of the Sudan had begun gathering as refugees were dispersed all over the globe, especially in the USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Europe and South America. By 2003, there were only a few thousands of them left in Cairo, a majority of which had already been registered in the UNHCR Cairo office. Those were mostly from southern Sudan, Dar Fur, Nuba Mountains and many other areas of the Sudan. By 2004, with the development of the peace negotiation that was brokered mainly by the USA, UK and Norway, this pressurized the rebel groups to reach a settlement with the present Islamic regime, interest by the UNHCR in the refugees began decreased. This gave the Cairo office, which was manned by Egyptians, a free hand in dealing with the situation. It resorted to a well designed plan of faked ineptitude, pretending to be local staff who did not

have any power. However, international staff were present and they were all Egyptians. As a result of this hopeless situation, most of the refugees, either headed back to Sudan to try another exit, or out of helplessness, resigned by staying in Cairo believing in the meek promises, made by the Egyptian staff at the UNHCR office that things would eventually be sorted.

In fact those who continued to stay were the poorest as they did not have a financial support base. They ultimately relied on the UNHCR. They were also the ones with genuine cases, mostly originating from the conflict zones of the South, Nuba Mountains, Ingassana Mountains, the Beja in eastern Sudan and Dar Fur in western Sudan. This made them a real burden to the Egyptian society and government who allegedly discovered that the refugees were filthy black Africans infested with Aids and a host of infective disease. With the Naivasha agreement, which was reached between the Sudan People Liberation Movement (SPLM) and the present regime in May 2004, the UNHCR Cairo office bluntly told the refugees that their cases had consequently lost its. It told them to go back to their country as there was no war. The 'Egyptianized' international body pretended not to be aware that the wars were not confined to southern Sudan, which was not safe for civilians. The poor of the poor were left to their own in the streets of Cairo, penniless, where they were looked upon with the disgust and contempt, typical of how an Arab slaver behaves towards a slave who behaves like a free person.

On the 29th of September 2005, a group of homeless refugees decided to stay overnight at UNHCR office grounds. A few days later the number began increasing as there was no where to go to. They eventually decided to protest at the footsteps of the UNHCR offices. This prompted the other refugees, who had shelter, to join the picket. In one week, there were 3000 refugees picketing. A camp committee was then organized. They kept a vigil for more than three months, with well organized feeding, hygiene and sleeping, activities, places assigned to women and children along with the old. Neither alcohol nor drunken people were allowed into the camp.

While hatred and contempt continued building up against the picket of the refugees, the international office in Cairo completely identified with the Egyptian public and senior officials within the UN, ironically headed by a puppet black African. It could be argued that the UN was simply waiting for the refugees to get killed so as to draft a well worded statement expressing shock and concern and then doing its best to contain the situation (cf. http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/4570446.stm.).

Just before midnight on the 30th December 2005, police forces and military troops supported by tanks, began gathering and forming a cordon around the refugees camp. A delegation from the refugee camp tried to contact the police leadership to enquire about the reason for this cordon, to no avail. The troops then fired water canons (in the early hours of a winter dawn). Then the gendarme stormed the camp of more than 12 thousand inhabitants, wielding truncheons and stamping people. The only thing the refugees could do in response was performing prayer (Islamic and Christian as well), with others chanting religious hymns aloud.

The massacre caused an international outcry, with no condemnation of those responsible. It was well covered by international media. Egypt's first move was to down play the whole event by falsifying the number of the dead, which they brought down to 29. However, the true number as revealed by counting the dead in the various morgues in Cairo brought the number to about 280. The Sudanese government shocked the free world when, instead of condemning the killing of its own citizens, condoned what the Egyptian government did. Later Egyptian officials revealed that the Sudanese government was informed about what it was going to do, and they agreed. That was not all. The injured, including those with minor injuries, happened to pass away once admitted to hospitals. Rumours had it that they were literally put

down in the theater, under anesthesia, after having removed any internal organ deemed useful for transplant.

However, what was most insulting was the timing. This massacre of Sudanese refugees took place on the eve of the 50th anniversary of the Independence Day of Sudan. The Egyptian regime could not be more cynical and more vindictive. The message was clear: independence or no independence, you are still our slaves. While ordinary Sudanese people were furning with anger and humiliation, the political parties were going out of their way to rationalize what the Egyptians did. The irony was that Egypt was the first state to recognize the Islamic coup d'état of Sudan in June 1989, which plotted to assassinate its President, Hosny Mubarak in Addis Ababa in the mid 1990s. This prompted Egypt to sponsor the political opposition while working tacitly towards taming the wild Islamic regime. Dreading the idea of having a democracy in the Sudan, according to Egypt, a totalitarian regime in the Sudan is convenient for correspondence, despite ideological differences. The regime is keen to appease Egypt. The opposition, confirmed by many Sudanese observers, has been recorded as having remained silent in condemning either the massacre of the refugees, or the Egyptian occupation of Sudanese land, because they have been on the payroll of their self-chosen exile in Egypt.

Well, isn't it slavery all over again?

Conclusion:

This paper concludes by demanding that the systematic and official obliteration of the identity of the Nubians in both Egypt and the Sudan, as represented by the sale of their historical lands on the bank of the Nile, and oppressing their languages should stop immediately. Egyptian and Sudanese Nubians must have the right and priority to go back to their historical villages. The two states in Egypt and the Sudan must do everything possible to protect the Nubians against any encroachment of other ethnic groups into their lands unless it takes place in a natural and peaceful way, and does not make Nubians feel that they are being targeted and endangered. The international community is called upon to offer support and solidarity. This paper draws attention to the fact that selling the Nubian basin in Northern Sudan by this present regime to Egyptians, in order to facilitate the settlement of Arabized, Egyptian peasants will turn that region into a civil war zone. The paper urges the conference to condemn this move in its endeavours, and to enhance peace and reparation.

The paper also demands that this conference includes in its programmes of reparation the Cairo massacre of December 30th 2005. The paper demands that this conference calls for an independent and international investigation into the circumstances that led to the killing of Sudanese refugees. The least that can be done to honour the dead is to know their numbers. Let us not forget that those people were killed while wearing the badge of the UNHCR. Compensations should be paid to those who suffered, whether by losing a member/s of their family/s or by injury and the traumatic experience. Furthermore, their resettlement should be resumed.

The paper urges this esteemed conference to adopt a resolution which effectively includes the points mentioned above. Let us be clear about reparation; there will be no reparation if the grievances have not been addressed.

About the Paper

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