



## **Nora Aly MSc**

***Nora Aly is an independent designer based in Cairo, Egypt. She works as an adjunct Professor at the American University in Egypt (AUC). She is mainly interested in Arabic typography which acts as a core element that she integrates in other creative endeavors such as visual communication, branding, type design and graphic design. Her interest in typography is also evident in how she engages with language, not only as a tool to manifest thoughts but also as means to shape our collective identity. She holds a master's degree in graphic design from the German University in Cairo. Nora Aly's work was featured in several exhibitions; Mena Art Fair in Paris, Arab Design in Doha, Weltformat in Switzerland, P21 gallery in London, Dubai Design week, Beirut Design week, and 100 Best Arabic Posters.***

# **The Nubian Language: From Spoken to Written Design Research to Prevent Disappearance of Traditional Languages**

## **Abstract**

**Believing in the importance of cultural and linguistic diversity, this study explores the endangered Nubian languages. These languages consist of two dialects in Egypt which are only preserved by the tongues of its special ethnic native people who live in peninsulas and islands across the Nile in Aswan.**

**The study starts by a review of literature about the historical background of the language, its characteristics, multi-linguistic uses and how it evolved through the years, as well as the various political, religious and social occurrences/reasons that led to the deterioration of the language and the extinction of its script.**

**It also discusses how some fellow researchers and few locals attempted to document and save their vernacular.**

**The research resumed by conducting a field research in the Nubian villages to better understand the context of the language due to the lack of material and resources regarding this matter.**

**The field research was divided into two phases: the first one aimed at deeply and fully understanding the people, as well as the social and cultural aspects of the Nubian life. This was done through qualitative research by holding unstructured and semi-structured interviews, in addition to participant observation.**

As for the second phase, the aim was to narrow down and validate all the data that was previously gathered into very specific fields of focus through quantitative research by holding more structured interviews, unlike the first stage. According to the fieldwork, it was concluded that the problem that should be tackled is the gradual disappearance of the language from Nubian homes because of mothers being indirectly forced to favor Arabic over Nubian. This was due to the need to prepare their children for the predominant Arabic speaking society that they will end up working and interacting with.

To preserve the language, the results of the study showed that it has to have a clear function that is financially and emotionally rewarding especially for the mothers. Accompanying this research, a new Nubian display typeface was developed to be used in henna designs presented in a kit for henna artists -who most likely happen to be young mothers or mothers to be- to develop henna art that is based on their language, aiming to bridge this socio-emotional and economic concern. This could be sold to tourists and visitors and provide the language with the opportunity of being spread. A lot of locals and henna artists were included in the process to ensure inclusivity, as well as relevance and sustainability of the proposed solution.

### **Keywords:**

***Traditional Languages, Cultural Studies, Preservation, Empowerment of Woman, Typeface Development***

Would we ever be able to maintain our culture, if we lose our mother tongue? And by culture, I mean our sense of humor, the way we

**express ourselves, our traditions, literature, music, art in all its forms, everything that defines us and shapes our identity?**

**Language is a major part of one's identity; sounds, vocabulary and structures differ from one language to another. Therefore, languages are not just considered as a tool to manifest our thoughts, but they also shape our minds and the way we think according to Lera Boroditsky, Professor of Cognitive Science at University of California San Diego and Editor in Chief of Frontiers in Cultural Psychology.**

**In her Ted Talk "How languages shape the way we think", Boroditsky explained that an aboriginal community in Australia, for example, does not have words for 'left' and 'right' in their language, instead, they use cardinal directions. People of this community would say "There is an ant on your south-west leg," to refer to someone's left leg. Additionally, this ethnic group greets each other by stating where they are going, instead of saying "hello". Being constantly aware of where they are heading at any time of any day, this special group stays extremely self-oriented in their lives, unlike anyone we might know.**

**Moving from stating directions to describing visuals, the word 'blue' in English is used to describe any shade of the color, while Russians have two completely different words: 'Goluboy' and 'Siniy' that refer to light and dark blue respectively. Although some people would think that this is a slight difference to be mentioned, Russians believe that it is important to be accurate and distinctive when it comes to the smallest details.**

**Human minds invented not only one cognitive universe, but 7,000 and they can keep on creating endless options (Boroditsky, 2017). The beauty of this linguistic diversity that shows the ingenious and**

**flexible capabilities of the human mind is subject to extinction. Unfortunately, we are losing an average of one language every week. In 2005, some linguists concluded that as many as 60 to 90% of the world's approximately 7,000 languages, may be at risk of extinction within the next 100 years (Boroditsky, 2017)**

**This summarizes the state of endangered languages on a global scale. On a national scale, there are some dialects in Egypt all preserved only by the tongues of special ethnic groups which the Nubian language- a language practiced in Nubian villages in Aswan, southern Egypt- falls under.**

**Several islands and peninsulas are located along the Nile River in this area that are inhabited by Nubians who consider themselves an independent ethnic group. They developed a common identity which has been celebrated in poetry, wall paintings, music and storytelling. They have their special language, very rich culture and traditions.**

**The shift of this language has occurred due to large scale processes and pressures of social, cultural, economic, and political attributes across hundreds of years during Egypt's profound history. The possibility of impending shifts appears when a language that was once used throughout a community in many domains becomes restricted in use as another language intrudes on its territory. Unfortunately, that is exactly what happened to the Nubian language being constantly threatened by Arabic since the rise of Islam within the area.**

**However, being a very closed community that is isolated in the southern islands and peninsulas, made it easy for Nubians to keep using their own language to communicate among themselves, and help the language survive all these years. Therefore, the Nubian**

language became an only spoken language that was last seen written before the rise of Islam and that's why in 1973, Egypt used to employ Nubians in the Arab Israeli war, as code-talkers.

While very few individuals still know how to write the language in its last used writing system, the majority are not even aware of the existence of this alphabet or what it looks like.

There are many theories made by 19th-century anthropologists in which the origin of Nubians was debated. Some theories claim that they are originally Africans who migrated from the South choosing to stay in this area, consequently mixing with Caucasians from the Northeast and West Africa. Others claimed that Nubians are Caucasian Africans who got mixed with other Africans migrating from the South to Nubia. (Hamid, 1973)

Aside from their ethnic origin, different civilizations rose in Nubia during the fourth to the sixth centuries in Lower Nubia (Bianchi, 2004) which helped in shaping the Nubian identity.

It is essential for this paper to study the history of the Nubian language to get a deeper understanding of all the stages that affected it across the years to better understand the current state that the language has reached.

## **Historical context of the Nubian Language:**

### **Meroitic language:**

Meroe kingdom, also known as Kush, is located between the 1st and the 6th cataract of the Nile Valley known today as Nubia (Southern of Egypt and North of Sudan) during the 3rd century B.C (Before Christ) until the mid 5th century C.E (Christ Era). Kushite kings

conquered Egypt around 712-656 B.C and created an empire in which its borders extended from central Sudan, all the way to the borders of Palestine. With their leader Taharqa, they formed Egypt's 25th dynasty and were known as 'Black Pharaohs' (Mansour, 2008).

After that, they were confined to rule Nubia only under the pressure of Egyptians, Persians and later Romans, until the 4th century of our era. The Meroitic empire was divided for unknown reasons into three small states that were converted later to Christianity (Mansour, 2008): Nobadia, Makuria and Alodia.

Despite Kush or Meroe being regarded as an inferior era to Ancient Egypt's history, but this civilization was one of the most flourishing significant civilizations of sub-Saharan Africa (Mansour, 2008). Also, out of all the different local languages that were once spoken in Nubia and central Sudan, Meroitic is the only one that is well documented although it is not yet fully deciphered (Rilly, 2019).

The Meroitic language was spoken in this area during the 3rd century B.C until the mid 5th century C.E and its script, written from right to left, is twofold (Fig.1): the cursive script, derived mainly from Demotic, and the hieroglyphic script, which uses a selection of Egyptian hieroglyphs. Both sets include 23 signs in addition to a word divider (two or three dots). (Rilly, 2019).

The people of Meroe also used the Egyptian hieroglyphs as late as the 1<sup>st</sup> century C.E, but they appeared alongside the Meroitic script or were replaced by it. In the royal cemeteries at Meroe, Egyptian hieroglyphs were used exclusively in some inscriptions, while in others, Meroitic hieroglyphs were used just for the royal name completed by the Egyptian script for the rest of the text.

However, other inscriptions were written entirely in Meroitic hieroglyphs. Also, a cursive version of Meroitic was used for the majority of royal texts (Fig.2) (Mansour, 2008).

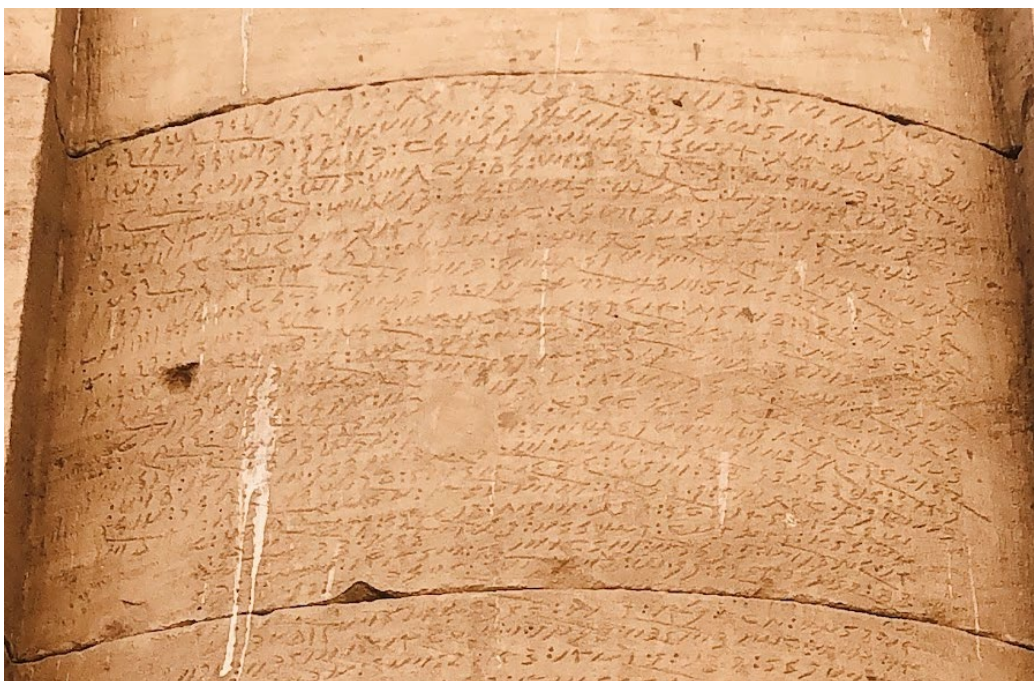
Mansour also highlights the existence of some features in the written language that demonstrates how common speed reading in the late period was, as opposed to some widespread ideas claiming that the last centuries of the kingdom of Meroe were a period of intellectual decline, which indicates that this period was the golden age of Meroitic literacy.

Some Egyptian Nubians I met in Aswan are confusingly convinced that Meroitic's alphabet is the original script of their currently spoken Nubian language and they transliterate the language using the Meroitic script. They are a group of three men, but they are trying to spread this knowledge among other Nubians and visitors through social media and in casual social gatherings. (Fig 3)

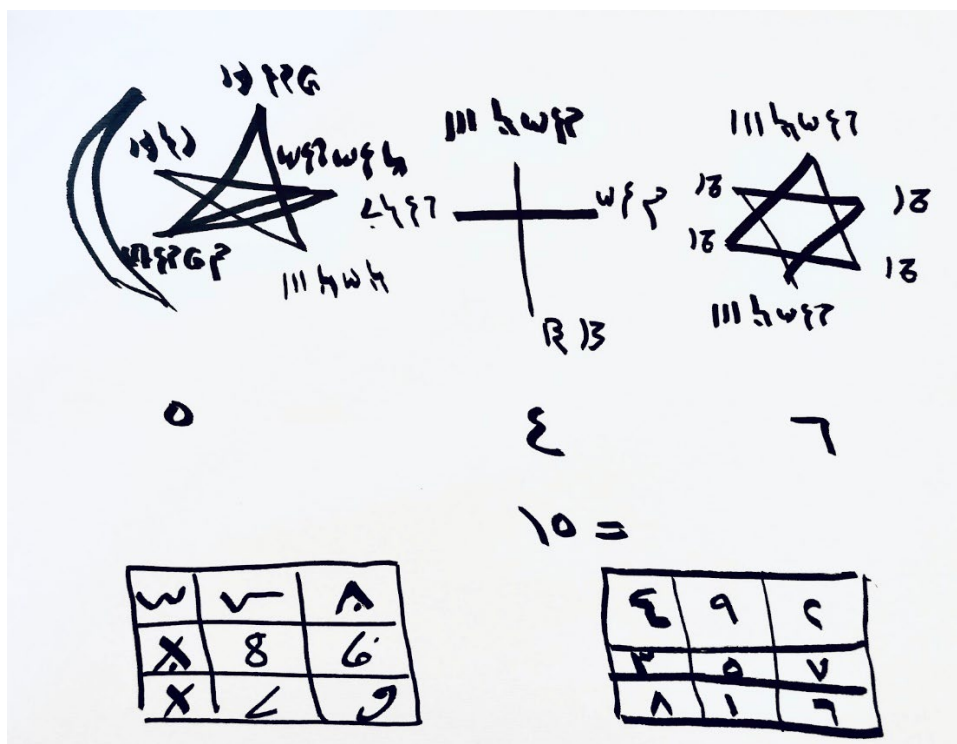


hieroglyphic	cursive	transliteration	values
	52	<i>a</i>	initial /a/ or /u/
	✓	<i>b</i>	/ba/
	2	<i>d</i>	/da/
	6	<i>e</i>	/e/, /ə/, or no vowel
	3	<i>h</i>	/x <sup>w</sup> a/ and /ŋ <sup>w</sup> a/ (?)
	4	<i>i</i>	modifier /i/
	3	<i>k</i>	/ka/
	5	<i>l</i>	/la/
	3	<i>m</i>	/ma/
	12	<i>n</i>	/na/
	8	<i>ne</i>	/ne/, /nə/ or /n/
	/	<i>o</i>	modifier /u/
	2	<i>p</i>	/pa/ (Egypt.) ; /ba/
	17	<i>q</i>	/k <sup>w</sup> a/
	ω	<i>r</i>	/ra/
	3	<i>s</i>	/sa/
	✓//	<i>se</i>	/se/, /sə/ or /s/
	7	<i>t</i>	/ta/
	15	<i>te</i>	/te/, /tə/ or /t/
	✓	<i>to</i>	/tu/
	3	<i>w</i>	/wa/
	✓	<i>x</i>	/xa/ and /ŋa/ (?)
	///	<i>y</i>	dummy vowel support
	:	:	word-divider

(Fig.1) Meroitic Scripts



(Fig.2) Royal Meroitic Inscriptions in Kalabsha Temple



(Fig.3) Meroitic Talismans written by one of the locals in Gharb Seheil

**Old Nubian Language:**

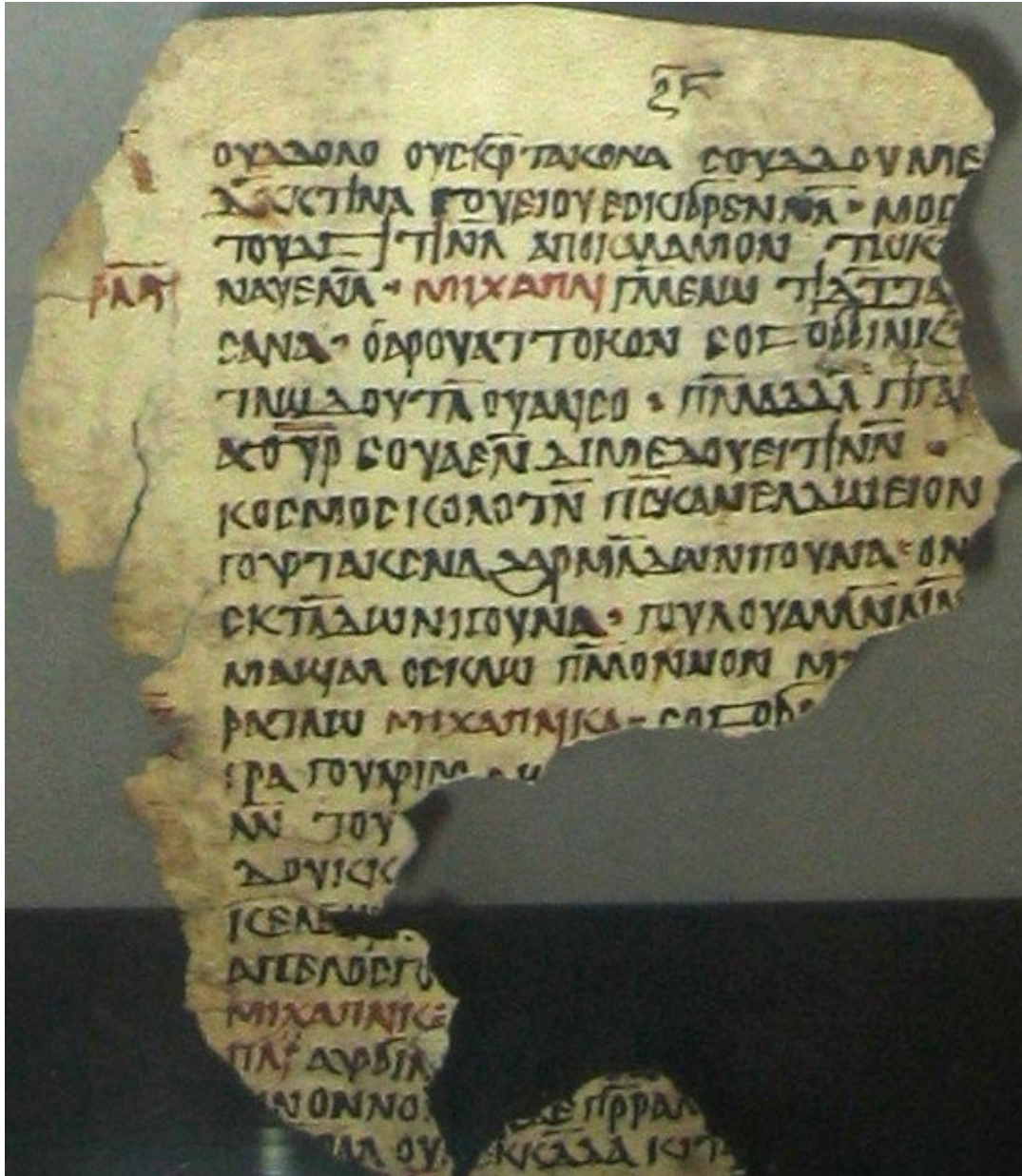
**Old Nubian, which is a Nilo-Saharan language belonging to the East Sudanic branch, according to Greenberg's classification, was the main language of the kingdoms of Nobadia, Makuria and Alodia (the area of North Sudan and Southern Egypt also known as upper Nubia and lower Nubia respectively).**

**The Old Nubian script was first discovered in 1906, when Karl Schmidt, a German scientist, bought a manuscript that he first thought was Coptic, but soon realized that it was a different language. Starting from this point, an intensive research into the Nubian language was developed by Griffith with his monumental edition of the texts (Griffith, 1913), followed among others by Zyhiarz (1928), Vycichl (1958), Hintze (1971-1986), Smagina (1986) and Browne (1982-1998). All the research that was investigating the Nubian language and its script were based on the collection of Griffith in 1913, which is estimated to be around 20 pages of continuous text until the construction of the High Dam. While the construction of the High Dam brought numerous negative consequences for the Nubians and their culture, it is worth noting that the excavations to save Nubian monuments from submersion led to the discovery of new texts, significantly expanding the Old Nubian corpus fourfold (Fig.4).**

**This new material has significantly improved the understanding of language and script. Nonetheless, it is still not clear how and when the Nubian language appeared due to a time gap that is estimated to be around four hundred years between the latest Meroitic documents and the earliest Nubian ones.**

**However, it is believed that old Nubian - which is the direct ancestor of the current spoken contemporary Nubian - was spoken and written during the Christian era of Nubia (6th -14th C.E) and was stopped**

from being written when Islam replaced Christianity and dominated the region, making Arabic the official and most used language.



(Fig.4) A page of Old Nubian translation of "Liber Institutionis Michaelis Archangelis" found at Qasr Ibrim and now housed in the British Museum.

### Characteristics of the language:

**Old Nubian is divided into two different dialect groups:**

**- The Kenzi, also known as Matokki, and the Dongolawi group, which is split into two: Kenzi spoken in Northern Nubia (Egyptian part) which is the focus of this study, and Dongolawi spoken in Southern Nubia (Sudanese part).**

**- The Mahas or Fadidja, which is spoken in the Central area of Nubia (from Korosko to Dongola).**

**The Old Nubian script consists of 30 letters and it is written from left to right in a modified form of the Greek uncial (majuscule script) alphabet with additional characters borrowed from Coptic and Meroitic. The latter were borrowed to represent sounds in Nubian unknown to both Coptic and Greek languages. Although the Coptic alphabet was adopted to write old Nubian, for some unknown reason, the invariably upright Coptic letters were written by Nubian scribes on a slant. This makes Old Nubian the only known alphabet in the world to be written entirely in italics according to *"The Atlas of Endangered Languages."* Most of the Old Nubian texts are dated back to the Christian period on Biblical themes and were written on parchment paper. Half of the preserved material consists of religious content, including translations of the Greek New Testament, the Septuagint, and other Christian writings. The remaining material is documentary, comprising public contracts, private letters, and other similarly transient documents. The majority of the Nubian manuscripts can be found in the British Museum and Berlin Museum.**

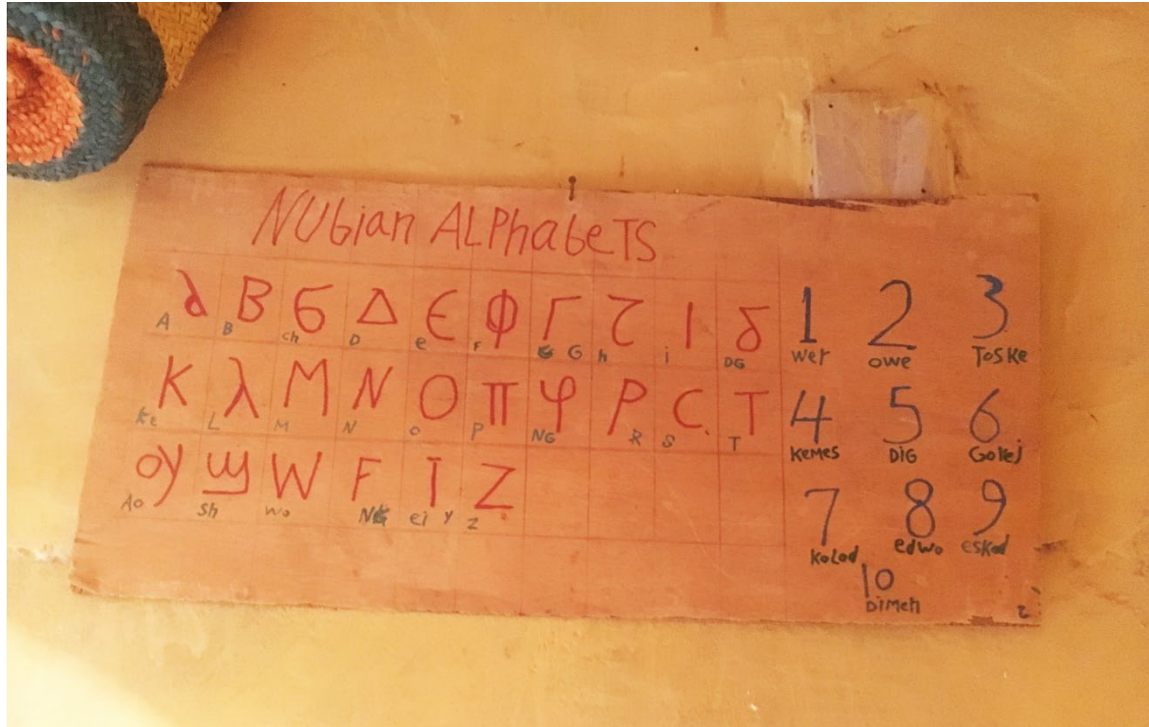
## **Evolution of the language and its script:**

**Although the script ceased to be written following the Nubians' conversion to Islam, it underwent several changes influenced by the socio-political climate.**

**A lot of concerns about losing the Nubian language without having any trace to it in our modern history, have been raised by many Nubian activists.**

**Therefore, the urge of writing and documenting the language started to appear a few decades ago resulting in a modified scripture composed of both Latin and Arabic alphabets in an attempt to make the Nubian language readable. However, it was not until Mokhtar Khalil Kabbara - a Nubian linguist and historian - that the original Nubian script made its way back to Egypt through his book "The Nubian Language: How to write it?" (Fig.5). In his book, Kabbara uses the original alphabet, but modifies it into 26 letters instead of 30. After the knowledge of the original script became popular among the Nubian scholars community in Egypt, some of them started to use it in its original form while others applied some changes to it.**





***(Fig.5) The modified Nubian alphabet developed by Mokhtar Khalil Kabbara, found in a Nubian activist's house during the fieldwork in Seheil island, Aswan.***

## **The use of Nubian in multi-linguistic applications:**

**During the medieval times, Nubia witnessed multilingualism.**

**Findings in Qasr Ibrim - the only archeological site that survived the flooding of Lake Nasser in southern Aswan after the construction of the High Dam - prove that Old Nubian was not the only written language of the region (Fig.6).**

**Many documents were found written in Meroitic, Hieratic, Demotic, Greek, Coptic, Old Nubian and Arabic.**

**Some of the Greek writings that have been found in the Nubian inscriptions, graffiti or documents were described as chaotic (Hagg,1978) and it is assumed that a pidginized Greek had been**

adopted. Numerous graffiti artworks were found with a mix of Greek and Old Nubian which reflected popular use among the community. According to *The Atlas of Endangered Languages*, Greek was not the mother tongue of the scribes, and at times, they may not have been sufficiently proficient in the language.

Nowadays, the original Nubian script is only written by scholars and usually used along with Arabic or Latin writing systems for translation and documentation purposes.



(Fig.6) Old Nubian manuscript that was found in Qasr Ibrim showing a bishop

## Deterioration of the Nubian Language:

A language is the carrier of its people's culture. Anything that affects the language significantly will accordingly alter the culture in one way or another, its people and their future. The Nubian language, one of Africa's oldest, is rapidly deteriorating due to a combination of



political, social and global factors. I believe that this will lead to the slow death of the whole Nubian culture, hence losing an important part of Egypt's cultural heritage if we do not take a strong move towards preserving it on a national level.

According to the UNESCO Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger, degrees of endangerment are set to assess the level of any language's endangerment according to 5 main points (Moseley, Christopher (ed.). 2010) which are:

1. **Vulnerable:** Most children speak the language, but it may be restricted to certain domains (e.g., home).
2. **Definitely endangered:** Children no longer learn the language as their mother tongue in their homes.
3. **Severely endangered:** Language is spoken by grandparents and older generations. While the parent's generation may understand it, they do not speak it to their children or among themselves.
4. **Critically endangered:** The youngest speakers are grandparents and older, and they speak the language partially and infrequently.
5. **Extinct:** There are no speakers left.

According to Nubian and foreign researchers and scholars I spoke to who have been investigating this problem for a long time, as well as my field research that was conducted during this study, it turned out to be very clear (results are discussed elaborately in "Findings & reflections" section) that the Nubian language is between the 2nd and

the 3rd degree of endangerment. Adding to this, the fact that the language is currently only spoken with no script accelerates its endangerment process.

Moreover, there is a constant pressure coming from the West of certain social and cultural images that happen to confuse the third world countries to understand and recreate their national identities after foreign domination and hegemony. (Mahgoub, 1990) Aside from the globalization wave that affected a lot of communities and generations all over the world, there are other important events that are considered to be the main reasons behind the struggle of the Nubian language. This includes the conversion of Nubians to Islam which pushed the people to stop writing their mother tongue and use the Arabic language instead. The first step in solving any problem is to be aware of its existence, investigate it and study its origins to be able to understand and tackle it properly.

### **Conversion to Islam and script extinction:**

The Old Nubian language was once the main spoken language across the Christian Nubian kingdoms of Nobadia, Makuria, and Alodia, following the fall of the Meroitic kingdom. It used the Coptic alphabet supplemented by three Meroitic letters to represent sounds not found in Coptic. Although Nubia converted to Christianity within 50 years, the shift to Islam took nearly 1,000 years, indicating Nubia's strong cultural resilience, especially compared to Egypt. This period included the Baqt treaty, where Nubia exchanged slaves for Egyptian grain, maintaining a degree of autonomy.

However, Arabic gradually became dominant due to trade and political changes, particularly after the Ottoman conquest in the north and the Sennar Sultanate's control in the south during the 16th century. This marked the decline of the Old Nubian script, and the language survived only as a spoken form within close-knit communities.

As the script disappeared, the language suffered in both quality and continuity, incorporating many Arabic loanwords. Because most Nubians today are only familiar with the Arabic alphabet, many attempt to write Nubian using Arabic script, though it lacks the necessary phonetics, making it impractical and confusing. Some turn to Latin script or avoid writing entirely, relying on audio recordings or voice messages to preserve the language. The lack of a proper script also means the language faces digital extinction.

Without Nubian fonts or typefaces, it becomes difficult to digitize texts, create educational materials, or communicate online in Nubian. This pushes speakers to use other dominant languages that are better supported in digital platforms.

However, individual initiatives by scholars and linguists—such as Mohamed Khalil Kabbara—are working to revive the Old Nubian script and promote its preservation, though these efforts remain limited in scale.

### **The construction of dams in Aswan:**

The displacement of Nubians began with the construction of the first Aswan Dam in 1902, just two decades after the British occupation of Egypt. The dam, later heightened in 1912 and 1933, flooded parts of

northern Nubia, forcing communities to relocate to higher ground (Mahgoub, 1990).

Nubians responded with quiet resilience, adapting without protest and maintaining their traditional way of life unaware that much greater upheaval lay ahead. Following the 1952 military revolution in Egypt, Nubia was divided between Egypt and Sudan, with Egypt controlling the areas between the First and Second Cataracts (Mahgoub, 1990). Under President Gamal Abdel Nasser, the High Dam project was proposed, promising national development through expanded agriculture and hydroelectric power (Mahgoub, 1990). However, its construction in 1964 submerged Nubia under the newly formed Lake Nasser, displacing around 50,000 Nubians from their ancestral homes. The displaced population was relocated to government-planned settlements called *El Tahjeer* in Kom Ombo—an area far from the Nile and culturally unfamiliar. While the state invested heavily in saving ancient monuments, it neglected to document the intangible cultural heritage of the Nubian people, whose way of life was drastically altered (Fernea, 1978). Many Nubians moved to Egyptian cities like Cairo, Alexandria, and Suez, or emigrated abroad to Sudan, North America, and beyond. This geographic scattering disrupted traditional community structures, pushing Nubians to adapt linguistically and socially to their new surroundings, often at the cost of their native language and customs. Gradually, Arabic became dominant in their daily interactions, especially among younger generations, leading to a decline in the number of Nubian language speakers. Along with their self-sufficiency, Nubians lost control over their food supply and agricultural choices, becoming increasingly dependent on government support (Mahgoub, 1990). The Fadidja dialect was most

affected, as its speakers made up the majority of those displaced. Most language preservation initiatives were thus led by and focused on Fadidja speakers. Ironically, this left the Kenzi dialect—spoken by the largest existing Nubian community between the Aswan Dam and the High Dam—largely undocumented. In response to this imbalance, this study focuses on the Kenzi dialect, aiming to support the living community and contribute to the body of work that protects and revitalizes this underrepresented linguistic heritage.

### **Unrecognized by the country:**

Another major factor contributing to the decline of the Nubian language is its lack of official recognition within Egypt.

Despite the presence of Nubian-majority schools, the language is not taught, as school principals—many of whom are Nubian themselves—must adhere strictly to the national curriculum outlined by the Ministry of Education.

Likewise, university students are unable to study Nubian in linguistics departments, where other less common languages such as Hebrew or Vietnamese are offered. Therefore, the spaces where the Nubian language can be learned and used are restricted almost entirely to the private sphere within homes or local communities.

This lack of institutional support parallels other global cases where minority languages have faced endangerment due to state policies. A notable example is the Welsh language in the UK, which was significantly marginalized after English became the official language following the Act of Union in 1535.

The decline was reversed through organized youth movements, political activism, and cultural advocacy. In the 1960s, the founder of the Welsh Nationalist Party used a popular radio lecture to demand official recognition for Welsh.

This sparked the formation of the Welsh Language Society, which pushed for bilingual signage, Welsh-language education, and public media. Their efforts culminated in Welsh being granted legal standing in courts and public institutions, laying the groundwork for a national revitalization strategy (Rebecca C.M. Rempt, 2017).

A similar trajectory occurred with the Amazigh people—indigenous to North Africa—whose language, Tamazight, was long suppressed under Arab nationalist regimes. In Algeria, Tamazight only gained official status in the constitution in 2016 after decades of resistance to Arabization policies (Chtatou, 2019). In Morocco, state support began in 1994, with King Hassan II acknowledging the significance of the Amazigh identity, followed by the establishment of the Institut Royal de la Culture Amazighe (IRCAM) in 2001 under King Mohammed VI. IRCAM led the standardization of the vernacular language and its integration into education and media.

In 2003, Morocco adopted Tifinagh as the official script, and its subsequent inclusion in Unicode marked a significant milestone in the digital recognition of Tamazight (Ataa Allah and Bouhjar, 2019; Andries, 2008).

In Libya, Amazigh communities experienced a language revival following the fall of Muammar el-Qaddafi, who had banned Tamazight. Despite a shortage of teachers due to generations of suppression, the language is now being taught in Amazigh-populated areas and at a Libyan university, with support from educators from Algeria and

**Morocco (Spreading the Word: Libya's Berber Language Revival, 2016).**

**These global examples underscore how official recognition alongside grassroots activism can profoundly transform the vitality of a language. They highlight what is currently missing in the Nubian context. While individual efforts by scholars and activists continue, the absence of governmental support limits their effectiveness. For Nubian to survive and thrive, a national stance acknowledging and supporting the language is essential. Without structural backing, revitalization efforts remain isolated and insufficient to reverse the decline.**

### **Language fading from Nubian homes:**

**As explained earlier it is clear how the education system in Egypt is based on Arabic and is not inclusive for linguistic diversity which makes the Nubian language only taught by mothers at home. Therefore, children learn the Nubian language from their mothers, keeping alive most of the words for objects and activities inside the house. As for the rest of the language, it is rapidly being forgotten and replaced by Egyptian-Arabic. (Mahgoub, 1990)**

**Mahgoub also highlights that women have become bilingual and the language they teach their children is greatly affected by the introduction of new words and terminologies. The youth, who seem to be speaking the language, are no longer speaking the language correctly according to the criticisms of the elderly. Because children learn the language from their mothers at home before they are exposed to the world outside, most of the vocabulary used inside the house is Nubian while the vocabulary used in the outside world is**

Arabic. This is because the exposure of women to the public, especially the market, where Arabic is dominating, forces them to speak Arabic in the Souq and other public places.

Mahgoub also concluded during his field research that according to the older people, the younger generations do not speak the language at all. As the youth are still not practicing the Nubian language up to this day, this shows that the problem has been occurring since the date of his paper, thirty years ago.

What is happening also during the current decade is that mothers are starting to make a conscious decision of not teaching their children their native language at all, favoring Arabic instead, since it is the main, dominating official language of Egypt.

There is a misconception among Nubian mothers, which is difficult to trace its origin, that teaching the children Nubian in their early years will distract them from learning Arabic properly, hence causing problems for their children in coping with the outside world. They choose to avoid this risk and teach them Arabic instead of their vernacular, hoping that their kids will pick up Nubian when they grow up by interacting with their grandparents as well as other relatives who are fluent in Nubian, and in some cases, is their only spoken language. This resulted in young generations that are unable to speak Nubian. Although they might understand it, they always choose to reply back in Arabic, while some of the children don't understand Nubian at all. During my field research, I learned a few words and phrases in Nubian.



Whenever I met a child, I tried to start the conversation in Nubian, but I rarely got a reply in the same language; they would either understand and reply in Arabic or they wouldn't understand at all and say "I don't speak Nubian". This is one of the critical points that will lead to the highest degrees of endangerment according to UNESCO's criteria of assessing a language's endangerment status as discussed earlier in this chapter. While mothers can't be blamed as they are left with no options in a country that does not support marginalized communities, they, unfortunately, don't see any value or a clear function for their native language.

Nubian is only used for communicating between one another within their small community, but even Arabic can replace this function easily.

### **Field Research:**

Due to the limited resources available in terms of books and documentation, the most convenient methodology used to address the problem and gather as much information as possible was no other than gathering insights firsthand by living with the Nubians. Not only is there a lack of resources, but also the majority of the available material is relatively old. The most recent research paper that explains the Nubian's culture and lifestyle in all its forms including their language was produced three decades ago. Understanding the current context is crucial to effectively compare it with the previous experience of fellow researchers and to develop a solution that is relevant to the present situation. This means that the field research is not only a plus, but a necessity for this study.

**I adopted an anthropological approach during the fieldwork, studying the Nubians in real-life situations to explore how modern-day individuals interact with their language. This included investigating how the language is used in daily life, its frequency of use, and gaining a comprehensive understanding of their social and cultural aspects.**

**The field research was split into two phases: The first phase was about conducting an exploratory trip for a one-month period.**

**The aim of this phase is to explore the Nubians and their culture as explained earlier, using qualitative research by using participant observation, unstructured and semi-structured narrative interviews as methods. Having no time-limits will enable the interviewees to feel comfortable and be willing to share as much information as possible. The more data I gathered from these interviews, the better during this primary stage.**

**While the second phase focused on narrowing down the fields of focus, the duration of the second trip will also be for a one-month period, aiming to assess the leverage points that were gathered from the first phase, further analyze them and choose one to proceed with. Unlike the first stage, this part of the research will adopt quantitative research through structured interviews.**

### **First field review:**

**The first phase of fieldwork began with a deep immersion into the daily lives of the Nubian community through participant observation. This method was chosen to overcome the outsider perspective I had previously held as a tourist, and to adopt an anthropological lens—one that seeks to understand the world from the viewpoint of others. Observation was crucial for grasping not only the status of the Nubian**

language but also the cultural context in which it exists, including gestures, routines, and social habits that are often overlooked yet deeply telling of a community's identity.

Unstructured and semi-structured interviews served as the second primary method. These conversations were intentionally casual and open-ended, allowing participants to express themselves freely and build trust. The Nubians' warmth and extroversion made it relatively easy to engage with people across different age groups. I adjusted my questions based on each individual and didn't shy away from questioning or probing deeper into cultural norms and social beliefs—especially where hidden struggles might reveal aspects of collective identity.

To ensure the documentation of this journey, I used photographs, videos, field notes, and post-interview self-reflections. However, photographing women proved difficult due to cultural sensitivities, leading me to rely primarily on note-taking for these encounters.

Decisions made during this phase significantly shaped the research experience. Choosing *Heissa Island* as a base was strategic—its geographical isolation between the Aswan Dam and the High Dam meant its residents were less exposed to tourism and thus retained stronger ties to their language and traditions. Unlike more touristic areas like *Gharb Seheil*, Heissa remains less accessible and less commercial, making it more suitable for an authentic, immersive experience.

Though my original plan was to live with a Nubian family, logistical and cultural barriers made this unfeasible. Instead, I stayed at a small three-room lodge named *Kenzi*, coincidentally sharing its name with

the Nubian dialect under study. The lodge staff; Bibi, Mando, Kommai, and Nasser became the first contacts and participants in the study, providing rich insight into food traditions and local life. These early interactions laid the groundwork for a deeper connection with the community.

Eventually, I moved into a rental owned by *Aam Sally*, a retired man living by the Nile, surrounded by relatives. Out of respect for the Nubian custom of not accepting money from guests, I decided not to burden any family and opted for this rental while remaining in close contact with surrounding households.

Finally, selecting local guides—or *fixers*—was another key step. I chose two individuals from different generations: one elder fluent in the original Nubian language to provide historical context and connect me with older residents, and a younger guide to facilitate engagement with the youth and modern aspects of Nubian life. This dual approach ensured a balanced and multi-generational perspective on the current status and transformation of Nubian identity and language.

Choosing Aam Sally as my elder guide turned out to be one of the most impactful decisions of the research. His deep knowledge of the community and fluent command of the Nubian language made him an invaluable connection to the older generation. For a younger counterpart, I selected Hamada Zizo, a 30-year-old boatman and occasional guide whom I met during a *Mawlid* celebration. Hamada's vibrant energy, sociability, and eagerness to help made him a perfect match for the dynamic demands of my fieldwork.

Building rapport with the community required intentional ice-breaking strategies, especially to overcome the barrier of being

perceived as an outsider or researcher. One particularly effective and unplanned strategy emerged when Hamada gave me a Nubian name: “Sandaliya”, meaning *Sandalwood essence*—a cherished fragrance used in bridal henna rituals. He also taught me how to introduce myself in Nubian: “Ayyi Sandaliya Era.”

This simple phrase became a powerful tool for connection. Whenever I introduced myself as Sandaliya, people would light up with surprise and amusement, often leading to enthusiastic conversations. The gesture of adopting a Nubian name deeply resonated with the community and sparked curiosity and pride, especially among women who were otherwise reluctant to teach the language to their own children. Many began teaching me new words and phrases on the spot, touched by my interest in their language.

Over time, I became known island-wide not by my real name but simply as *Sandaliya*. No one asked for my actual name, and more importantly, I was no longer treated as a visitor, but as a local. The name served not just as an ice-breaker, but as a symbol of mutual respect and cultural connection that shaped the rest of my time in Heissa.

## **The People:**

During my research in Heissa and other northern Nubian villages, I quickly discovered the warmth, generosity, and deep-rooted traditions of the Nubian community. What began as a short walk turned into an immersion of endless tea invitations, spontaneous friendships, and a new identity—“Sandaliya,” my given Nubian name, which became an instant icebreaker and symbol of acceptance.

Guided by locals like Hamada Zizo and Aam Sally, I visited nearly all Nubian villages in Aswan, witnessing the decline of the Nubian language and the shift toward Arabic names and customs. Despite their cultural isolation, Nubians are remarkably open, often leaving their homes unlocked and resolving conflicts through *El Majles*, a traditional council of elders.

The men often work in tourism and surprisingly indulge in hash and alcohol, even around family, while women—though strong and central in households—still face restrictions, particularly around education and relationships. Yet, beneath conservative surfaces, many girls expressed ambition, curiosity, and a longing for more autonomy.

What struck me most was the unwavering sense of safety, trust, and communal solidarity. Nubia is not only a place—it's a way of life where simplicity, pride, and kinship endure, even as modern pressures quietly reshape its future.

### **Community Centers:**

Nubian villages center much of their social life around the *community center*, or *Gam'eya*. These spaces—most notably Heissa's—are hubs for daily gatherings, celebrations, and communal meals. Their role varies by village, shaped by elected local leaders. In Heissa, the center hosts nightly games, social storytelling, and even nursery classes. Elsewhere, centers have broadcast World Cup matches or offered workshops and medical convoys. More than just a gathering space, the community center reflects the Nubians' deep kinship, adaptability, and commitment to collective well-being.

### **Nubian's relationship with the Nile:**

The Nile, called *Essi* in Nubian, is central to Nubian identity, shaping daily life, traditions, and beliefs. Living close to the river, Nubians rely on it for drinking water, bathing, swimming, fishing, and even storytelling. Many believe that drinking directly from the Nile in Aswan creates a lasting longing to return—prompting locals to encourage visitors to try it. Homes traditionally store Nile water in clay containers called *Zeer* to keep it cool.

Children learn to swim in the Nile from as early as age 3, using makeshift floatation devices made from plastic barrels. Daily bathing in the Nile is a cherished ritual, especially among elders like Aam Sally, who believes it ensures a good day.

Cultural beliefs around the Nile are rich and spiritual. In her 1970s book *A View of the Nile*, Elizabeth Fernea recounts a folktale in which a noble prince, fleeing from evil enemies, drags his sword across the land as he escapes. Wherever the sword touches, the ground opens and water flows, forming the winding path of the Nile. The river protects him until he disappears into the Mediterranean—leaving behind the Nile as a symbol of life and protection. While locals hadn't heard this story and questioned its authenticity due to non-Nubian words like "prince," its symbolism still resonates with how Nubians view the river.

They also believe in spiritual beings living in the Nile—benevolent ones called *Malayket El Bahr* (Angels of the Nile) and harmful ones known as *Dogir*. Before entering the river, it is customary—especially among older generations—for Nubians to say a prayer in their language: "Walargi izermenu wlaar ekki bizemenu," which means "You don't harm us, we don't harm you." This simple phrase expresses

a wish for peaceful coexistence between humans and the unseen beings of the Nile.

Though such beliefs are fading among younger generations, storytelling continues to serve as a bridge for cultural memory. One widely shared tale tells of a grandmother whose hand mysteriously swelled after her water bucket broke in the river an ailment that defied medical explanation but was later understood by a village sheikh as punishment from a disturbed Nile spirit. Such stories, passed down through conversation and memory, help preserve the mythological dimension of the Nile. Overall, the river remains both a physical and spiritual lifeline in Nubian culture.

### **Nubian Homes:**

Nubian houses are a defining feature of the culture, admired for their hand-painted facades and thoughtful, environmentally-conscious design. Built from mud and gravel, with clay bricks forming domes and triangular openings, they provide natural insulation against Aswan's intense heat. Their architecture reflects the Nubians' deep connection to nature and adaptability to their environment.

Every Nubian house typically has two entrances—one at the front and another at the back—to allow women to exit discreetly when guests are present, preserving privacy. A bench known as a 'Mastaba' is placed outside for neighbors and relatives to gather, reinforcing community bonds. Inside, a spacious courtyard or *Housh* serves as a central hub for social life, hosting pre-wedding celebrations, family meals, and ceremonies. Homes often include at least two bedrooms, following an old tradition where newlyweds stayed with the bride's family for 45 days.



Decorative elements also carry cultural meaning. Outer walls are adorned with hand-drawn images of birds, palms, and suns using natural pigments. Hanging plates once common at doorways are believed by some to ward off the evil eye, while others see them as mere decoration. A lesser-known theory claims the plates signified a male resident's presence, and would be broken by his wife upon his death—though this explanation is not widely accepted by locals today.

#### **Art and Crafts:**

Art and craftsmanship are deeply embedded into Nubian culture. Known for their architectural ingenuity, Nubians—especially women—are also skilled artisans. Nubian women traditionally weave dried palm leaves into decorative plates, coasters, and tray covers, and have recently adapted the craft to create colorful bags. However, this tradition has mostly disappeared in villages like Heissa, surviving only among displaced communities in Tahjeer, whose products are sold in local bazaars.

Pottery and beadwork were once common but have largely vanished. Nubians used to craft belts, shawls, and jewelry with copper, shells, and colored beads. Efforts to revive copper jewelry-making are underway through occasional NGO-led workshops. Two sisters, Doaa and Asmaa, were among the passionate attendees and also practiced henna art.

Henna is a major cultural tradition and profession for Nubian girls, renowned across Egypt for its quality and beauty. While some artists now incorporate modern, minimalist designs by request, traditional floral patterns remain central especially for brides, who choose elaborate designs for their wedding night. Grooms also wear henna,

sometimes with personal or unexpected motifs, like the Apple logo one groom unknowingly chose to stand out. A beloved custom during the "Henna night" involves writing heartfelt wishes on the walls of the groom's home.

### **Music:**

Nubian music plays a crucial role in preserving the Nubian language, making it one of the few domains where the language remains actively used. Loved by all generations, even children who don't speak Nubian fluently can often sing popular songs by heart—though many don't fully understand the lyrics without asking their parents. Music is embedded in daily life and gatherings, where instruments like the *doff* (tambourine) are played spontaneously, turning casual evenings into communal celebrations.

Nubian songs often draw from real-life stories—like women fetching water from the Nile or the dreams of young girls—and are not limited to themes of love. The trauma of displacement has also heavily influenced their music, with icons like Hamza El-Din reflecting this loss in their work. Arabic music has left its mark too, with popular songs being adapted to Nubian lyrics, sometimes blending both languages.

Live music at Nubian weddings offers an unforgettable experience, showcasing not only powerful performances but also distinctive, intergenerational dance traditions. Prominent figures like Mohamed Mounir, a Nubian singer raised in Cairo, helped spotlight Nubian identity by incorporating Fadidja dialect lyrics into his music. However, opinions are mixed—some feel he could have done more to uplift his community.

Recently, a new wave of Electro/Shaabī Nubian music has emerged, sparking both excitement and concern, especially among elders and some youth. Still, as long as the Nubian language continues to find a voice through music, many see this evolution as a natural and necessary part of cultural growth.

#### **The language:**

During a visit to a *Mawlid* celebration in Tenqar's village, I noticed that children were speaking only Arabic while playing. This sparked a conversation with a group of local mothers about whether they pass down the Nubian language to their children. Most of them, particularly Fatma's mother, explained that they chose not to teach their kids Nubian because they believe Arabic is far more important for their future. They shared concerns about their children being bullied or ridiculed for speaking with an accent, struggling in school, or facing limited job opportunities.

Fatma's mother was especially firm in her stance, even recounting how she once punished her daughter for speaking Nubian, believing it to be in her best interest. While a few other mothers seemed conflicted, most supported this decision. I also learned that although their husbands mostly disagreed, the women were the ones making language-related decisions at home.

As I continued my visits to other villages, I observed a clear pattern: the closer a village was to Aswan, the more Arabic had overtaken Nubian, particularly among children and younger adults. Although some individuals, like Hussein Shalali and Zizi from the Nubian Museum, are working to preserve the written form of the language,

its use in public spaces—such as signage or boat names—is rare and mostly in Arabic or Latin script.

Currently, the Nubian language survives mainly in music and within the home, used by elders and in some family interactions. However, these domains are not enough to stop the language from gradually fading away.

### **Ceremonies and Occasions:**

Nubians have unique ways of celebrating life events like weddings, religious holidays, and the birth of children. Weddings are major communal events that often stretch over several days. One key tradition is the *Okjar*, where the entire village is invited to breakfast at the groom's house, followed by the groom and his friends personally delivering wedding invitations—an essential gesture, as digital or phone invites are seen as disrespectful.

I was invited to join one of these *Okjar* outings, where the groom and his friends, all dressed in white *galabiyas*, visited each household, offering tea or sweets and leaving printed invites if no one was home. The groom is marked by a traditional red bracelet with shells, worn throughout the wedding events.

Pre-wedding celebrations include *henna night*, where guests apply henna, socialize, and enjoy dinner. In the days leading up to the wedding, families host gatherings with music and sometimes live Sufi performances, known as *Leila*. These events vary based on a family's financial means and village customs.

On the wedding night, the bride is welcomed outside the hairdresser's with a *Zaffa*—a traditional Nubian street procession of music and dancing. The bride wears a white dress and shows her hair, while the groom changes from a tuxedo into a *galabiya*, keeping his red bracelet. Weddings are vibrant, with beer, dancing, neon lights, and live Nubian music often lasting until sunrise.

They also have distinctive ways of marking religious events like *Ashura*, visiting the Nile to offer dates, rice, and henna, and collecting water for blessings. At night, men and boys play with fire using *Dom* branches.

When a baby is born, they celebrate *Sebou'* on the seventh day. The mother and her female relatives take the baby across the Nile seven times before bathing the child in the river for blessings.

## Second field review:

After completing the first phase, which involved immersing myself in Nubian social and cultural life, I returned to Cairo to process the experiences and data I had gathered. This break allowed me to reflect and prepare for the second phase, which required narrowing down the findings, identifying key leverage points, and defining the most effective area of intervention.

The second phase involved a return to the field for a more targeted research trip. This time, I conducted quantitative research to validate the insights from the first phase and to help finalize both the leverage point and the target group. While it was already clear that the Nubian language was rapidly disappearing, it remained uncertain how or where to intervene effectively. This led me to organize structured

interviews specifically focused on the language issue, targeting families with children aged 3 to 8 and meeting with school principals. The aim was to explore the use of the language in the two key domains where children spend most of their time: at home and in school.

### **Data Collection:**

To ensure the collection of relevant data during the second field trip, I prepared a detailed research plan outlining the target villages, number of family visits, and a clear set of survey questions. It was essential to include families from various Nubian villages to capture a diverse range of backgrounds and perspectives, helping to ensure the accuracy of the findings.

Three tailored surveys were designed—one for each family member: the mother, father, and child. A fourth survey was created specifically for school principals to be used during school visits. With the support of Aam Sally and Hamada Zizo, I conducted interviews with an average of three families per village over the first four days of the trip.

I conducted interviews in six villages: Heissa, Tenqar, Khazan, Seheil, Gharb Seheil, and Gharb Aswan. Unlike the first phase, this round of interviews was much smoother, as I was already familiar to most families—some even expressed admiration for my work. This rapport helped eliminate awkwardness and allowed the short-format questionnaires to be conducted more efficiently compared to the more in-depth methods used earlier.

The second step involved visiting schools to speak with principals and to interview children in a different environment from their homes. I visited three schools and two nurseries across Heissa, Seheil, and

**Gharb Aswan, aiming to better understand the school's role in the preservation or loss of the Nubian language.**

**Following the initial data collection, I paused field visits for a week to digitize and analyze the gathered material. Based on this analysis and the identification of a leverage point, I decided to explore another critical layer: the work lives of Nubian mothers. I focused specifically on those working as henna artists and artisans—two of the most common professions among Nubian women.**

**This additional step aimed to understand the work environments and needs of these women, recognizing that their daily lives and routines are key to shaping the language habits of their children. I created two separate surveys tailored for these professions: one for henna artists and another for artisans.**

### **Findings and reflections:**

**After conducting structured interviews with 20 Nubian families and local schools, I found that 64% of children (133 out of 207) don't speak Nubian. While some understand basic words, they rarely respond in Nubian. 12 of the 20 mothers interviewed said they wouldn't pass the language on to their children—largely because they saw no practical value in it compared to Arabic. This sentiment, along with the disappearance of the Nubian script, has contributed to the language's decline.**

**Fathers acknowledged this but felt powerless to intervene, as mothers are the primary caretakers while they work. Bullying over Nubian-accented Arabic also discouraged many parents from encouraging their children to use the language.**

Importantly, 19 out of 20 families were aware that their language is endangered. However, schools play no supportive role, instead reinforcing Arabic as the only accepted language. Principals stated they could not incorporate Nubian into learning due to Ministry of Education regulations and feared government repercussions if they tried—even in extracurricular settings.

Only in Heissa did I find widespread use and preservation of the language. All 45 children at Heissa's school spoke Nubian fluently, and nearly all families there retained its use.

Interestingly, children who didn't speak Nubian weren't more fluent in Arabic than those who did, debunking the myth that one language must be sacrificed for the other. Still, most mothers remained unconvinced and felt judged, viewing me—an Arabic-speaking outsider—as disconnected from their lived struggles.

Many mothers actually felt helpless, not disinterested. They were saddened by their decision not to teach Nubian but believed they had no choice. This led me to a key insight: reviving Nubian among mothers requires restoring its value emotionally and financially.

I recalled how moved Nubians were when they heard a stranger like me speak their language. Given Nubia's tourism industry and the number of women working as henna artists, artisans, and chefs, I saw an opportunity. I began interviewing henna artists and artisans to explore how the Nubian language could be incorporated into their work.

Findings revealed that henna art could serve as a promising medium for language integration.



## **Development of the design concept:**

**Following the two phases of field research, the ideation phase focused on proposing a design solution to support Nubian language preservation. The solution needed to include Nubians, rather than preach to them—recognizing that, as an outsider, I would still be perceived as a stranger despite my time spent with the community.**

**Raising awareness or creating educational materials for children wasn't suitable, as these approaches don't tackle the core issue: mothers choosing Arabic over Nubian at home. Additionally, as a student project, the initiative might not be taken seriously unless backed by an educational institution.**

**I decided to propose a practical tool. A clear criteria was established to guide the solution—focusing on inclusivity, relevance (based on the lifestyle insights from fieldwork), and sustainability to ensure long-term impact.**

**While the proposed idea is not positioned as a cure-all for language extinction, it aims to be a modest, actionable step that brings attention to the issue and lays groundwork for future initiatives.**

**Throughout the paper, the cumulative events and problems that affected the Nubian language and made it subject to extinction were discussed elaborately. The most alarming problem is how mothers are taking a conscious decision to break the cycle that has been carried out for years by refraining from passing down their vernacular to their children. This action further endangers the language's survival, which is already in a precarious state due to the loss of its script. Digging deeper into those problems during the field research revealed that the**

core problem lies in the language having lacked a clear functional purpose for an extended period. Hence, the script got extinct, Arabic took over, and mothers started to favor it over their own mother tongue. This leads to the question: “How can Nubian mothers reclaim the value of their language to prevent it from fading away?”

To address the research question, it was essential to ask: *What kind of tools can make the Nubian language rewarding for mothers?* The answer lay in offering both financial and emotional incentives. Financial reward is crucial for this less privileged community, while emotional reward—such as the pride felt when strangers use their language—helps rekindle a sense of belonging.

Given Nubia’s status as a tourist destination, many Nubian women work as henna artists or artisans. Henna artists, in particular, frequently interact with visitors, making them ideal agents to bridge cultural exchange. Therefore, incorporating Nubian language into henna designs emerged as a fitting idea—one that honors culture, involves mothers directly, and provides both emotional and financial value.

Though the Nubian language is part of the region’s atmosphere, it has not been visibly manifested, especially due to the disuse of its script. However interviews with eight henna artists revealed that tourists occasionally request Nubian script designs, but are turned away due to the misconception that the language cannot be written. This insight reinforced the untapped potential for revitalizing the language through culturally rooted creative expression.

To incorporate the Nubian language into henna art, I first had to decide on its written script. Despite debates, I chose Kabbara’s

modified version of the original Nubian script over Arabic or Latin, due to its phonetic accuracy, cultural preservation, and use by NSDC (Nubian Studies and Documentation Center) —though I supported Kabbara’s inclusion of the “z” sound for practical reasons. After consultations with linguists like Markus Jaeger and Dr. Kirsty Rowan, experts on the Nubian language, we agreed on using Kabbara’s 26-letter system.

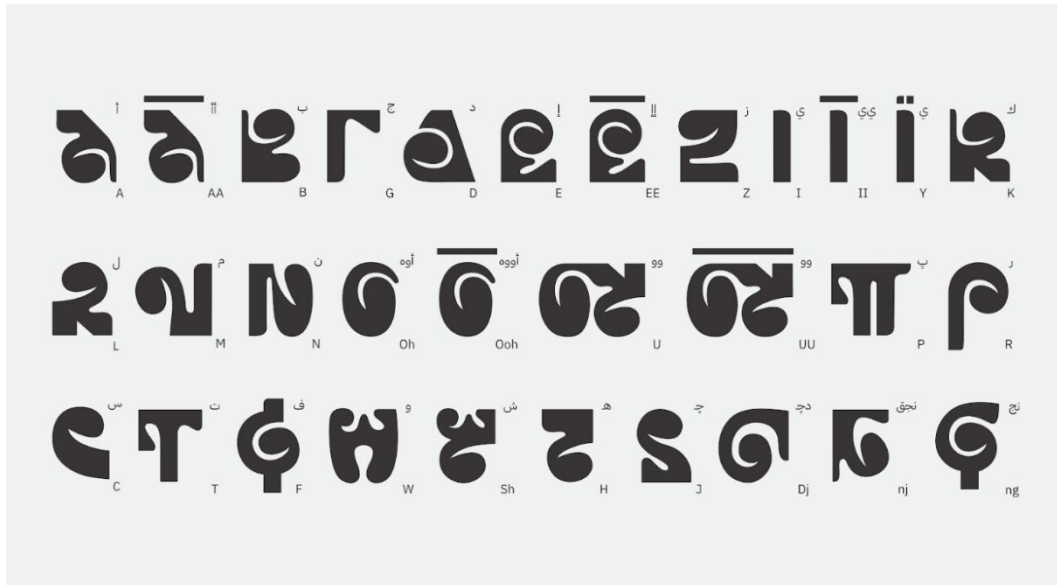
The first phase was developing a display typeface specifically for henna. Inspired by Peter Bil’ak’s indigenous type work and Juliet Shen’s Lushootseed font, I took a culturally rooted approach. I studied Nubian henna patterns, especially their swirls and curves (Fig. 7), comparing them to historical manuscripts (Fig. 8). This led to a script that merged ornamental aesthetics with legibility. The typeface features open-ended strokes and uncial forms (Fig. 9), making it suitable for stenciling. Experts including Gerry Leonidas and Dr. Nolan gave feedback on a beta version. I also connected with Hatim-Arbaab Eujayl, a Sudanese Nubian type enthusiast who designed the “Sawarda” Nubian typeface, and he appreciated the henna-art-inspired concept.



(Fig.7) Henna swirls.



(Fig.8) Similarities between traditional henna swirls and Nubian script in Miracle of St.Mina manuscript.



*(Fig.9) "Koffre" Typeface that I designed to be used by Henna artists.*

Next, I created a Henna Kit (Fig.10) to introduce the typeface to artists unfamiliar with Nubian writing. The kit includes:

- An acrylic stencil (Fig.11)
- A sketchbook with hand templates (Fig.12)
- A henna catalog (Fig.13)
- Letter stickers (Fig.14)

The final phase involved designing the typographical henna catalog, aimed at tourists and Egyptians. It's divided into:

1. Write your name in Nubian (Fig.15) – Alphabet chart with Arabic/Latin equivalents + name examples.
2. Words & Quotes (Fig.16) – Designs combining Nubian terms with henna motifs and cultural facts.
3. Traditional Designs (Fig.17) – Regular henna patterns with optional text integration.

The catalog's flexible binding lets artists add new designs. Material and color choices reflect Nubian aesthetics. With this, the first full prototype of the kit was completed and ready for testing.



(Fig.10) The Henna kit.





**(Fig.11) Alphabet acrylic stencil.**



**(Fig.12) A4 notebook with hand template in which henna artists can sketch their henna designs using the Nubian alphabet stencil**



(Fig.13) The Henna catalog.

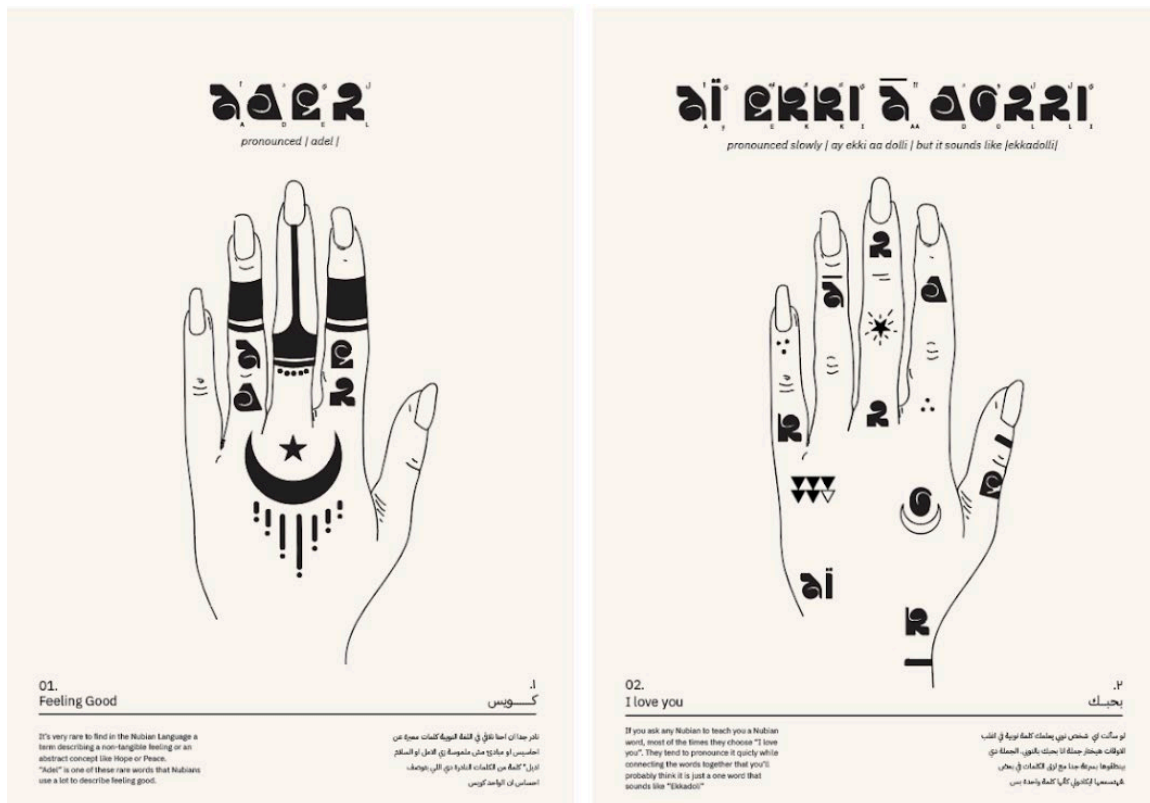


(Fig.14) Nubian letters' stickers.





(Fig.15) Examples of names written in Nubian script.



(Fig.16) Nubian Sayings and expressions in Henna designs.



(Fig.17) Regular Nubian Henna designs.

## Prototype Test:

To evaluate the proposed henna kit, I returned to Heissa for a week-long field test with 11 henna artists across Gharb Seheil, Heissa, and El Khazan. The response was largely positive—7 artists were enthusiastic, while 4 showed disinterest, possibly due to resistance to change. Some Nubian locals like Annoury and Aam Sally noted that such reluctance is common and often temporary, predicting that peer adoption would eventually sway others.

One impactful moment occurred with Donia, a henna artist in Heissa. A tourist noticed the kit and requested a Nubian typographic design.

**This led to a full day of enthusiastic client engagement, with nearly all choosing Nubian-language designs. Donia's income increased that day, and clients shared their designs online, showing appreciation for both the aesthetic and cultural value of the work. Donia later sent her own sketches and asked for more materials to continue practicing.**

**Other artists also offered valuable feedback. Doaa, a henna and jewelry designer, was excited by the kit's potential beyond henna and proposed adding examples of Nubian phrases to help artists form full expressions. Asmaa recommended including Arabic and Latin transliterations alongside the Nubian characters in the stencil, while also expressing her appreciation for the stickers, which Donia didn't find useful. Bob's sister shared Doaa's concerns and suggested new Nubian phrases for future designs. Samiha highlighted the need for a laminated catalog to withstand frequent client handling. These insights provided a strong foundation for refining and finalizing the kit.**

### **Future Development:**

**The project holds strong potential for expansion in multiple directions. The typeface itself could be further developed into a complete font family with various weights and adapted for broader applications beyond henna such as graffiti, signage, book covers, and more. One example of this versatility was a wooden sign created as a gift for Aam Sally, showcasing how the typeface can be applied in different contexts (Fig. 18).**

**Beyond the typeface, alternative versions of the kit could be designed to support other Nubian artisans, such as those working with beads, threads, or brass. A jewelry kit, for instance, could enable women to**

**integrate Nubian typographic designs into handmade jewelry, extending the project's cultural and economic impact.**



***(Fig.18) The wooden signage that I gave Aam Sally as a present. It transliterates: "Sally Ka" which means Sally's house.***

## References:

***Ataa Allah, F. and Bouhjar, A., 2019. The IRCAM Realizations for the Amazigh Preservation and Revitalization in Morocco. Paris, pp.215-218.***

***Atlas of Endangered Alphabets: Indigenous and minority writing systems, and the people who are trying to save them. Retrieved 11 September 2020, from <https://www.endangeredalphabets.net/alphabets/nubian/>***

***Azab, K., & Mansour, A. (2008). Journey of writing in Egypt. [Alexandria, Egypt]: Bibliotheca Alexandria.***

***Boroditsky, L., 2017. How Language Shapes The Way We Think. Ted.com. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RKK7wGAYP6k>***

***Browne, G. (2002). Old nubian grammar. Munchen: Lincom Europa.***

***Chtatou, M., 2019. The Amazigh Cultural Renaissance. The Washington Institute. Available at: <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/amazigh-cultural-renaissance>***

**Csis.org. 2016. *Spreading the Word: Libya's Berber Language Revival*. Available at: <https://www.csis.org/analysis/spreading-word-libyas-berber-language-revival>**

**Eujayl, H., 2021. *Sawarda Nubian - Union for Nubian Studies*. [online] [Unionfornubianstudies.org](http://unionfornubianstudies.org). Available at: <https://unionfornubianstudies.org/projects/sawarda/>**

**Ferne, E. (1970). *A view of the Nile (1st ed.)*. Doubleday.**

**Idrees, M., & Khalil, K. (2020). *Nubian-Arabic Dictionary*.**

**Habob, M. (2014). *The dictionary of Nubian quotes*.**

**Jaeger, M. (2008). *Indigenous Efforts to Revitalize and Digitize the Nubian Languages*.**

**Jaeger, M., 2018. *Aspects of Gender in Dongolawi and Kenzi Wise Sayings and Proverbs*. Dotawo: A Journal of Nubian Studies, 5.**

**Kabara, M. (1998). *The Nubian Language: How do we write?. The Nubian Studies and Documentation Center*.**

**Khalil, M., & Miller, C. (1996). *Old Nubian and Language Uses in Nubia*. *Égypte/Monde Arabe*, (27-28), 67-76. doi: 10.4000/ema.1032**

**Kennedy, J., 1978. *Nubian Ceremonial Life*. Cairo, Egypt: American University in Cairo Press.**

**Łajtar, A., Vliet, J., & Ochała, G. (2011). *Nubian voices II*.**

**Mahgoub, Y., 1990. *The Nubian Experience: A Study Of The Social And Cultural Meanings In Architecture*. Ph.D. University of Michigan.**

**Mahmoud Bayoumi, O. (2018). *Nubian Vernacular architecture & contemporary Aswan buildings' enhancement*. Alexandria Engineering Journal, 57(2), 875-883. doi: 10.1016/j.aej.2016.01.002**

**Mansour, N., 2017. *Discourses Around Nubians: A Critical Discourse Analysis Of Egyptian Social Studies And History Textbooks*. American University in Cairo.**

**Mattoki. (2014). Retrieved 11 September 2020, from <https://www.ethnologue.com/language/xnz>**

**Moseley, Christopher (ed.). 2010. *Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger*, 3rd edn. Paris, UNESCO Publishing.**

**Özüm Ak, Z., 2018. *Understanding the Problems of the Support of an Endangered Language in Typography: Proposal of a Typeface That Supports the Laz Language*. MA. Escola Superior de Arte e Design de Matosinhos.**

**Riechers, A., 2016. *How To Design Typefaces In A Language You Can'T Speak*. [online] Eye on Design. Available at: <<https://eyeondesign.aiga.org/how-to-design-typefaces-in-a-language-you-cant-speak/>> [Accessed 11 September 2020].**

**Rempt, R. (2017). *Revitalisation of Minority Languages in Britain: The Cases of Irish and Welsh* (B.A.). Utrecht University.**

**Romaine, S. (2007). *Preserving Endangered Languages*. *Language And Linguistics Compass*, 1(1-2), 115-132. doi: 10.1111/j.1749-818x.2007.00004.x**

**Rovenchak, A., & Glavy, J. (2011). *African writing systems of the modern age*. New Haven: Athinkra.**

**Shen, J., 2010. *Aesthetic Innovation in Indigenous Typefaces Designing a Lushootseed font*. Available at: <http://www.glimpsejournal.com>**

**Schillo, J. and Turin, M., 2020. *Applications and innovations in typeface design for North American Indigenous languages*.**

**Storozynsky, T., 2020. *How Typography Can Preserve Endangered Languages*. Extensis.com. Available at: <https://www.extensis.com/blog/how-typography-can-preserve-endangered-languages>**



**Vince, G., 2012. Can we save the world's dying languages?. [online] Bbc.com. Available at:**

***<https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20120531-can-we-save-our-dying-languages>***

**Zaraysky, S., 2020. Preserving endangered languages with Noto fonts. [online] Google. Available at: <https://blog.google/outreach-initiatives/accessibility/preserving-endangered-languages-noto-fonts/>**