

Nubians

Population: Est. 200,000 (Source Ethnologue)

Profile

Nubians live in the Upper Nile region. When the Condominium Agreement of 1899 fixed the boundary between Egypt and Sudan, Lower Nubians found themselves under direct Egyptian rule and politically separated from their kin to the south. This arbitrary frontier divides the Nobiin-speaking group more or less equally between Egypt and Sudan. Close ties of culture, language and family continue to unite the people north and south of the border, and until the evacuation of 1964 that accompanied the building of the Aswan High Dam there was continual visiting back and forth between them. Egyptian Nubia is part of the Governorate of Aswan which also includes a populous area whose inhabitants are not Nubian. As a result, Nubians have found themselves a minority within their native province.

Historical context

Although Egypt remained the stronger power for most of its dynastic period, it did not destroy its southern neighbour, Nubia; nor did Nubia, in spite of its adoption of Egyptian gods and ideas of kingship, completely succumb to its neighbour's ways. The Nubian city of Meroe was sited on the banks of the Nile about 200 kilometres north of present-day Khartoum, growing rich from control of trade on the Nile until the fourth century CE. Its wealth gave rise to elite patronage of art work such as pottery and shield rings, worn on the forehead, a practice that Nubians continue today. The incorporation of Egypt into the Byzantine Empire brought Christianity to the Nile region. Coptic Christianity spread to Nubia, where a Christian kingdom existed from the sixth to the fourteenth centuries. At the end of this period Nubia adopted Islam, 700 years later than the north of Egypt, and many of its large churches were converted into mosques.

Rural Nubians have been neglected and exploited for much of the twentieth century. From about 1910 until their final destruction in the 1960s, the villages of Egyptian Nubia were populated chiefly by women, children and older people; most able-bodied men were forced to migrate to find work. For the sake of increased agricultural production downstream, their land has been destroyed piecemeal by the building of successive dams at Aswan without any effort to gain their consent. Over a period of 70 years about 60 per cent of Egyptian Nubia territory has been destroyed or rendered unfit for habitation, and roughly half the surviving Nubian-speaking people have been obliged to find new homes. Some attempt has been made to compensate Nubians for the loss of their farms and date groves and create new livelihoods for them, but development south of Aswan has failed to keep pace with the rest of the country. For thousands of years 'Nubian' and 'slave' were virtually synonymous in the Egyptian mind; although this prejudice has lessened in the modern era, Nubians are still largely excluded from Egyptian national life. Nubians convened a 'First Nubian Congress' in October 2002, and petitioned the government for greater compensation for their lost land.

Current issues

Nubians remain bitter over the loss of their land to the dam projects without adequate compensation. While the dams were designed to serve Egypt's development needs, Nubians complain that the government continues to neglect their needs.