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The Puzzle in African History: Re-examining Pre-Colonial African History Via Nubia and the Nubians in the Making of Africa's Civilisation.

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ABSTRACT

The writing of African history has time and again been an intellectual and epistemological struggle against European narratives regarding the fate and representation of the continent's history in the world. The history of Africa's civilisation long has been written as exogenous brought by external influence. In fact, some scholars have argued that Africa had no history and civilisation before its encounter with the western world and any traces of civilisation were not indigenous but Caucasian. These narratives came in the Hamitic hypothesis thesis and they kept on changing in their historical developments. Therefore, African history was attributed to those who invaded and antagonised the continent. Western historiography was based on grounds that render Africa a victim rather than an architect and source of history. Even African historians who tend to write precolonial history focus on the near past i.e., the 16th-20th centuries which accounts ignore the developments that took place in the far past (Richard Reid, 2011). As such, Africa has been denied the agency to define her own history. However, on the other hand, nationalist historians have time and again considered the history of Africa to have been created without any influence from outside Africa. I contend to the contrary that much as Africans had agency in their own civilisation, there were contributions from the outside world. Therefore, I re-examine the history of Africa and its civilisation based on the history of Ancient Nubia. Egypt's Revival in Africa argues that Africa and Nubia in particular had a civilisation long before its encounter with the western world. I offer evidence from secondary literature to show the nature, character and dynamism of Nubia's civilisation explaining the internal material and non-material developments engineered by the political, social, economic and cultural organisation and developments that took place in ancient Nubia by the Nubians were very relevant in the shaping of Africa's history but such has often been denied if not stolen. As well

as projecting relations with her neighbours in terms of trade, cultural exchange, intermarriages, conquests & wars. I employ both descriptive and analytical approaches.

Keyword: African Historiography, Hamitic Hypothesis, Ancient Nubia Civilization, African Agency in History, Precolonial African History.

Introduction

The history of Africa's civilisation for long has been written as outward-looking brought by external influence. In fact, some scholars have argued that Africa had no history and civilisation before her encounter with the western world and any traces of civilisation were not indigenous but Caucasian (See Sanders, 1969). These narratives came in the name of the Hamitic hypothesis and they kept on changing in their historical developments i.e. From the biblical accounts of Noah's curse to Napoleon's archaeological findings in Egypt. Therefore, African history was attributed to those who invaded and antagonised the continent. Western historiography was based on grounds that render Africa a victim rather than an architect and source of history. Her connection and attachment to internationally recognised history is disappointingly related to external proxies. In fact, Lobban (2004) has argued that Nubia was placed under "intellectual darkness" (P.xvi).

This paper, therefore, re-examines the history of Africa and its civilisation based on the history of Ancient Nubia. Based on archaeological evidence from Nubia, O'Connor (1993) in *Ancient Nubia: Egypt's Revival in Africa* argues that Africa and Nubia, in particular, had a civilisation long before her encounter with the western world. The political, social, economic and cultural developments that took place in ancient Nubia by the Nubians were very relevant in the shaping of Africa's history but such has often been denied if not stolen. However, this paper still maintains that the civilisation of Nubia was not in isolation, it was equally due to her relations with her neighbours in terms of trade, cultural exchange, intermarriages and conquests or wars.

The paper is divided into four sections: the first section looks at the internal dynamics that shaped and manifest Nubian civilisation. It continues to the second section to look at Nubia's foreign relations and their implications for her civilisation. The third section unpacks the role of women in the civilisation project of Nubia. The fourth section deals with the question of method in writing history. The paper ends with a conclusion that re-echoes the key narratives raised in the paper.

A Civilisation from Within: The Internal Dynamics of Nubia's Civilisation.

Across time and space, Nubia had been called numerous names with various meanings. In the Bronze Age, Nubia was called *Nehasyu* and the nomads in the east of Lower and Upper Nubia were called *Medjayi*. The land of the Nubians, therefore, was called *Ta Nehasyu*. In the period that preceded 1550, Nubia was called *Kush* by the Egyptians and this is said to have applied to only Nubians in Upper Nubia. O'Conner (1993) tells us that the Greeks and Romans re-baptised Nubia with the name *Aethiopia* or Ethiopia which was applied to other parts of Africa also. Ethiopia's identification with Abyssinia is attributed to the connections that the country had with Nubia. I contend that from ancient times, Nubia had a very developed civilisation which was facilitated both internally, independently and creatively. Nubia's history and civilisation were strong culturally, politically, economically and socially. Starting with his depiction of the Nubian political system, O'Conner (1993) argues that Nubia had a centralised political system and not chiefdoms as some scholars allege. He notes that "Nubian political systems were strongly centralized, covered large territories, and were akin to states and kingdoms, rather than chiefdoms"¹. Their governing systems, O'Connor supposes, "covered territories in excess of 100,000 people". Put differently, he argues that Nubia had a civilisation and was at its advanced stage of social development throughout the largest part of the Bronze Age as much as in Napata and Meroitic times. This is well expressed in the following lines explicitly:

This book is about ancient Nubia, during its Bronze Age (ca. 3000-1000 B.C.) and Napatan- Meroitic period (ca. 1000 B.C.-A.D. 350). One point this book makes, with which some scholars would disagree, is that Nubia had a civilization that is, was in an advanced stage of social development throughout most of the Bronze Age, as much as in Napatan and Meroitic times. This does not mean that either Nubia or Egypt always displayed political unity and cultural uniformity; on the contrary, political fragmentation and cultural diversity extending over long periods occurred in both lands, yet each represents a civilization.

One can see that Nubia had a civilisation in her long historical development both social and economic. From the quote above, O'Conner narrates that despite some scholars arguing that Nubia in the Bronze Age was organised into small simple structured chiefdoms, O'Conner challenges such narratives by arguing that Nubia, for the most Bronze Age, had very strong yet centralised political systems. Shinnie brings to us the history of the kingdom of Meroe which speaks to O'Conner's argument that there were kingdoms that constituted a centralised state. For over 1000 years, Meroe had her own civilisation (Shinnie, 1967). He suggests that an 'African, urban, civilised and literate' state existed in Africa long and is deeply rooted in the African continent and African people. The civilisation of Meroe according to him is a 'civilisation of Africa based on African soil by the African population' (Shinnie, 1967 P.169).

¹ This book by O'Conner does not possess page numbers and so for this paper, where O'Conner is cited directly, no page numbers will be provided but the direct quote will be enclosed in quotation marks.

We can see that Shinnie tries to point to the agency of the African people in the process of their civilisation. O'Conner adds that Nubia had its own written records written in Egyptian and Meroitic languages. This statement works to challenge the Eurocentric argument that Africa has no history because it had no written records.

O'Conner rejects narratives that argue that Nubian civilisation especially in the Bronze Age period had Egyptian origins. Such stories he argues claim that the cultures of Napata and Meroitic kingdoms derive their cultures from Egypt. In response, he says that this is an exaggeration of the stability of the political and social Bronze Age Egypt. Therefore, to him, the Meroitic kingdom had a cultural blend of Nubian and Egyptian cultures but not a mixture of the two. In fact, he says that some schools of thought argue that the origin of Egyptian civilisation is Nubian and the people themselves are of Nubian origin. To him, Nubia had a diverse history which cannot be attributed to any outside influence but her own.

Just like O'Conner and Shinnie, other scholars like Larry (2013) have opined that much of the literature which had been written about Africa tends to have been a misrepresentation of the continent. Such literature for Larry carries a consciousness of the western world which only represents Africa as being savagery, backward with no capacity to generate civilisation and history and whatever was there was brought by people of foreign origins (see Larry, 2013). Consequently, Larry shows how Africa has been considered to have nothing to portray since it was behind the rest of the world's population which was civilised (Ibid.). This narrative was not limited to any part of Africa but the whole including Nubia.

For Larry, a critical study of the civilisation of the Nile Valley is required if one is to do justice when it comes to re-examining the history of Africa's civilisation. This implies that such a study should seek to go beyond just a narrow investigation of pyramids, gold, and great titles [he considers titles to have been exaggerated]. Given the fact that Nubians had a sedentary life long ago say over 10,000 years, one needs not to ignore that fact since it was at the centre of her civilisation. This can be studied along with her trading partnership with her neighbours both near and far (Larry, p.208).

The early writings about Nubia show that the place was home to agricultural and so food production. This is evidenced by the presence of grinding stones, and pottery which points to the possibility of food gathering and grinding hence food production. Larry writes:

It seems curious that Nubia is usually ignored when it comes to the world's earliest food production; this appears questionable because as early as 10,000 years ago, there is evidence that grindstones and pottery were being used; this suggests that grain was being processed in a way that is usually associated with Food Production. The intensive gathering is also a possibility, but since there is no definitive explanation

for how Agriculture began, one can only postulate this. Prehistoric Nubian archaeological sites can tell us 'Something', but what that continues to be interpretive (P.45)

What one can learn from the above quote is that since civilisation is brought about by human beings, food becomes a necessity to sustain their lives. The presence of food shows the possibility of growth since food production, he argues, was the "basis for Nubian and Egyptian growth" (p.208). In another word, one can only deduce that there was settled agriculture in the area and settled agriculture was only supported by a healthy and energetic population. So, such production could provide adequate quantities of food to support the population that took part in the construction and building of monuments and tombs, farming and fishing. This population was a Nubian population that provided for itself.

The settled food production however came after the area had witnessed a shift from hunting and collection. He states that:

Until about 12,000 BCE, these prehistoric sites evinced a subsistence pattern that is characterized by specialized hunting and collection, according to J.D. Clark's research. There is a shift to intensive hunting and collection during the Ballanan, Sebekian, and Upper Paleolithic Complex G. The incipient domestication of plants and animals commenced during the Qadan and El-Sikh, and by the Shamarkian and El-Kao, extensive farming was underway (P.46).

The above quote to my interpretation points to the fact that Nubia in the period prior to 12,000 BCE was a hunter-gatherer community which shifted during the Ballanan Sebekian and Upper Paleolithic Complex G period and the period that preceded—Qadan and El-Sikh, and by the Shamarkian and El-Kao—witnessed largescale farming. The basic implication of this is that the civilisation of Nubia was in stages i.e., from hunting and collection to crop farming and this could only be possible with shrewd leadership and hard work. He states that one cannot just rule out the fact that the area practiced sedentary agriculture by its limitedness at a certain period of time. Absence at one point does not point to absence forever, to Larry, it was only between 8000-7000 years ago that Nubia had scarcely settled farming but considering a shift to sedentarised habitation and pottery only works to show that agriculture was present though to a particular level (P.51). The skeletal remains that can be traced from the period 7500 BCE show that the domestication of plants and sedentarised agriculture contributed to boosting nutritional dietary levels of the population (P.59). Nubia had a very sophisticated civilisation which can be evidenced by the A-Group pottery. The A-Group graves were home to bones of domesticated sheep, goats, and cattle (P.51). The presence of domesticated animals points to the wealth of the area but also the value attached to animals as sources of food. Some of the animals which were consumed included cows, goats, sheep, and pigs

coupled with hunted birds, and fish shellfish hunted from the Nilotic environment (P.133). He explains this when he writes:

Nubia's settlement pattern was more 'cattle-based' than 'plant-based', in comparison to Anatolia and Mesopotamia around 7,000 years ago (P.57).

Further, he adds that:

...as far back as the Late Paleolithic, cattle had more than a 'practical' significance in Nubia, and this trend continued through later periods of social stratification, as 'the pastoral component became fundamental to the construction of social identity and religious beliefs. In this sense, cattle held a special place, not only because the Nubians had had a strong relationship with wild cattle since the Late Palaeolithic, but because, from a pastoral point of view, the cattle were far more precious than caprines. Changes in climate during the 511 millennium BCE had an impact on the movement of Nubian populations to the north... (P.59)

Therefore, we can see from the above quote that Nubia attached much more value to cattle than to crops at a certain point in time. The narrative that supports this is an environmentalist narrative where he argues that it was due to climate change reasons that the Nubians moved northwards. Nubia was a pastoral community that throughout the period of the late Paleolithic and the reared cattle were of great significance to the Nubian community. Larry shows in the above narrative that pastoralism enabled the construction of social identity and religious beliefs and so the place that cattle held was much bigger. Cattle was therefore not only a source of food but also carried cultural and religious values. This narrative shows that pastoralism was internal to the Nubian civilisation and was not brought by foreigners from elsewhere as some schools of thought contend. Just like other pastoral societies, Nubia developed "social complexity to attain, in some instances, a state-level society, and the kingdom of Kerma represents the ultimate result of the social stratification achieved by the Nubian pastoral society" (P.61). Pastoralism was fundamental in the process of state formation in Nubia. This process is believed to have started during the Holocene and developed during the early and middle Holocene (Ibid.).

The Nubian people in the process of founding their civilisation did not only end with crop farming but also engaged in fish farming. Larry shows that fishing provided the diet and variety of foodstuff which was necessary for the population during that period. This was evidenced by the presence of "harpoon fragments in association with fish bones were found in situ at Tagra with Pila werni" (P.47, Citing Adamson D. A. 1982). In other lines, he writes that there were shellfish which could be found in the

Nilotic environment (P.133). The presence of fish provided adequate nutrition to the population that participated in ensuring that the process of civilisation was complete.

The materials which were used for building and construction in Nubia are said to have been of Nubian origin, mostly from within Nubia. Jane Roy (2011), in her book *The Politics of Trade Egypt and Lower Nubia in the 4th Millennium BC*, tries to re-examine the material evidence from archaeological campaigns and use anthropological and economic theories to better articulate the exchange patterns of Egypt and Lower Nubia and through this, she tries to show how materials from Nubia. However, notwithstanding the Nubian material source, she acknowledges some materials from Egypt which were used during the Nubian civilisation. She writes that:

The dom palm which is native to Nubia is found along the desert margins and its trunk serves as a source of timber for building houses, particularly furnishing the roofs...Acacia trees are numerous in Nubia, valuable for boat building, housing, grazing for goats and possibly for charcoal. The official Weni even mentions acacia for building barges, some of which came from Wawat. Young shoots of halfa grass are also an important source of grazing for domestic animals. In the deserts rainfall alone allows for the presence of vegetation and this gradually increases as one travels from north to south although the sandstone plateau in Lower Nubia has no vegetation except in times of sporadic, short-lived rainfall (P.48).

From the above quote, we can see that materials such as timber were used for building like in furnishing the rooftops of houses, acacia trees also used in building, charcoal, grazing goats, barges building, halfa grass for grazing animals were from Nubia. This shows the level of civilisation that Nubia had right from ancient times due to its potential to construct houses, grow grasses for feeding animals, and burn charcoal. Equally important is the fact that there was an improvement in the use of fuel from wood to charcoal. All this was made possible by the Nubians themselves.

Jane Roy has further shown that Nubia's civilisation was supported by a range of resources ranging from the fertile productive soils that supported agriculture to precious minerals like gold. These were not only needed in Nubia but also outside Nubia. She notes in a detailed paragraph that:

...while Lower Nubia was never able to sustain agriculture on the same scale as Egypt, it was a region that was able to provide (or provide access to) other resources. Nubia is most often associated with gold but it has been suggested that in fact, copper was the material which first created an interest in the area...The Wadi Allaqi is a convenient gateway to many of the natural resources available in the Eastern and Nubian Deserts such as cornelian, steatite, quartz and possibly amethyst and it seems no coincidence

that there is a concentration of A-Group remains in this region....Diorite and granite were exploited from the region west of Toshka, and sandstone was also quarried from various parts of Nubia. Amethyst mines are known from Gebel el-Asr 65km northwest of Abu Simbe...although to date, most evidence for amethyst exploitation in Nubia dates from the Middle Kingdom onwards. Amethyst was certainly exploited in Predynastic times but the only known source dating to at least the 1st Dynasty is from Wadi Abu Had which is in the Eastern Desert adjoining Middle Egypt. Gebel el-Asr also yielded cornelian near the gneiss quarries although it is not clear if these were exploited in ancient times (P.48-50)

From the above quote, one can easily trace how rich Nubia was. It's clear that as early as the 1st dynasty and 4th millennium BC, Nubia was able to mine gold and copper, later on, other resources gained demand like quartz, cornelian, steatite, granite, and amethyst in the middle kingdom but also in the predynastic period. I can state from the above that the labour that was used to mine and exploit those resources must have been Nubian labour perhaps with the support of others not of Nubian descent. Also, one can argue that since most of these resources had been demanded from outside Nubia, Nubian civilisation was exported to the outside. The narrative in the quote takes into consideration the question of the time from which these mining activities were made and none of the stated periods seems to have been during the time of foreign western powers. Therefore, Nubia can be said to have been an architect of its own civilisation with the support of connections with its neighbours.

Nubia in her early stages of civilisation developed the art of making perfumes using incense burners. When we talk of incense burners, it means containers which were used to burn perfumes or gum which produces fragrance (Roy, P.213). Roy points out that vessels of Syro-Palestinian origin have been found in Lower Nubia but only at cemetery L Qustul. The fact that evidence suggests that the Levant was the nearest source to the vessels which came from the settlement, fragrant resins does not serve to approve that it had foreign origins. Roy shows that incense burners were a Nubian invention. This is because "chronological and geographical distances between the lower Nubian and Maadian incense burners are problematic as are the very different stylistic forms these vessels take" (P.213). He adds that some of the bowls contained resinous vegetable fat which was used as incense burners.

O'Conner as if re-echoing what other scholars have said states that the kingdom of Nubia survived on agriculture which was both crop cultivation and pastoralism. During the Bronze Age, there was a continuous ribbon of agricultural villages along the Nubian Nile which was later on broken into the Lower and Upper Nubia and the Upper and southern Nubia. However, these stretches, later on, became dry with harsh conditions thus sparse populations. The west and southern Nubia are said to have been more covered by nomadic pastoralists who seasonally occupied larger parts moving from one place to

another. The Nubian state is said to have been Neolithic in which some domestic crops were grown and animals domesticated. Even Shinnie alludes to the claim by arguing that crop cultivation and animal rearing were predominantly the main activities carried out, particularly in Meroe but in Nubia as a whole (P.158). The A-Group represents a group of Nubians who conducted sedentarised agriculture and had a distinct culture called the pre-Kerma culture of Upper Nubia. In the period that preceded the Bronze Age, nomadic herders occupied east and west of southern and Upper Nubia and had a material culture called the Gash group which lasted until 1500 BC.

The pre-Kerma of Upper Nubia is said to have transformed into the Kerma Group in 2400-1500 BC. Further still, C-Group resettled in Lower Nubia until 1700/1500 BC. In about 2000 BC Egypt conquered Lower Nubia and later raided Upper Nubia. However, Upper Nubia remained independent. The Gash-Group witnessed significant developments i.e., permanent settlements. Later Egypt again conquered Upper and Lower Nubia in an attempt to establish an empire until 1000 BC. Egypt with time weakened internally and abandoned Nubia as Nubia grew stronger and expanded in size. The period that preceded 900 BC saw strong rulers of Nubia who even conquered Egypt. However, Nubia later lost Egypt but the kingdom remained independent and strong with its capital in Napata, later transferred to Meroe and further southwards (see also Shinnie 1967, P.31). O'Conner doesn't provide reasons for the transfer of the Nubian/Kush capital from Napata to Meroe yet this is a very significant development in the history of Nubia. What I can see from the above narratives is that colonialism or conquest started as early as the premodern period and this may be symbolic of colonialism if we are to treat the Egyptian conquest of Nubia and Nubian conquest of Egypt as colonial encounters. What perhaps may differ is the name of the conquests. Should we say that these were just occupations and not colonial encounters? What I can argue here is that we cannot read history narrowly by limiting it to western colonial encounters but more broadly if we are to re-examine African history.

In a similar tone, Shinnie highlights some of the reasons that led to the transfer of the capital of Nubia and among others they include; the political and military events including the sack of Napata (p.33). Similarly, there were economic and environmental reasons i.e., the annual rains, the broad valleys of Butana, Wadi Awetieb, and Wadi Hawad and these provided abundant crops and green pastures for animals which aided urban civilisation. Shinnie argues that Napata had less if any of these at the time the capital was transferred and so could not support the needs of the population. These reasons were further coupled with the presence of iron ore and timber which were used for smelting. Furthermore, Meroe could ease trade due to easy navigation on the river Nile from the red sea and likewise easy access to the red sea and other alternative routes from the Nile (P.33-34). Boozer A. Lucille (2017) in an introduction to his book *A Historiography of Archaeological Research at Meroe*, Sudan has elaborated that Meroe is

considered to have been one of the most significant administrative, religious and artistic centres of the kingdom of Kush in its ancient times during the periods ranging from 7th century BC and the 4th century AD (P.1). Boozer pens down lines on the account of the Nubian state and kingship:

On the basis of the stelae, scholars argued that Meroe was a ‘debased echo’ of Egyptian civilisation and fuelled ethnic biases already found in Lepsius’s work...Despite these inherently adverse views on Meroitic culture, these stelae provided insights into the nature of kingship and the division between Napatan and Meroitic phases (P.73-75).

Lobban (2004) shows Meroe as a vivacious state but this was influenced by the Hellenistic, Egyptian and Roman ideas. This does not mean that it was those states that brought about the development of the state. Meroe for most of the time is said to have developed its own cultural traits and “was a gateway and marketplace for ideas, writing, resources, and technologies into and from Africa” (Lobban, P.Viii). what we can see is that Meroe by that time was able to write and possessed developed technologies which show her level of civilisation. Costanza has argued that by the time the Nubian state and centre of culture moved from Napata to Meroe, the Nubians had the potential to “express themselves in a local language Meroitic” (P.50). However, this language is said to have been influenced by the knowledge they possessed regarding alphabetical writings. Costanza provides some great lines on language which are worth reproducing here:

The appearance of the Meroitic language in written form made it possible, for the first time for locals, to express themselves in their own language. Unfortunately, so far, the interpretation of this language still puzzles scholars...The Old Nubian language used to write the texts of Christian Nubia from as early as the eighth century A.D is considered to be the direct ancestor of the Nile-Nubian language group. It belongs to the Nilo-Saharan group, as do most of the indigenous Sudanese African languages, and it is the only indigenous African language for which development can be traced over a millennium.⁹⁹ There were never any connections between Old Nubian and other Hamitic languages, or with ancient Egyptian and Coptic. Or, if there were any at all they are restricted only (P.23, 38, 45)

Therefore, we can see from the above lines that Costanza tries to challenge the western historians who argue that Africa had no written text, no language, and so no history. To me, I pick from the quote that having written some texts in the indigenous language, the Nubian civilisation has left behind some legacy of written material which can provide insights into the Nubian ideas, policies and innovations from records worth considering their own and not foreign.

Larry provides us with evidence to show that Nubia in the precolonial period had the potential to invent and innovate its own basic technology which supported daily life activities. Among others, he points to the tools and implements that show a high level of material culture in the region. This can only be got if one engages with archaeological material. Some of the material objects include pottery. He elaborates this with an example of the axe as one aspect of material culture when he writes citing Stuart Tyson Smith:

Two ground stone axes are the only tools that fit distinctively into a Nubian cultural framework. Each was made of green granular serpentine, one light and the other dark, a favoured material of Nubian celts. Three other stone axes were used by a T-shaped design derived from Egyptian metal forms. This style of stone axe occurs in both Egypt and Nubia and so is probably not culturally diagnostic. Nubian ground stone axes like the two from Askut were a common funerary offering, particularly earlier in Nubian history, but are also found in periods contemporary to the occupation of Askut. They are often highly finished and without wear, serving as an important cultural marker for Nubians, especially Kermans (P.146-148).

The above quote shows the level of sophisticated technology that Nubia had in the early periods like the Kerma. Ground stone axes do not only point to the fact that Nubia had the potential to invent and innovate her own implements but also the strong material culture it exhibits. This potential to invent and innovate shows that it was the Nubians themselves that engineered their civilisation and not anyone else and such deserves a historical appreciation. Jane Roy invites us to think about the possibility to innovate by just borrowing ideas and knowledge and not just goods. She writes that we should not consider everything with a similar resemblance to be of foreign origin in its current sense and shape. One item being identical to another manufactured from somewhere else is no guarantee that it has origins from there. He pens down the following lines to elaborate:

It should be noted that simply because an artefact, such as a ceramic vessel, resembles one found or known to be manufactured elsewhere it does not necessarily follow that it originated elsewhere. For instance, there is evidence to suggest that pottery found in Kerma and previously believed to be Egyptian imports based on stylistic analysis alone were in fact locally produced copies of Egyptian wares. This demonstrates that trade and exchange can be in ideas and information as well as material goods (P.46).

One can get to learn two things from the above lines; the first is that not all materials which look identical to others from a different area, in fact, have origins from there so there is a possibility that Nubian pottery did not have Egyptian origins but Nubian. Secondly, borrowing ideas and knowledge on how to manufacture does not mean that the original owner of the idea manufactured the product. Resultantly, we can share ideas and knowledge but I can manufacture my own product. These lessons try to deconstruct

arguments that attribute Nubian civilisation to Egyptian origins due to the resemblance of some materials to those of Egypt. This points to the idea that Nubia and the Nubians facilitated their own development and civilisation with borrowed knowledge from Egypt and other places.

However, much as the civilisation of Nubia can be seen to have come from the initiatives of the Nubians themselves, some schools of thought have gone beyond this indigeneity or nativist perspective by engaging archaeological evidence to show how this civilisation in context was influenced by Nubia's interaction with her neighbours and partners which I unpack in the next section.

With the Outside but not from the Outside: Nubia's Civilisation and its Interaction with Other Societies.

The civilisation of Nubia cannot be studied in isolation, it was equally facilitated by her encounter with other parts of the world. O'Conner's narrative shows that Nubian civilisation wasn't in isolation and not from a single source. It was due to relations with other parts of the world in what he calls a blend but not a mix. To understand this fact, one needs to understand the involvement of Nubia in trade with her neighbours both near and far. Nubia's civilisation can be attributed to the empire being comprised of traders. It is clear from the literature that Nubia was a centre of trade and commerce along the Nile Valley. Nubia was not only a centre of trade but equally was a huge mining area for gold and the production of hard rock and copper. Larry's accounts indicate that Nubia and Egypt were dependent on each other as far as their civilisation is concerned. In their encounter both imperial and consent, the two were interlinked by either strategy of "key trade routes and sources of sumptuary goods including ebony, ivory, incense, gold from Nubia" (P.123). The statement "gold from Nubia" points to the fact that Nubia used to supply gold which had to find its routes somewhere else but its destination is not very clear in this particular statement. The Wadi el-Allaqi (or Wadi Allaki) and to the south in the Nubian desert comprised the major gold deposits. Similarly, Nubia is said to have had abundant gold, especially near Buhen and to the east of Wadi el-Allaqi and Wadi Gabgaba. Not only gold was a precious resource but also ivory from elephants. It is said that these either had to be bought or stolen by the Egyptians (P.82). This shows that Nubia had enough wealth found in gold deposits and ivory that it could sell to Egypt and other places. These resources weren't foreign but Nubian and the labourer that was used in the mining of this gold could have been Nubians. From the above, one can say that the Nubian region and people were responsible for much of the economic stability as a major centre of trade and the continuing production of precious metals and buildings which can be attributed to her maintenance of trade.

Jane Roy tries to show that much as Nubia invented numerous material products internally, there are others that it had less if not no potential to produce by itself. This means that she had to import them from somewhere else for use at home. Let's take an example of stone vessels and copper as she writes:

Stone vessels are also here considered Egyptian imports; indeed, working in stone generally is seen as a particularly Egyptian skill. Stone vessels are not common in A-Group contexts and there is no evidence to suggest that the Lower Nubians themselves were working stone into vessels and access to the raw materials appears to have been limited. Copper objects have traditionally been viewed as Egyptian in origin. While all copper objects have been included in this study as Egyptian this will be further discussed, both in this chapter and in chapter five. Copper objects are limited which is probably partly due to plundering. However, it is particularly worked copper objects such as chisels and axe-heads that should be viewed as imports as there is no evidence that Lower Nubians were working copper into such objects. Copper exploitation in fact is linked rather with northern sites such as Maadi in Lower Egypt and, as shall be discussed, the more 'sophisticated' copper objects have parallels in the Levant as well as Egypt.

From the quote above, one would argue that it is clear that Nubia could have imported stone vessels from Egypt alongside copper objects. Some objects like axe-heads and chisels are said to have had Egyptian origins. This implies that Egypt and other places that exported such goods to Nubia contributed to its civilisation. This does not seem to suggest that it is those powers that brought the civilisation, I opine instead that they contributed to the civilisation process of Nubia.

Did Nubia have texts or written records? Jane Roy suggests that as far as the Naqada period, A-Group culture lacked the luxury of texts like the autobiography of Harkhuf or tomb decoration like the kingdom tomb of Rekhmire. The writing about Nubian civilisation during the period was based on the material remaining and Harkhuf's journey to Yam (P.245). He cites an example of the ebony label which contained the name of King Aha to describe the commodities which were being imported from Nubia by the Egyptians. The namings on the commodities like gold, ebony and semi-precious stones work to show that Egypt used Nubia as a source of raw materials despite the difficulties in identifying the exact source of the raw materials given the limited scientific analysis (P.246-147). However, he gives a clear picture of the commodities that Egypt exchanged with the south of Nubia and outlines perishable goods like beer, wine, oil or cheese and some bulk items (*ibid.*). This shows that Egypt contributed to the civilisation of Nubia and so her history is that of interaction and exchange.

Nubia was not only a trading partner with other societies and kingdoms but also acted as a catalyst for trade between different places. It provided a favourable route from which goods could move from one place to another. Roy writes that much as Egypt was well known for supplying good quality flint in large

quantities, “the appearance of obsidian as flakes, blades and fishtail knives, as well as beads, pendants and vessels is more in keeping with prestige objects and raw materials, the supply of which may have been facilitated by the A-Group in the south” (P.247).

Egypt depended on Nubians for their military and domestic demands like mercenaries. Tyson Stuart (2003) shows that those Nubian mercenaries who lived in Egypt in times of the first intermediate period have their names labelled on the “Egyptian funerary stelae in Egyptian dress with their Egyptian wives, but with Nubian physiognomy” (P.23). also, Egypt depended on Nubian women for their marital demands and some of these women are said to have had a huge influence (P.28). Lobban has stated that the rulers of Egypt demanded Nubians, their produce, trade items, and mercenary conscript soldiers and these can be seen in the “middle kingdom tomb models and gold from the region” (P.102)

The Broad Gender Bases in Human Civilization. Mothers, Workers and Queens: Women’s contribution to the civilisation of Nubia.

One cannot think of writing the history of Nubian civilisation without talking about the role of women in the process. Nubian women both within Nubia and outside Nubia played a very significant role, especially in the process of state formation. The history of Nubian civilisation has witnessed a number of many ruling queens which may not sound very exceptional but the way they were being portrayed in Nubia itself. If we take a closer look at the literature on the history of Nubia, it becomes apparent that women played an important role (O’Conner, 1993; Török, 2009).

Larry provides us with an illustration of Amenemhet Pharaoh of Egypt who was born to a Nubian mother Nefret who is believed to have been from Elephantine. Citing the works of Margaret R. Bunson, Larry states that “The prophecy of Nefer-rohu, also called Neferti, describes Amenemhet I as the son of a woman of Nubia', (or of the Elephantine area in modern Aswan)” (P.128). As a mother, Neferti gave birth to a would-be pharaoh of a different place. In Nubia, the throne was shared by both men and women and this makes the role of women to be very relevant in the history of Nubian civilisation. A case in point was the Kushite throne which was shared by King Natakamani and Queen Amanitore indicated by her supposed regalia and the activities she was involved in like the crowning ceremony (Larry, P.186). This account is coupled with that of Queens Shanadakhete and Amanishakheto who are said to have independently ruled without the support of any man and this is said to be supported by iconographic inscriptions of their time (ibid.). Equally though, he suggests that women and men made interchangeable leadership with power oscillating between both sexes (P.204). Much as agriculture which used technology was attributed to both animal and human power, Larry states that much of the contribution to such was offered by women in agricultural societies. This was aimed at producing abundant quantities. The system

that ensured the success of such production was hierarchical inherently (P.84). László Török (2009) highlights some of the many important queens that ruled Nubia either independently or with their husbands including (Queen) Kadimalo, Amanirenas, Candace, Shanakadakheto, Natakamani and Amanitore.

Various interpretations have been given about queen kadimalo i.e. Some say that she was the wife of “Siamun (c. 978–959BC) of the Twenty-First Dynasty and that her Semna text is the document of an Egyptian incursion into Lower Nubia” (Török, P.291). He adds that others have considered her to have been the wife to “one of the Upper Nubian kings with “Neo-Tameside” titularies” or “wife of one of the Kurru rulers”. But Török shows that there is a very huge possibility that she may have ruled independently in her own right (P.294). Irrespective of the nature of rule she embraced, all we can get from the narrative is that Nubia had very strong female rulers like Kadimalo. Women were not just rulers who sat and watched things go wrong. Török brings us an account of Queen Amanirenas whose generals commanded a Meroitic army that fought the battle with the Romans (P.424). He writes that “In early 22BC Meroitic forces appeared new in Lower Nubia under the command of Amanirenas, queen of Meroe”. Her army trooped with thousands of men against the garrison [Qasr Ibrim] (P.441). We can see that women were great leaders who commanded armies that could fight for the stability of the kingdom and to conquer other places.

The readings of O’Conner and Shinnie have a very strong contestation on the ruler-ship by Queens. The debate is on whether Queen Candace was a Queen of Nubia or was just a title of Queens of Nubia and so Meroe kingdom. O’Conner argues that Queen Candace was a Queen of Nubia. However, Shinnie argues that Candace was just a title for the queens of the Meroe kingdom. He highlights some of the queens with such a title i.e., Amanishakhelet, Amanitare who ruled together with her husband Amanirenas etc. Lobban seems to be in agreement with Shinnie on Candace being the title of queen. He states that Candace is the original form of a Meroitic title which was “generically applied to regnant queens and perhaps others not regnant” (P.97). The origin of the title of Lobban reflects a meaning that can be interpreted to mean “royal woman”.

Despite such contestation, the fact remains that Nubia had female rulers who were very strong, respected and feared. It is believed by Shinnie that, the period of Queen Amanishakhelet and her successors—Netekamani and Amanitare husband and wife—marked a period of great prosperity, evidenced by their building activities (P.50). Therefore, Shinnie points out the important role that the Queens played in Nubia both as independent rulers and also as contributors under the reigns of their husbands. The system of ruler-ship in Meroe was matrilineal and there were succession rights to the throne but also the

transmission of property (P.153). This system is said to have prevailed in Meroe even during the Christian period under the Christian state of Nubia (ibid). We can see from the above that women had powers which appeared to be very great. This is because, with such positions of power, they could ably make very pertinent bargains for their kingdoms even in matters regarding weapons, trade, and policy.

One can also get a clear picture of women in the civilisation of Nubia from the works of Jane Roy. She points to the social hierarchy that was found in the communities claiming that these were advanced as they constituted both men, women and children (P.35). He bases on the evidence from the cemeteries of Kadero to make such an argument. In her narrative, not only men were the elites in the community but also women and children alike. These could also inherit status within and among social groups (Roy, P.35). This shows that women were not discriminated against in Nubia and their contribution to Nubian civilisation was recognised and appreciated. A society in which there is intellectual pluralism and sharing like Nubian elites exhibits a high level of civilisation. Roy further shows that women and children owned material goods like pottery, and old, jewellery. She writes:

There would appear to be a social/gender distinction in objects left for the deceased and this seems to translate even into the objects which have their origin in Egypt. Women and children donated pottery and probably take with them the personal adornments they owned in life. The women also receive grinders and mortars and sometimes palettes. Men generally do receive palettes but almost never jewellery. Ostrich feather fans clearly indicate some position within the community as they are not rare but also not widespread and usually reserved for adult male burials. Child burials not uncommonly contain plates/discs of shell, often with a hole in the centre. The cemetery was used for some time but is relatively small and indicates that only elites were buried here (O'Connor 1993:16). Three of the graves (27, 34 and 37) were particularly large and all contained female burials. The grave contained a necklace of gold beads (P.181-182)

From the above quote, we can see that women had the luxury of owning property which they could use to contribute to the civilisation process with such decisions taken independent of their men and fathers.

The Nubian culture was exhibited in arts and crafts which were very essential components of her material cultural folklore. This shows partly Nubian history and beliefs (Costanza, P.111). Costanza citing the works of Abdel Wareth Abdel Meguid, 2005 states that:

From the markings on small, pottery female figurines, we know that some of the C Group women elaborately decorated their bodies with tattoos and patterns of scars...Tattoos and scars may indicate

social status or signify rites of passage. The arrangements of the scars vary from one group to another and may also serve as an identifying mark of one's tribal origin or affiliation (Ibid., P.272).

From the above quote, we can see that tattooing is as old as Nubian history and civilisation and an invention that was valued for it could show social status, rites of passage, and tribal identity.

For the most part, Nubian society was a matrilineal one with succession rights originating from the mother's side. Costanza states that there was a correlation between female sovereignty and the principles of female descent coupled with the importance of matrilineal succession in the Nubian and Ethiopian dynasties (P.53). There was a disproportionate number of women to men, which led to the continuation of the matrilineal society in which relations were strongest on the side of the mother as some families went so far as to have the son take on the name of his mother (Ibid.). He quotes a huge paragraph from the works of Lobban 2004, which is worth reproducing here:

The Nubian case is an excellent example of this type of matrilineal succession, as the right of kingship passed from the king's sister (sometimes also called the 'Great Wife') to her son. The exalted role of queen-mother occupied the semi-divine status of great progenitress and legitimizer of the king or queen. The religiously significant role of 'God's Wife of Amun' with a succession of this role from aunt to niece may also have provided sacred legitimacy to the regency and reinforced a basic matrilineal pattern... (P.53)

Similarly, from the quote, it's clear that women held a very paramount status and were valued in the community. They were not only mothers to would-be rulers but also held divine positions and respect. Unlike in other places where society is purely patrilineal and the ruler has to come from the father's side, the Nubian case was an exception. This does not seem to suggest that there were no patrilineal societies in Nubia but emphasises the uniqueness of the matrilineal experience in Nubian history. Pointing to God Amun's wife, we can see that women were sacred. László Török (2009) in his work *Between Two Worlds: The Frontier Region between Ancient Nubia and Egypt 3700 BC-AD 500* shows a similar experience:

The epithets given to Amun in Taharqo's inscriptions clearly indicate the conceptual setting of the legend in the Third Intermediate Period Theology of Will and, more closely, in Theban concepts associated with the legitimating power of the God's Wife of Amun. The "commitment to Amun" of a female member of the royal family may be understood in the sense of the concept of the New Kingdom and Third Intermediate Period God's Wife as a legitimating force and a mediator between the god and the king. The queen as priestess of Amun and of the royal cult played an essential role in the renewal and maintenance

of royal power in both Egypt and Kush. Yet the most important feature of Alara's "giving" his sister to Amun of Kawa, which was established in the course of an oracular procedure, is that he did so in order to secure the kingship of her descendants in this, and not any other way (P.298)

From the above lines, we can see that women played a mediating role between the king and god. Secondly, women were significant in their priestly role in the birth of the successor to the throne which was essential to the maintenance and rejuvenation of royal power. There was a maternal passing of divine right where Nubian queens are often portrayed at the event of the divine birth. Besides women had roles beyond those and Lobban tries to show that some were military while others were general especially for queens as he notes:

Amanikhatashani, Queen (62–85 CE). This Meroitic queen is known for her Bejrawiya north pyramid 18. An interesting feature is that she was buried with as many as three wooden bows, suggesting her military and regnal role (P.22)

Women's important roles can be seen in an effort to legitimise their men and society shown in the social status of Nubian women which is high. This is evidenced by the evidence from matriarchy in A-Group (q.v.) in which we can see the majority of precious goods in graves being attributed to women (Lobban, p.248). "For Nubia, especially in the Meroitic period, at least eight regnant queens—including Amanikhatashan, Amanirenas, Amanishakete, Amanitore, Shanadakate, and three other anonymous queens—are buried in Bejrawiya pyramids 4, 25, and 26 (Ibid.). If we take a closer look at some of the precious mineral resources like gold, we can't afford to ignore the relevance of women in society as such metals bore names of queens which signified their importance and richness. Costanza points to this narrative by arguing that copper situla bore the name of Queen Maletarata (P.152).

Women were not only consulted during making plans that could be used to govern society but equally make enormous contributions towards their implementation. In the words of Tyson Stuart, Nubian and Egyptian women implemented plans both large and small scale, forged new communities and created their own trajectories of cultural contact and this did nothing more than determine the nature and pace of interaction between the two powers (P.5).

There is a debate that Nubian women in Egypt used their pottery in private spaces compared to those of Egypt that used theirs in public space. This has been interpreted to mean that the former was "conservative" in their social practice for the fact that they practice a private inner sphere as those in the public only show a sense of assimilation and adaptation to the surrounding social situation. Contrary to those interpretations, Stuart Tyson offers a different understanding by arguing that those women do not

use their pottery in the private space because they are conservative but because he views the private sphere as an active context for interaction “with household as a zone of ethnic negotiation” (P.205). He elaborates this when he states that “by maintaining and extending Nubian foodways, Nubian women created a counterpoint against discrimination and a loss of worth by referring to their own culture and identity” (Ibid.). This for his acts as a recipe for ensuring that the Nubian women form ties within society but also sustain networks with people back home. This debate does not only serve to show that women of Nubian origin were only confined to the private space, but it is also clear that they brought their voices out to the public space as well by clearly asserting their Nubian identity by sticking to their Nubian burial “style that stood in marked contrast to Siamun’s dramatic projection of an Egyptian identity through his monumental pyramid tomb, reflecting the important role that individuals play in the negotiation of ethnic identities” (P.206). By maintaining and continuously using Nubian pottery, jewellery, Cuisine and figurines at Askut, women of Nubian origin tried to save their Nubian identity in and outside their households. This to me shows that such women played a significant role in upholding and promoting Nubian culture, ethnicity and identity even in places outside Nubia which is a great contribution to its civilisation. It has been suggested by Tyson Stuart that Egyptian men married Nubian women, who maintained certain Nubian practices such as methods of food preparation.

What I can argue with regard to women is that women and, in this case, girls were not always servants of their men and fathers, some held very honourable positions as Queens—some of whom ruled independently while others were together with their husbands. This implies that they could make decisions on matters that affect society without being influenced and despised for instance Queen Amanishakhelet and her successors—Netekamani and Amanitare husband and wife. Those who were married had the leeway to advise their husbands on matters of governance and policy whom they listened to and their advice taken. This to me serves to negate all scholarly work that may claim that women were always discriminated against and so servants of their husbands with very low status. however, I don’t claim that discrimination never existed completely, but I tried to show that it was not always the case in Nubia.

Conclusion

As I conclude, I have opined that much as Nubia and the Nubians were at the centre of Nubia’s civilisation, this civilisation was also a result of her interaction with other people and societies and not in the veins of isolation from the outside world. This challenges the nativist argument that claims that African civilisation was entirely African and migration-centric narratives that attribute African history to foreigners. I have illustrated the gender perspective in form of the role that women played in the

civilisation of Nubia as mothers, queens, warriors, workers, agents and ambassadors of Nubian civilisation outside Nubia. From the evidence provided, what is clear is that Nubia had a civilisation which has been held since time immemorial. The political, social, economic and cultural developments that took place in ancient Nubia by the Nubians were very relevant not only in the shaping of Nubia's history in particular but also in Africa's history in general. The case of Nubia's history of civilisation is evidence enough to make an argument that Africa has a history whose roots cannot be attributed to foreign influence per se despite interaction with the outside has been instrumental in constructing it.

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