

The Intangible Heritage of the Nubian Nile with a Tribute to the Late Dr. Abdelhalim Sabbar (MBChB)

When the Soviet Union provided finance and technical aid for the High Dam near Aswan, a young man in Nubia wrote a letter of protest to Chairman Nikita Khrushchev. The Nubian homeland was about to be flooded. The protest received a reply typed in red letters from the Kremlin. The young man was offered a scholarship to continue his studies in the Soviet Union. He is Dr. Eltigani Mursi, who is now Financial Secretary of the Sudanese Nubian Association - UK.¹

Egyptian and Sudanese Nubia were destined to be flooded. In 1960 UNESCO issued an appeal to save the ancient monuments. The response was positive. The great temples of Abu Simbel were moved to a nearby hill above the area to be flooded. Many other features of the tangible heritage were saved.

However, the intangible heritage of Nubia has suffered severely. Residents were resettled far away from their ancestral homes by the river Nile. Links with religious sites, familiar toponymy and the historic environment were broken. Nubian songs, poems and oral traditions were usually expressed in the Nubian languages. Not taught in the state-sponsored educational system, the

¹ [THE SUDANESE NUBIAN ASSOCIATION - UK :: OpenCharities](https://opencharities.org/charities/1115984)
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Nubian languages were not only threatened, but seriously endangered.

In order to face this serious challenge a particular type of scholar is ideal. He/she is not only the brilliant scholar who has mastered the techniques of research in Western universities. He/she should also be a living encyclopaedia of the local languages and their culture.

On the 1st of May 2017 the world lost such a scholar. It was Dr. Abdelhalim Sabbar who died in Lowton near Manchester of a heart attack with complications from diabetes.

Possibly no one else had such a breadth of knowledge of the Nobíin Nubian language and culture. This was enriched by an understanding of the mediaeval Nubian language and a precise knowledge of the traditional environment of the river Nile. A qualified medical doctor, he produced thought-provoking articles for the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names (Workshop on Exonyms).² He was devoted to teaching the Nubian language and to its revitalization.

Those of us who knew him well should have done much more to support him as a team to achieve his ambitious goals. In the words of Cicero,

² Sabbar 2012. Numbers as geographical names in Nubia: Endonyms or exonyms? In Paul Woodman (ed.) 2012. *The Great Toponymic Divide. Reflections on the definitions and usage of endonyms and exonyms*. Warsaw/Warszawa: Head Office of Geodesy and Cartography, pp. 105-110

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‘Nos, Nos, Dico Aperte, Consules Desumus.’³

The present study will present the case for traditional scholars with insights into their own intangible culture. They should be fully supported in conducting major field research, in analysing results and in implementing plans of action. This is particularly important when the goal is not simply documentation, but the revitalization of a language.

³ ‘We, I say it openly, we the consuls have been deficient.’ Oratio in L. Catilinam Prima [3].