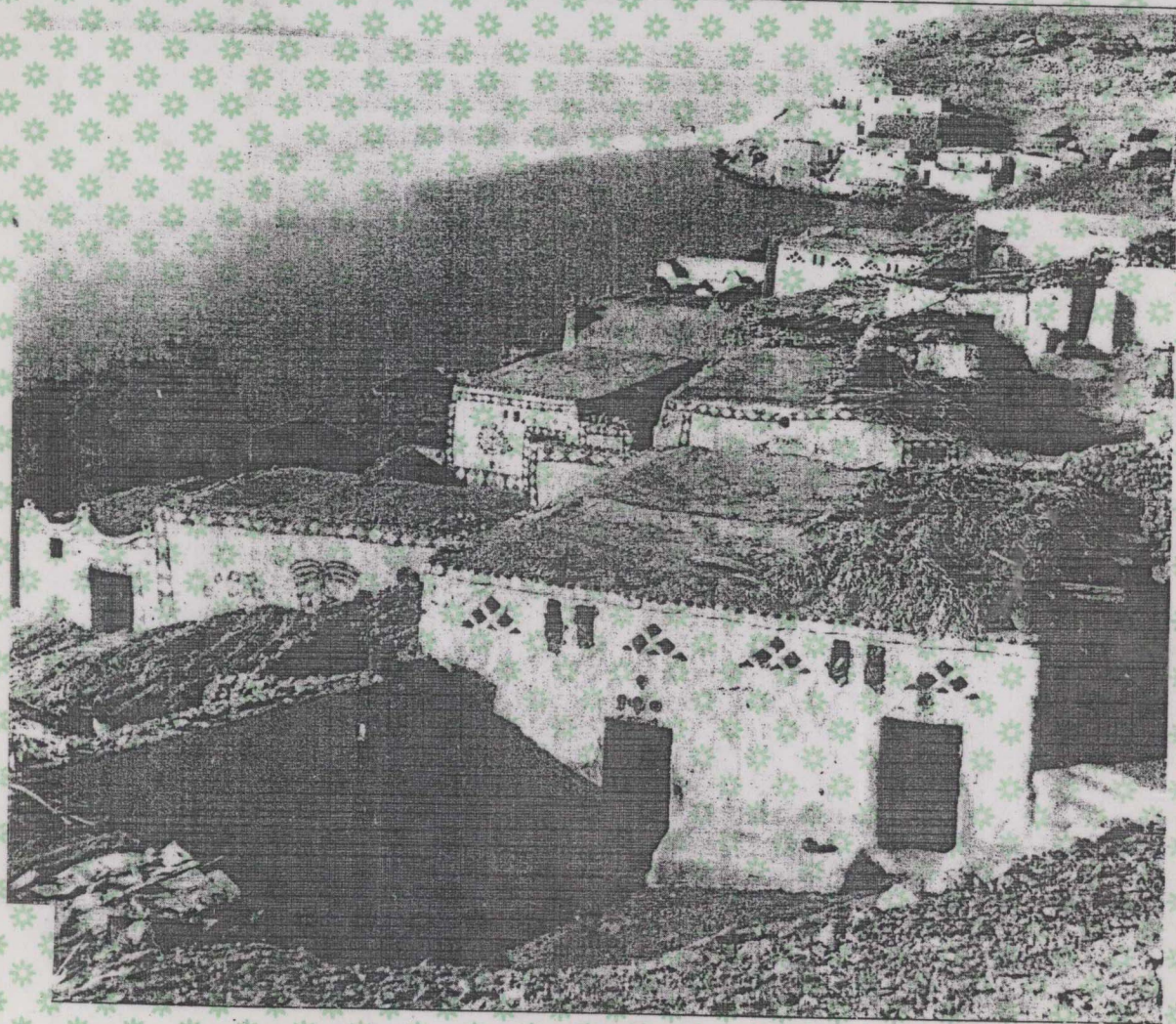


NUBIAN ETHNOGRAPHIES



Elizabeth Warnock Fernea
Robert A. Fernea
with Aleya Rouchdy

NUBIAN ETHNOGRAPHIES

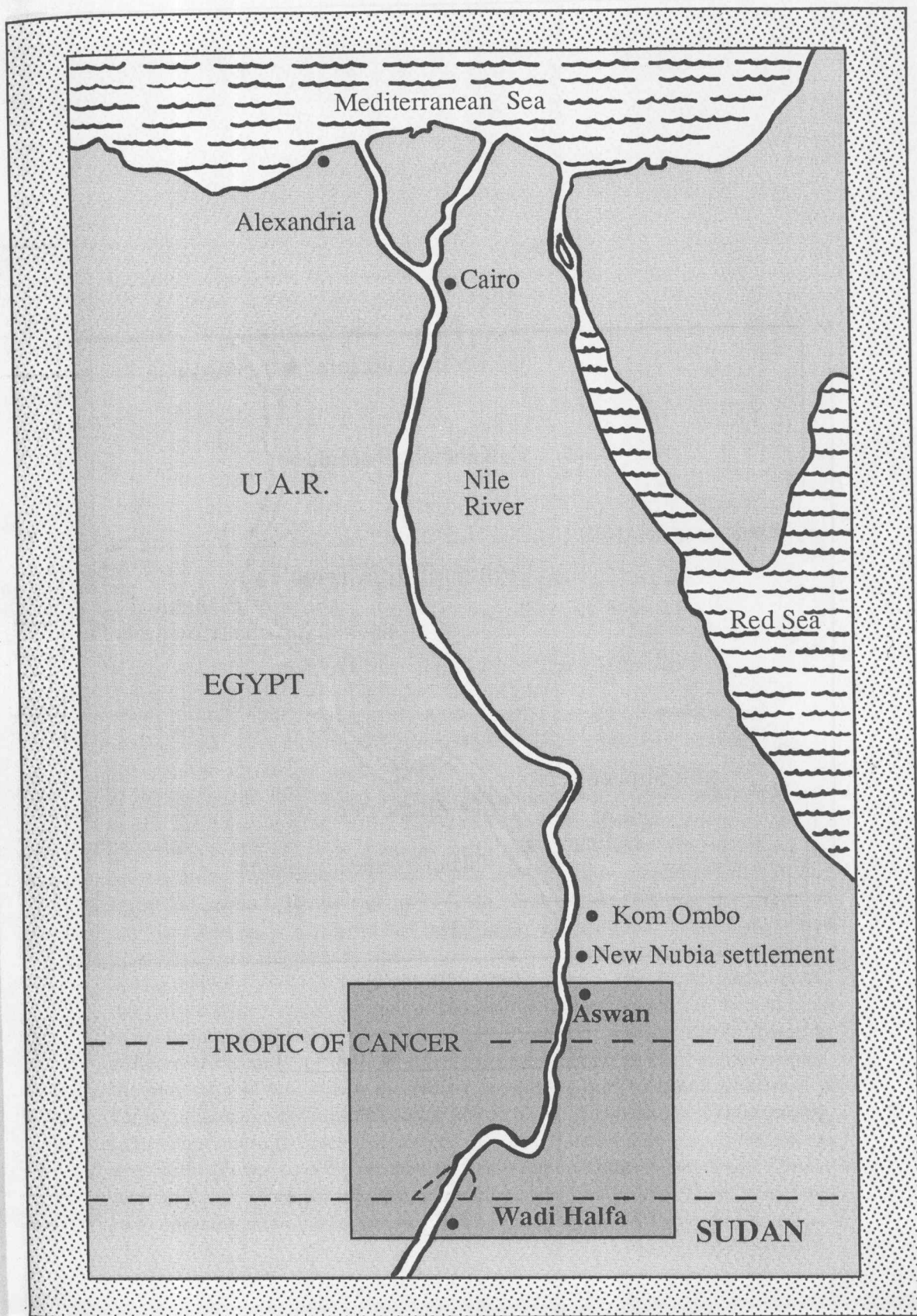
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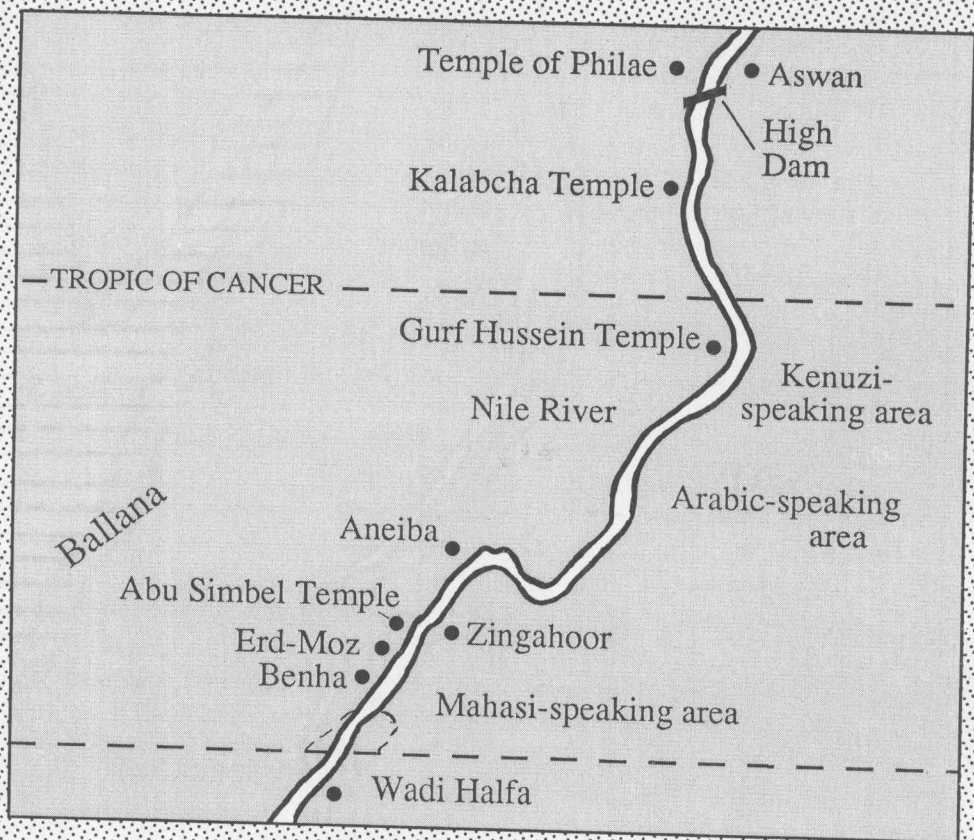
The Nubian Ethnographic Survey of which the research in this volume is part, was begun in 1960 as a salvage anthropology project. Its stated purpose was to record the culture and heritage of the 50,000 Egyptian Nubians before they were moved from their ancestral home along the Upper Nile. Their houses, fields and graveyards, along with hundreds of Pharaonic monuments (including the mammoth rock temple of Abu Simbel) were threatened by the rising waters backed up by the new High Dam at Aswan. As part of the High Dam project, the Nubians were to be compensated for the loss of their property, and resettled on agricultural land in Kom Ombo, north of the city of Aswan. The Egyptian government would provide houses and utilities as well as irrigated land and the Nubians would grow sugarcane, a cash crop useful to the nation, on their new allotments. By 1965, these events had all taken place. By 1990, the Nubians have been in their new homes for a generation and the villages of old Nubia have disappeared.

The Ford Foundation funded the Nubian Ethnographic Survey through the Social Research Center of the American University in Cairo. Laila Shukry al-Hamamsy, then the director of the Center, was crucial in implementing the project's aim—to provide a record of Nubian culture that would be valuable not only to the world of anthropology, but to the Nubians themselves. Robert Fernea was director of the project, which involved social scientists and researchers from America, Europe and Egypt, including some Egyptian Nubians. Three village studies took place in the three distinct linguistic areas of Egyptian Nubia. Charles Callender headed the team in the Kenuzi sector, assisted by Fadwa al-Guindi. Asaad Nadim and Nawal al-Messiri worked in the Arabic speaking region. South in the Mahasi area, Robert Fernea directed a team which included Karim al-Durzi, Bahiga Heikal, and Afaf al-Deeb. Abdul Hamid al-Zein later joined this group. A fourth village study was launched by John Kennedy, with Sohair Mehanna and Hussain Fahim, in Dar al-Salaam. This was a pseudonym for a village which had been settled by Kenuzi Nubians displaced after the raising of the first High Dam in 1912.

Thayer Scudder and Abdul Hamid al-Zein conducted a demographic survey of the entire area from Aswan to Wadi Halfa on the Sudanese border. Peter Geiser, with Mohammed Fikry and Aziza Rashad, interviewed Nubian families who had lived in Cairo and Alexandria as migrant laborers. Nadia Youssef also was involved in this sociological analysis. Additional work was later undertaken on Nubian architecture (Horst Jaritz, Hassan Fathy); Nubian funeral ceremonies (Najwa al-Shukairy); and Nubian languages (Aleya Rouchdy). The several books, theses and journal articles which have resulted from the project are listed in the bibliography.

An additional grant from the Ford Foundation made it possible for seven of the young Egyptian researchers from the project to continue their professional training in anthropology and sociology in the U.S. These included Abdul Hamid al-Zein, Sohair Mehanna, Fadwa al-Guindi, Hussain Fahim, Asaad Nadim, Nawal al-Messiri and Nadia Youssef. Of this group, three have returned to work in Egypt; three remained in the U.S.; and Abdul Hamid al-Zein, in the midst of a promising career in anthropology, died in 1979 while teaching at Temple University.





EGYPTIAN NUBIA

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Introduction

The book that follows is a chronicle of the period of Nubian history with which the Nubian Ethnographic Survey, a 1960s salvage anthropology project, was concerned. A follow-up essay describing Nubia today completes the book. The chronicle is told from several perspectives, Nubian and non-Nubian. These different perspectives allow the readers to see Nubians at different points in time, as well as through the eyes of different researchers. Through the different sections, the reader may also observe the changes in states of ethnographic writing that have taken place in the last thirty years, changes in both ethnographic method and subject matter.

Part I, by Elizabeth Fernea, is a personal account of the experience and process of fieldwork in Nubia, and of the author's interaction with Nubian society, particularly with the women and children. Written in the 1960s as the major section of *A View of the Nile*, it was published by Doubleday in 1970 as a non-fiction work, not an ethnography. At that time, ethnographic concerns were rather different than they are today. First, women's roles and children's lives were viewed as peripheral to the central concerns of a credible ethnographic account of any society or group. Women had not yet entered the field of anthropology in large numbers, and those who were becoming part of the profession studied what men perceived to be important: kinship, economics, politics, ritual.

The tone of Part I is related not only to the audience (the western lay reader) but to Elizabeth Fernea's own experiences in adjusting herself and her children to the isolation and scarce resources of the village. Her sense that Nubian women suffered from many of these problems is also conveyed. For Nubian women, the blessed land was not so blessed as for the migrant husbands who lived in Cairo and dreamed of home as an idealized refuge. The hazards of childbearing, high infant mortality rates, extreme temperatures, limited supplies of food, water and medical care, and the absence of husbands and fathers meant that Nubian women's lives were precarious, demanding and often lonely. Their perception of themselves as caretakers of households in the absence of men and as guardians

of family social and economic interests gave them strength, purpose and dignity. But everyday life was hard; many women spoke wistfully of the possibilities of an easier life in the cities.

Elizabeth Fernea was in Nubia not as an anthropologist but as a wife and mother, accompanying her anthropologist husband. She tried to gather material about women's and children's lives in order to understand their position within the larger society. For, in the master files of field notes that were kept for the entire project and organized according to the categories established by the respected Human Relations Area Files, no category then existed for "women" or "children." No clearer indication can be given of the priorities within the field at the time.

In addition, in those days, the ethnographer's presence was not recognized to be a factor affecting the description of a culture or the analysis of the data gathered. Therefore, any personal doubts or emotional reactions of the anthropologist were excised from the final text, for these were seen to be injecting subjectivity into what should be an objective account, and therefore undermining the legitimacy of the whole enterprise.

Today, however, new genres of anthropological writing are in process. Ethnographers are experimenting with different narrative strategies, attempting to represent their subjects and themselves in relation to those subjects. Elizabeth Fernea's account might be seen as an early expression of this new approach.

Part II of this volume is the text which accompanied a photographic essay in the now out-of-print book *Egyptian Nubians: Peaceful People* (University of Texas Press, 1973) by Robert Fernea with photographs by Georg Gerster. It is an ethnography providing an overview of Nubian society and culture, the result rather than the experience of fieldwork.

Even before the flooding by the High Dam in the early 1960s, Old Nubia had become a somewhat idealized homeland for most of its men, who were or had been urban labor immigrants. The Nubian migrants in Egyptian and foreign cities talked of their villages as places of peace and honesty, a "blessed land," they would say, free of the strife and conflict of urban life. It was a place where Nubian men were the princes of their domain, free from the orders of the housewives, hotel and apartment managers, and restaurant owners for whom many of them worked in Cairo or Alexandria. Nubia was an isolated, sheltered place, out of the purview of strangers, including government administrators. The beautiful villages along the Nile with spacious houses and groves of green palm trees *were* a place of peace and tranquility, even for the anthropologists engaged in their fieldwork.

By the time Robert Fernea began working on the text of his book, he had left Egypt, and Old Nubia had been under water for several years. His sense of writing about a world which had disappeared was very strong. Also, from the very beginning of the ethnographic survey one of the objectives had been to create for Egyptian Nubians a record of life in Old Nubia of which they could be proud. So, when Fernea was writing Part II, the audience he had in mind was not only Western readers but also future generations of Nubians. Hamza el-Din, the

well-known Nubian musician, was then a visiting professor at the University of Texas at Austin and a colleague and close friend of the author. Fernea often wrote in Hamza's home while Hamza played the *oud* and sang. The music and conversation constituted an evocative context in which to formulate ideas and images of the "blessed land," as Nubia was often called, at least by Nubian men. For Part II does reflect a male perspective as well as very positive feelings about life in Old Nubia. While the text in *Nubians in Egypt: Peaceful People* has never been published in Arabic, copies of the book are valued by Nubians today. Part II is then an account written not only about but also for the subjects of the narrative.

Part III was written by Robert Fernea and Aleya Rouchdy, a professor of Arabic and linguistics at Wayne State University, who is carrying out a long-term study of the Nubian language and its use. The joint paper was presented at the International Nubian Studies conference, held in 1986 at the University of Uppsala, and subsequently published in the proceedings of that conference. The essay builds upon several ethnographic studies by other scholars since the sixties to summarize events in Egyptian Nubian history since the resettlement in 1964-1965. Also, several times over the last twenty-five years Fernea and Rouchdy have independently visited the resettlement area of New Nubia north of Aswan. Rouchdy has found a steady decline in Nubian knowledge and use of their languages, which are also becoming more and more "Arabized"; this suggests the languages will rapidly disappear. One might ask whether the Nubians, as a cultural and racial minority in Egypt, are also disappearing.

Future research may well address this issue. Are Egyptian Nubians developing a sense of self and other of their own or of other's choosing, which may make their minority status as a racial and ethnic group a matter of long term social consequence? How rapidly are they becoming absorbed into Egyptian society, something that has happened to other people from the south over the millennia of Egyptian history? These are the subjects for other studies; the book that follows addresses, in different ways, the Nubian past, not the future.

PART I

A View of the Nile

Elizabeth Warnock Fernea

Chapter 1

Our Thoughts Turn South

“You want to hear the story?”

“Yes!”

“The real story, the true story?”

“Yes! Yes, we do!”

“Well, this is the beginning, and this is how we did it!”

(Cheers in the background, and drums)

“We built the High Dam!”

The popular voice of Abdul Halim Hafez singing “Sud el Ali, the Story of the High Dam,” against a well-produced background of chorus and drums, was a hit record throughout Egypt that winter and spring of 1960. However, my mind was hardly on the High Dam. I was pregnant again, Laura Ann was teething, Fawzia’s family had opened marriage negotiations with her first cousin’s father (and where would I find another good nanny, I worried to myself). Bob had become fascinated with the idea of doing salvage anthropology in Nubia. That casual conversation in the garden of Chicago House at Luxor had been like a stone dropped into a deep pool; the circles widened every day.

But whether or not I wanted to think about the High Dam, it was with me everywhere I went. Taxi drivers turned their radios to full volume when Abdul Halim Hafez’ voice signaled the beginning of “Sud el Ali.” The choruses resounded from the coffee shops and record stores along Talaat Harb Street. “You want to hear the story, the true story?” came piping from the transistor radios

propped up among the pyramids of pomegranates and the baskets of artichokes in the stalls of Bab el Loukh market. On 26th of July Street, the television sets displayed in Cicurel and Sednaoui department stores featured Abdul Halim Hafez in person, singing "The Story of the High Dam" on the Cairo television channel. Little queues of people gathered before this projection of the popular singer to watch, but also sometimes to clap in time.

At home, the Nubian *boabs* in our apartment building sported, under their white turbans, skullcaps decorated with the new High Dam design, a pattern in yellow and green and orange thread created by a Nubian housewife.

In the cinemas, the features varied: the new Egyptian film *Do'a el Karwaan*, based on a classic novel by Taha Hussein; an American hit, *The Guns of Navarone*; Russia's *The Cranes Are Flying*. But the short subject was always the same, a new documentary called, not surprisingly, *The Story of the High Dam!*

"Let's face it," Bob said to Nicholas. "The High Dam may change *our* lives, too, as well as the Egyptians."

"How?" I asked.

"Well, I mean, if I do get some money to do research and Nicholas does get a grant to lead an expedition . . ."

"I didn't realize. . . Nicholas was thinking of going to Nubia."

Nicholas laughed. "Who knows? One must think large thoughts these days. That's what the President is doing."

"And it seems to be working," put in Bob.

President Nasser was embarked on many projects to improve the individual's standard of living, to lift Egypt from nineteenth-century dependence on Europe to economic self-reliance. But the High Dam was the grandest of them all. He had taken Germany's offer to build an iron and steel plant, he had signed a contract with American engineers to develop new water sources in the oases, he concluded an agreement with the Fiat company to ship auto parts from Italy and assemble them in Egypt. Factories were being built and consumer goods appeared: drugs, cosmetics, plastic dishes, refrigerators, all with the proud label "Made in Egypt."

But none of these achievements had the popular appeal of the High Dam. More land—two million more acres of land—could be placed under cultivation when the dam was finished. That made sense to a people who knew from thousands of years of bitter experience just how many bushels of grain could be raised on a tiny strip of Nile-silted soil. Electricity, ten billion kilowatts of electricity, were promised. That made sense, too, to light the dim village houses, to power the television, the refrigerators, the radios that were to come with the new prosperity.

Think grand thoughts, Nicholas had said. Well. . .

"If you do go to Nubia, couldn't I come?" I asked.

"See," said Nicholas, "she's getting the bug, too."

"How could you?" asked Bob. "Bring the babies and live on a boat! Impossible!"

"Why couldn't we live in a village house?"

"B.J., I don't have the money to do *anything* yet. Nobody at Chicago House has even agreed I could bunk on their boat if I *did* have the money. Let's just wait and see."

I began to pay more attention to the daily news accounts of the High Dam's progress, to the government speeches about plans for the development of the city of Aswan. (Maybe I could live there with the children if Bob went to Nubia. It would be 750 miles closer than Cairo.)

Abbas was a Nubian. I asked him about the countryside, about the houses in the villages south of Aswan. Could I manage to live with two babies in one of those houses?

"They are nice houses," said Abbas doubtfully, "but they're made of mud and have no running water, and . . . well, madame, I don't know."

I didn't know whether I could do it either, but I was willing to try. If the Nubian people were anything like Abbas, I was certain I would like them and enjoy living among them. I even began to listen more closely to "The Song," as we began to call it.

The curious thing about "The Song" was that it completely neglected to mention the Russian role.

"We built the dam, we built it with our hands, we built it with our money, yes, we built it, the High Dam!" sang Abdul Halim Hafez. I often wondered what the Russian Information Agency made of all this. Officially, the Egyptian cotton crop, main source of cash income, was mortgaged to the Russians for millennial years to pay for all those bright yellow bulldozers, for the Russian engineers and advisers, for the master plan of the largest earth-fill dam that had ever been attempted in the world.

But the Soviets got not so much as a footnote of popular appreciation in the songs and the stories that circulated throughout Egypt. It was true that the average Egyptian had almost no contact with the Russians, who arrived, planeload after planeload, and then seemed to disappear. They went directly onto the through train to Aswan, we were told, where they lived in a special housing project somewhat apart from the city of Aswan. If they stayed in Cairo for special duty at the closely guarded and walled Soviet Embassy, they still were not seen much in public, for they had their separate "leisure" compound.

We'd seen that compound. Its picket fence, which had allowed such interesting glimpses of the Russian children and their mamas, was now bricked in. Within its confines, we were told, were a social club, a dining hall, a school and a cinema. The Russians were required to spend most of their leisure there and were bused from home to embassy duties to compound in Soviet-hired vehicles. They did not even have servants, who could have gossiped about them. The ambassador had brought his staff with him from Moscow. The rest presumably needed none.

I saw Russian ladies in the markets in homemade cotton house dresses, their hair crimped and permanented, trying desperately to determine, through a dense language barrier, the prices of turnips, potatoes, cabbages, onions, beets.

"Parlez français? Ingleezie? Yonani?" The vendor would go through his five or six languages to no avail.

Occasionally I saw those ladies standing for long, silent moments in front of shop windows on Kasr el Nil and 26th of July Street, shop windows which Egyptians insisted were empty in comparison to the displays of previous years, but which apparently did not seem so to the consumer-goods-hungry Russians. And they