

Endangered Cultures: A case Study, Merwoe Dam

Dr. Mohamed El-Mahdi Bushra

By signing the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) between the Government of the Sudan and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement /Sudan People's Liberation Army in January 2005, a new era have been opened in Sudan. The Government has already started the National Comprehensive Strategy which ultimate goal is to eradicate poverty and maintain equity and justice.

Consequently several projects have been planned to be implemented in different parts of the country. Certainly most of these projects will have impacts on different aspects of the life of the people in those parts primarily on the cultures of the people. This paper will confine itself to the impact of big projects which are going to create rapid changes. Merowe Dam project will be dealt with as a case study in this respect.

The issue of the relation between development and culture have been intensively studied recently by Sudanese scholarly, primarily in anthropology and folklore.

Abdel Ghaffar Mohamed Ahmed, for instance, studies the issue referring to Jongeli Project (Ahmed:2003). According to him the role of the anthropology " is to provide the basic study on the structure of the society which is to be developed. As a result of the detailed studies he undertakes, he can identify a possible area where change can be introduced and guided." (Ibid:143). Ahmed comes to the conclusion that the anthropologist has a great role in such a magnificent project " not only at the stage of carrying out the preliminary survey in the area , but also

at the stage of leading the socio-economic studies that precede the project's implementation. " (Ibid:144).

On the other hand Sayyid Hurriez deals with the issue with concentration on what he calls: "Challenging paradox (Hurriez:1986). In this seminal study Hurriez highlights some topics which are relevant to this paper, mainly the topic of folklore in re-groupment and resettlement (Ibid :98). He admits that "Folklore can affect this process of the regrouping of population both negatively and positively. Within the Muslim parts of the Sudan, people congregate around notable religious personalities and settlement often grow around the graves of Muslims saints."(Ibid:98).Hurriez concludes that "The basic challenge facing policy makers and development planners is to achieve development based on local sources and cultural premises. "(Ibid:11)

Moreover, the Department of Folklore in the Institute of African and Asian studies, University of Khartoum, afforded a symposium which studied the topic of folklore and development in depth , (Ahmed Nassr:1985).Nine papers written by scholars from different disciplines study the issue from different perspectives. A study, for instance, traces the impact of urbanization on oral cultures (Ibid:112) while another one examines the positive and negative aspects of development on folklore of the Northern Province (Ibid:139).

Merowe Dam is recently under construction. It is located in the Northern State at the forth cataract on the River Nile. The Dam is a major component in a project which objectives is to generate hydropower. All the population close to the area should be evacuated, mainly the residents in Hamadab, Amri and Manasir. Those in Hamadab have

been already migrated to their new settlements. It is planned that residents of Amri should move by the closing of this year (2006) and those of Manasir by the next year. Having that some people should leave their original homeland to different locations, this certainly aggravates the feelings of the people towards the Dam erection.

A word should be said about the land and the people. The area is almost a big island which embodies several islands, the people live on the banks of the river where they manage to cultivate a very narrow strip of land surrounded by rocky hills. The residence are basically farmers cultivating date palms usually inherited from remote grand fathers. They are also rearing some cattle. The majority of the population belongs to the Shaigyya with some small pocket who claim either Arabic or Nubian descendant. In brief the Nile is essential for those population. They have successfully adapted themselves to this hard and niggard atmosphere. Not only that but they managed to keep the best type of cattle in the area. They also provide markets around them with well-known production of spices, mainly comino and chilly. In brief the Nile is vital to the life of the residents. The river shapes their daily life, mainly when it floods and the islands are isolated from each others. So to master swimming is of great importance for those people. It is also important to have the experience to deal with the river. Usually children, mainly males play most of their free time in the river. For instance kak which is a folk game played in the river. It is sort of hide and seek. Unless the boy is well-trained in swimming he will not be allowed to play the game because of the risk of drowning.

However, the impact and repercussion of such a project should be considered . As expected most of the attention has been given to the aspect of the tangible cultures and

with a lesser degree to that of the intangible one. This could be easily explained by the mere fact there is a well-established experience available in the area of dealing with tangible cultures mainly in respect of archaeological heritage. It is almost more than half a century when the Sudanese Antiquities Service, SAS (later developed to the National Corporation for Antiquities and Museums NCAM) had been established before independence (1956). The SAS issued laws that regulate handling issues related to archaeological heritage. The SAS has a vast experience accumulated from different campaigns. The campaign for the rescue of the Nubian heritage before the construction of the High Dam (1960) is a remarkable example. Vivid and detailed description is made by Hassan Daffallah in his *Nuba Exodus* (Daffalla: 1975).

Again for the second time in history, a call has been made to rescue archeological heritage in Merowe Dam area . in October 2001. The call has been highly welcomed by several international institutions, from Britain, France and Poland for instance. Consequently studies and excavation are intensively conducted in the area covered by the Dam's lake and resettlements areas as well. The works have started in the Dam's site as early as mid 2002. The output of these works shows substantial indications that some of the sites might be traced back to the stone ages, the Modern Stone Age and the post_Merowe era. In brief a success has been achieved in this respect.

The Dam Implementation Unit DIU has given attention to the aspects of intangible cultures. A committee of prominent scholars from different disciplines has been formed in 2003. The committee is authorized to look after and supervise the documentation of the heritage and oral cultures in the area affected by the Dam. The committee

contracted scholars to conduct research in areas pertaining to intangible cultures. For example, religion and sophism, folklore and history .

The author of the paper has the honor of leading a team which has conducted field work in Amri. The field work has been achieved through a generous fund donated by the Dam Administration. The team consisted of six researchers, three males and two females. Frequent trips have been made to the field in different season of the year according to the traditional calendar of the residents. The team has almost visited all the major islands on both sides of the river. At the beginning the residents were reluctant to give any information but after some negotiations shared by their leaders they welcomed the idea and were very forthcoming.

The outcome is marvelous, the team successfully interviewed about thirty adult informants from both males and females. More than fourteen hours of performances have been videotaped. Astonishingly enough the bulk of the literature collected evolves an oral history. This might be explained in different ways. That people are usually anxious to tell about their origins to affirm the notion that they are deeply originated in the area and that they are the owners of the land. Certainly such narratives depict their nostalgia to their homeland .

However, a sizable literature have also been collected form other genres mainly oral poetry.

To sum, though our team has successfully managed to document a considerable part of the intangible cultures, yet there is a lot of work should be done as fast as possible. Some aspects have not been documented. Probably there is

an urgent need to document and collect information about languages in the area, the social systems together with issues of ethnicity should be documented as well. Of course there is so many other issues to be considered bearing in mind that an area which existed for more than at least thousand years will soon vanish

The literature collected so far tells a lot about the people and the land. Oral history, for instance, gives indications about the land ownership, the genealogies and the introduction of the religious sects. Oral literature reveals how the indigenous people see themselves and how they see the other. Moreover, folk names display the multi-culture structure of the society.

Moreover, this information about the intangible cultures should be examined with that about tangible cultures. It is time to build a bridge between both cultures since in reality they are inseparable. Unfortunately the scholars of intangible cultures usually undermine the value of the information got from intangible material. It is known that there is always narratives about archeological sites and monuments. Ali Salih studies folk tales narrated about some sites in Nuri area (Salih: 1989) Moreover the author of this paper traces a myth about the Barkal mountain in Karima town (Bushra:2001). A remarkable illustration in this respect is the mummy which have been discovered recently in Amri area. This mummy is of great value for researchers and scholars in both tangible and intangible culture. Certainly it gives indication about different historical aspects. It also gives substantial evidences about some cultural aspects.

Recommendations :

Needless to say that those people are going to pay a lot by leaving their original homeland to new and different settlements. For example they will live in a place which is four kilometers from the River Nile. However their modes of life will be radically changed. All these facts are considered and addressed by the Dam administration which committed itself to amounts of compensation deserved by the affected population. Lists of compensation have been prepared for the trees, in particular dates, houses and cattle. Yet, what is the price of intangible cultures, of the games in the river, the folk names and people's memories in places where they are born and live most of their life?

To sum up, the fieldworks already conducted in the area should be seen as the start or a prologue for a big campaign for the documentation and surveying of intangible cultures. Several teams of scholars and researchers of high caliber should be assigned with the necessary financial and technical support. These teams should start with intensive and proper pre-field work. Certain areas of folklore and folk life should be given the priority, for instance, performing arts, languages and oral history.

March 18, 2006

References

- Ahmed, Abdel Ghaffar M. : Anthropology in the Sudan:
2003 Reflections by a Sudanese
Anthropologist.
Addis Ababa: International
Books in association with
OSSIZAE
- Bushra, MohamedEl-Mahdi : " The Mythe of Nassira Bit al Jabal
2000
(Unpublished paper)
- Dafalla, Hassan : The Nubian Exodus
1975
Khartoum: Khartoum University
Press
- Hurriez , Sayyid Hamid : Studies in African Applied Folklore
1986
Khartoum: Khartoum University
Press
- Nasr, Ahmed Abdel-Rahim : Folklore and Development in the
1985 Sudan
Khartoum: Khartoum University
Press
- Salih, Ali Osman : The Role of Folklore in the
1988 Protection of Archaeological Sites
(Unpublished paper)