

EXCERPTED FROM

Nubian Women
of West Aswan:
Negotiating
Tradition and Change

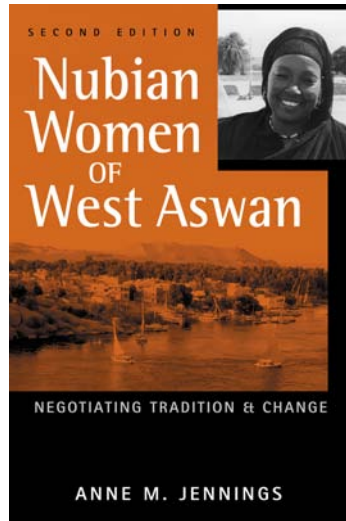
SECOND EDITION

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Introduction

THE IMPETUS FOR THE CREATION of a new edition of *The Nubians of West Aswan: Village Women in the Midst of Change* came about as a result of a recent visit to West Aswan after a ten-year hiatus. What was originally a trip to see my friends in the village developed into the felt need to revise and expand the book, after meeting several US tour groups in Zuba's house. The members of these tour groups had not heard of my book before Zuba showed them her copy, but they were all quite eager to get copies of their own.

It was at that time that I realized how out of date the 1995 book was, and I began to pay closer attention to the changes that I had encountered. Not only had the population of the town of Aswan grown tremendously, but the town itself was physically much larger. People from other parts of Egypt had moved there, altering the small-town feel of the place. The new bridge, opened in 2002 and spanning the Nile just north of West Aswan, has made access to the area easier for all Egyptians as well as for tourists. The number of tourists coming into the village had also increased, as had the options that the people of West Aswan have employed in dealing with them. Dwellings, clothing, and new attitudes were all indicative of culture change and transformation.

I have revised and updated the first edition of my book to reflect such changes and have tried to incorporate them throughout this new edition. In addition, two chapters have been expanded: Chapter 7 discusses the great influx of tourists to Gubba and the solutions the villagers are using to try to control it; Chapter 8 has to do with shifts in Nubian attitudes and behavior as the people are exposed to more and more foreign influences. Justly famous for their tradition of syncretism, the Nubians of West Aswan continue to show their adeptness at innovation. The new title, *Nubian Women of West Aswan: Negotiating Tradition and Change*, reflects this emphasis.

Although I discuss the many changes I have observed during, as of this writing, the past twenty-five years of fieldwork in Nubia, I must admit there are some aspects of the Muslim world that are changing much more slowly. One of these is its patriarchal structure. Islamic societies have been represented by many social scientists as classically male-dominant—that is, soci-

eties in which men have appropriated all powers of economic, political, and social decisionmaking. This has occurred, they contend, within the context of the public/private dichotomy used by many anthropologists to characterize Muslim culture. According to this model, Muslim women pursue domestic matters that keep them in or near the home (the so-called private sphere), whereas Muslim men concern themselves with the political and economic life of the community (the so-called public sphere). Women's decisionmaking is, ideologically, as circumscribed as they themselves are and affects only the private sector of society. Men's decisions, on the other hand, because they affect the public sector, ramify throughout the entire society.

This model of asymmetrical access to economic, political, and social decisionmaking powers in Islamic society is based, I believe, upon incomplete ethnographic information. Because women are, in many places, physically constrained, it has been assumed that their ability to influence others is equally constrained. Because they may be legally and formally subordinate to males, the model presumes women's social, economic, and political disenfranchisement as well. While it is true that men are accorded formal positions of authority and status within Muslim societies, it is also true that women possess informal means by which they can effectively influence the behavior of others. It is only since the late 1980s, however, that social scientists have begun to focus upon the realities of Muslim women's lives.

The popular press in the United States often presents a picture of the status of women in Muslim society that is very similar to the one presented by Cherry and Charles Lindholm in 1980: "Muslim society considers women naturally inferior in intelligence and ability—childlike, incapable of discernment, incompetent to testify in court, prey to whims and fancies. In tribal areas, women are prohibited from inheritance . . . and in marriage they are purchased from their fathers like a commodity" (Lindholm and Lindholm 1980: 46). Such statements are generally a result of the fact that the ordinary US citizen has had little exposure to information about Muslim societies, and what she or he has been exposed to is mainly ideology rather than reality. As a graduate student at the University of California, already very interested in gender studies, I read such statements in both the popular press and the anthropological literature, and began to wonder how it was that women could live under such adverse conditions. I looked in vain for any account of the benefits women must receive for helping to maintain a system that was apparently so detrimental to their well-being and decided to do field research in an Islamic society in order to find out. My research among the people of Nubia was an attempt to see beyond the ideology of male dominance and to discover what living as a Muslim woman really entails.

The task was daunting, since women in the Nubian community I studied are in fact formally subordinate to men. Women's subordination is mandated by Islam in certain of its legal and religious texts, and by a complex

of traditional values that are regarded as Islamic by the villagers. This meant that I, as a female researcher who was not seeking to challenge Nubian views of Islam, had to accept the restrictions placed upon my behavior—restrictions that my informants believed were Islamic.

These restrictions are rooted in two traditional institutions. The first is the considerable paternalism toward women that can be found in the Islamic religion itself. Although the Prophet decreed that men and women are equal in faith, the more often quoted quranic passage appoints men as “guardians over women, because of that in respect of which Allah has made some of them excel others, and because the men spend of their wealth” (Surah 4, verse 35). Intrinsic to this sacred injunction is the obligation placed upon men to take care of women, and upon women to obey men. The need to protect women, some have argued, stems from their valuable and important positions as wives and mothers (various informants, personal communication, 1981–1982); others state that women must be constrained because they are weak-minded and without moral sense (Maher 1978; Mohsen 1967). A third hypothesis, advanced by Fatema Mernissi (1987), states that the institutions that restrict women’s behavior are strategies for containing the powerful sexuality of women, which if left uncontrolled would deflect men from their higher goal: total involvement with God. Whatever the rationale, the injunction is met by placing women under male guardianship throughout their lives. In most Muslim societies, a woman remains a member of her father’s lineage even after marriage, owing him ultimate obedience. This is why it is her kinsmen who take responsibility for her, regardless of her marital status. When her father dies, the duty of protecting and controlling her falls primarily to her brothers, although her husband is expected to share part of this obligation.

In addition to the paternalistic bias of religious doctrine, the concept of honor shapes male/female relationships, encouraging male dominance in many Muslim societies. Male honor “is realized critically and importantly through the chaste and discreet sexual behavior of womenfolk in a particular man’s life: premarital chastity of the daughter and sister, fidelity of the wife, and continence of the widowed and divorced daughter or sister. These are basic principles upon which a family’s reputation and status in the community depend” (Youssef 1978: 77). This combination of the need to protect and provide for female kin, as stipulated by the Quran, and the desire to preserve personal and family honor has led to the consolidation of control over women almost exclusively by male members of the kin group, and the perpetuation of the status of women as economic dependents (Youssef 1978). In addition, the Quran also maintains the subordinate legal status of women to men by sanctioning polygyny but not polyandry, by stipulating that females may inherit only half of what males may inherit, and by giving lesser weight to women’s testimony in a court of law.

A woman's status as a jural minor and her economic dependency make it appear almost impossible, in many cases, for her to have any freedom of choice regarding basic life decisions. Her parents decide whether and for how long she may go to school, and they also arrange her first (and sometimes subsequent) marriage; ideologically, her husband can prevent her from going out of the house, from working for wages, and from keeping or spending what money she does earn. A woman can be threatened with repudiation or with her husband's marrying a second wife if she is disobedient or if she does not bear sons.

It cannot be denied that these are conditions that adversely affect women's lives and can be formidable obstacles to overcome when used against them. But the "plight of the Muslim woman" seems to be the only aspect of her life shown to us in the West, and because of this, we tend to think of her as hopelessly oppressed. Rarely do we learn of the Islamic laws that support women's rights: inheritance and property rights, a dowry system that represents a source of financial security for the woman, and custody of children for a certain amount of time upon divorce (Fluehr-Lobban 1993)—all of which are reportedly improvements over pre-Islamic conditions for women in some societies. In reality, women manage household affairs, enjoy respect in everyday life, and have historically been public agitators for social change and national liberation movements (Ahmed 1992; Fluehr-Lobban 1987). Modern laws guarantee women the right to vote, equal rights to education, and equal pay for comparable work in several Islamic countries.

My argument is that, contrary to the popular model of the oppressed Muslim woman, and despite the very real obstacles outlined above, Muslim women are not the passive tools of men, obediently enduring ignorance and confinement. Instead, they are themselves actors, concerned with influence, persuasion, and the negotiation of social order to their own advantage (Morsy 1978; Nelson 1974; Rosaldo 1980). Women throughout the Islamic world lead productive and rewarding lives; while most work very hard, they appear to be no more oppressed than are women in non-Muslim societies. Their subordination to the dictates of a patriarchal system just takes a different form.

The image of women in Islamic society is a subject that has captured the imagination of Western travelers for centuries (Burton [1855], 1964; Doughty 1953), but few anthropologists had concerned themselves with the empirical reality of women's status until the latter part of the twentieth century. The most commonly accepted anthropological model of Islamic society is that it is one of sharply divided sexual domains: the private, or domestic sphere, and the public, or extradomestic sphere (Bourdieu 1973; Cunnison 1966; Geertz 1979; Rosen 1978; Saunders 1980; Tapper 1978). The private sphere is considered the woman's domain and encompasses the

house and garden. It is associated with intimate human relationships, the love of close kin, and domestic pursuits. The public sphere is associated with all that happens outside of the home, in the marketplace and the mosque. It is the area of business and political activity, and social relationships with non-kin, and is the male domain (Deaver 1980; Makhlof 1979; Nelson 1974).

Because of the dichotomy between male and female spheres, male anthropologists have found it difficult to collect firsthand data concerning the life of the Muslim woman, and have been dependent upon information given them by the males of that society. Thus, most descriptions of the status of Muslim women by male investigators have been presented in terms of idealized behavior norms (Bourdieu 1966; Rosenfeld 1960; Zeid 1966). Men have been described as active agents of the political life of the community, making the major decisions that affect the whole society, whereas women have been depicted as passive. While women have been accorded respect within their own domain, this very restriction to the women's sphere was said to prevent them from affecting the wider community (Douglas 1970; Fox 1969; Maher 1974; Vinogradov 1974).

Although most Islamic societies are characterized by separate gender domains, this model is now considered to be oversimplified. In addition, it has led to unfortunate characterizations of the male and female domains in value-laden terms. Several investigators described the public sphere, prohibited to women, as broad and expansive, while the private sphere, which is closed to men, was described as narrow and restrictive (Nelson 1974). Domestic duties were considered to be of less importance than public duties; female activities and pursuits, and even females themselves, were said to be devalued in Islamic society (Antoun 1968; Asad 1970; Dwyer 1978; Mohsen 1967).

Others, concerned with the subject of the status of women in cross-cultural context, have referred to these characterizations in their models. Michelle Rosaldo (1974) and Sherry Ortner (1974), building, in part, upon the literature about Muslim societies, maintained that women were devalued because of the universal division of societies into public and private realms. These realms are themselves hierarchically placed: "The family (and hence women) represents lower-level, socially fragmenting, particularistic sorts of concerns, as opposed to interfamilial relations representing higher-level, integrative, universalistic sorts of concerns" (Ortner 1974: 79), resulting ultimately in lowered social status for women. Peggy Sanday (1974) and Karen Sacks (1974) argued that women can achieve full social equality only when they can participate in labor in the public domain, an analysis that implies that the status of Muslim women is low because of the dichotomy that prevents them from acting in the more highly valued arena.

Such models have been challenged by female scholars who have actual-

ly done fieldwork in Muslim societies. These investigators contend that popular characterizations of Muslim women contain inaccuracies about such subjects as veiling, polygyny, and women's work inside and outside of the home. In addition, there has been a great deal of discussion in the literature concerning the appropriateness and accuracy of the use of the terms *public* and *private* as descriptions or characterizations of gender domains (Ahmed 1992; Altorki 1977; Davis 1983; Joseph 1978; Makhlouf 1979; Mukhopadhyay and Higgins 1988; Wright 1981).

Field-workers who have lived in Islamic countries emphasize that there is no "typical" Muslim society in which it is possible to observe "the" status of women. Anthropologists who have been able to penetrate the veneer of ideology report a wide variety of gender role behaviors in the Islamic world. The customs of seclusion and veiling, which were practiced in the Middle East and parts of Europe before the advent of Islam, are examples of this. The seclusion of women, although an ideal in the Muslim world, is chiefly dependent upon social class and wealth; even within the same society, class and geographical distinctions can be observed. In Morocco, for example, total seclusion is practiced mainly by wealthy townspeople (Maher 1974). The man who wants to keep his wife totally secluded must hire someone else to do the shopping and other outside activities that he has no time to do himself. Villagers are generally too poor to do this and need the help of their wives in the fields, anyway. Nomadic women in Morocco, on the other hand, like their counterparts in other areas of the Muslim world, are neither secluded nor veiled; and while the townswoman who must venture out-of-doors loses some status because of this, most female nomads do not (Beck 1978; Cole 1975; Cunnison 1966; Mohsen 1967). The veil is used to provide a sense of seclusion when a woman must leave her home for some reason. The nomad camp, filled only with family members, is, ideologically, still considered "home" for the woman. The men she encounters there are all relatives; thus she need not veil herself from them. The same sense of being among family can also be found in many small villages, so a village woman need not always veil herself there, either. The towns and cities, on the other hand, are filled with strangers, against whom a woman should take appropriate precautions.

The veiling of young, mostly lower-middle-class women, however, is a contemporary phenomenon with more complex behavioral meanings and several explanations. Recent studies have indicated that it can be explained as an expression of anti-Western sentiment, as a revival of cultural-religious heritage and genuine religious feeling, as a political symbol of Islamic activism, or as a means of protection in the urban jungle (El Guindi 1981, 1999; Fluehr-Lobban 1993; Hatem 1987; Macleod 1991; Mernissi 1987; Rugh 1984; Zuhur 1992), and even as an ardently feminist gesture (Ahmed 2005).

In the instances where women are partially or totally secluded, it has appeared, to the outsider, as if they were restricted to a lifetime of isolation and ignorance. The popularly accepted model of the private sphere is that it is narrow—that women focus upon only the wants and needs of their own households—whereas the wider public sphere is the domain that deals with the whole community. Are secluded women as constrained as they appear to be? For some women, the answer is yes (Maher 1974; Smith 1954), but for most, seclusion does not prevent them from building a wide range of contacts, making informed decisions, and influencing the male domain in important ways. Female ethnographers who have lived among women in Islamic societies report that women have access to at least the households of their entire kin group and, in many places, to those of the whole community. Having access to a household leads ultimately to contact with all members of that household, including males. Women's visiting patterns take them to one another's homes (Altorki 1986; Aswad 1974; Larson 1983; Makhlof 1979; Sweet 1974; Tapper 1978) and/or to public baths (Davis 1983), where information is exchanged on a daily basis.

The manipulation of information is a very important source of power for both men and women in many Muslim societies (Davis 1983; Nelson 1974). Males and females have access to different areas of information (Roger Joseph [1975] suggests that "Berber communication can be viewed as a media system in which there is one public T.V. station accessible to all, and many private circuit stations available only to subscribers. Both men, and women, through their men, have access to the public station, but only women have access to the private channels"); and each sex attempts to control the behavior of others, both female and male, through the judicious use of what they know (Davis 1983). Women exercise this skill in areas such as marriage alliances (Aswad 1974; Joseph 1974; Makhlof 1979; Peters 1965), economic exchange (Lienhardt 1972; Maher 1974), patron/client relationships (Maher 1974; Smith 1954), poetry and song (Joseph 1980), and social control (Ammar 1954; Cunnison 1966; Farrag 1971; Schneider 1971; Tapper 1978). This is all evidence that women do extend their influence into the public arena, although their decisions are made in the female domain.

The extent to which men are able to influence happenings in the women's sphere seems, on the other hand, to be more limited than the accepted model suggests. The model, based upon what informants say is the societal ideal, shows men exercising absolute authority over women and bearing ultimate responsibility for their behavior. But ethnographic information, mainly from Morocco, points up differences between this ideal and what people actually do. Sexual segregation in Moroccan society encourages men to leave the day-to-day running of the household to women, resulting in the loss of male control over certain aspects of female behavior. Male household authority

is frequently undercut by other social rules which give women control over daily household interactions and limit the involvement of men in family affairs. Defined ideologically as authority figures in the household, men frequently remain aloof from intimate interactions. . . . Women . . . through the affectional bond exert control over many family interactions. (Auerbach 1980: 17)

Although men do have imposing sanctions that they can use in order to influence actions in the female sphere, women are adept at using informal ones that are often quite effective in helping them to maintain control over their domain (Crapanzano 1972; Davis 1983; Farrag 1971; Joseph 1976). Among the Bedouin 'Awlad 'Ali of Egypt's Western Desert, for example, men converse freely with one another while women are present, yet women do not exchange information in the presence of men (Abu-Lughod 1986). Men's actions may be further limited by rules of avoidance (Geertz 1979), by a lack of information about events in the women's sphere (Joseph 1975), or even by an almost incomprehensible dialect that women speak only among themselves (Makhlouf 1979).

A household head is, ideologically, responsible for all major decisions, reached after discussion with other men of like position, on the basis of information obtained in the male domain. Informants may state that males have access to much more information than do females, since women are bound to the home, and so are much better equipped to make decisions about such issues as the arrangement of marriages, large-scale expenditures of capital, travel plans, and so forth. Investigators have reported, however, that men rarely make major decisions without first consulting their wives, although they may not admit to it publicly (Rogers 1975; Sweet 1974), an indication that, despite the societal ideal, men realize that information received in the marketplace and the mosque may be only part of the total picture. Women are privy to certain kinds of information that men find difficult to elicit from other men, since men are prevented, ideologically, from discussing private household matters in the public arena (Bourdieu 1973). Although Roger Joseph (1975) speaks of one occasion in which an informant bares his private life to the anthropologist, I know of nothing else in the literature that tells us what men talk about privately to one another.

We are told, however, that women can and do discuss private affairs with one another, and it is through them that men learn what they cannot learn from other men (Altorki 1977; Geertz 1979; Nelson 1974). Information that women collect from their own sources is shared judiciously with men in the privacy of the home, enabling the latter to appear astute and knowledgeable publicly.

Another inaccuracy is the assumption that the women's domain is a devalued one in Muslim societies. This assumption has been attacked on two levels. First, investigators have pointed out the importance of ascertain-

ing the source of statements concerning valuation: Is it the males of the society in question, both males and females, or the anthropologist? Edwin Ardener (1972) argues that a society's ideological system is not always generated by the whole society, that indeed men and women may have very different models of their own society and/or universe. The anthropologist who has access to only one of these models may, because of the nature of the discipline itself (e.g., "because anthropologists are either men, or women trained to think like men, anthropology orders the universe in a male fashion" [Rogers 1978: 130]), assume that it is the only one. Ethnographic studies have recorded the existence of separate beliefs concerning the value of males and females within the same society, as well as evidence that women, while aware of male beliefs, do not always feel the need to concur with them (Kaberry 1952; Leith-Ross 1965; Paulme 1963; Rosen 1978; Wolf 1972). Negative statements about women by Muslim male informants have many times been generalized to the entire society, on the assumption that the male view is the only view, or even the most important view. Ethnocentrically, the anthropologist (and Western readers of popular literature) assumes that since this has been the case in the West, it is so everywhere.

Susan Rogers speaks to this same problem when she suggests that the nature of our own society leads us to believe that segregation is always synonymous with devaluation:

Marked social and economic segregation is conducive to the development of separate ideological systems and of two contrasting valuations of the importance and attractiveness of each sex group and its activities. In this case, the barring of one sex group from the domain of the other does not necessarily have negative implications for the excluded group. Furthermore, it may not be legitimate to consider one group as more excluded than the other, if neither has access to the other's domains. . . . Because these factors are so clearly present in our own society, the tendency is to facily associate all segregation with discrimination. (1978: 145)

Information from Muslim societies indicates that the women have high self-esteem and do not consider their sphere to be any less important than the male domain (Auerbach 1980; Cunnison 1966; Deaver 1980; Makhlouf 1979; Rosen 1978; Saunders 1980; Sweet 1974). In many places, a woman can establish a position and achieve status in the world of women through her own efforts: as a midwife, as a cook for ceremonial occasions, through her knowledge of religious matters and/or magic, as the center of important information networks such as bath attendant or seamstress, through her verbal skills, and in some cases, through shrewd management of her husband's resources (Aswad 1967; Davis 1983; Farrag 1971; Joseph 1976; Lienhardt 1972; Mernissi 1987; Tapper 1978). While it has been assumed that women

feel excluded from the male domain in Muslim societies, some anthropologists argue that it is men who often feel excluded from the world of women (R. Joseph, personal communication, 1986; Geertz 1979; Makhlof 1979; Nelson 1974).

The assertion that the female domain and its inhabitants are devalued has been challenged on another level by investigators of peasant societies, who maintain that such societies are “domestic-centered.” That is, the family unit in a village is the economic, political, and social core of the community, the place in which all major decisions are made (Arensberg and Kimball 1968; Dubisch 1971; Friedl 1967; Redfield 1967; Rogers 1975). As such, it is highly valued, not only in peasant societies, but also in Islamic groups that are not comprised of peasants (Asad 1970; Barth 1961; Cole 1975). Consequently, these investigators argue, those who are concerned about learning to what extent women influence their societies should focus upon male/female interactions in the women’s domain, not the men’s. Additionally, it is argued that modern peasants feel that they have very little power vis-à-vis the larger society; males especially feel powerless in the “outside world” (Banfield 1958; Dubisch 1971; Foster 1965; Riegelhaupt 1967). This awareness is coupled with the knowledge that male actions in the public arena of village life very often result in the accretion of prestige, which does not always translate into power in the domestic sphere (Friedl 1967). Some maintain that these factors make the female domain even more important than the male sphere.

While the most widely accepted model of Muslim society has depicted the public and private spheres as polarities, and while the theorists discussed above, influenced by this model, have argued for the primacy of one sphere over the other, I believe that it would be more constructive to investigate the ways in which the spheres are complementary rather than hierarchic. Data collected in the field have shown that native informants often see the division of their societies in just this way (Antoun 1968; Auerbach 1980; Barth 1961; Cole 1975; Deaver 1980; Friedl 1967; Paulme 1963; Sweet 1974, Wright 1981). Anthropologists tell us that female and male social networks give their members access to different kinds of information—mutually interdependent and complementary—that traditionally led to differential control over separate aspects of village life. Divergent communication networks, like sexually segregated spheres, provide females and males with alternate sources of self-esteem, power, and control over alternate resources. The question remains, therefore, as to why the popular conception of Muslim society constructs the male and female spheres as hierarchically placed opposites.

I believe that the answer to this question lies partially in the history of the subject matter, briefly recounted above. The dichotomized nature of Muslim societies themselves resulted in male ethnographers talking with

only male informants, and the androcentrism of both led to characterizations of the male sphere as broader, more important, and more highly valued than the female domain. When other ethnographers, mostly female, discovered, through investigations of the women's sphere, lacunae between what had been presented in the literature as fact and what was actually happening, they argued their case for the female domain with equal fervor. It may be in the nature of Western thought processes that we, when presented with two oppositions, tend to rank them hierarchically rather than considering them dialectically. It seems certain that we tend to rank male interests and pursuits higher than female ones, and we assume that people in all other societies do as well. Consequently, academic debate, coupled with our own ethnocentric tendencies, resulted in our acceptance of a hierarchic model as a true reflection of Muslim society.

In addition, the United States has been, since the late 1980s, in a political struggle with certain Middle Eastern countries and ideologies, and this struggle is reflected in the negative image of Arabs in the mass media. This popular negative image is one that goes back, in Western culture, to the era of the Crusades, when Arabs were depicted as the opposite of everything European; their portrayal as cruel, duplicitous voluptuaries was exemplified by their apparent debasement of women. During the mid-1990s these representations were resurrected, reducing the complexity of the Middle East to stereotypes in an attempt to control feelings of anxiety and threat (Ahmed 1992; Mernissi 1987; Said 1978). Even anthropologists, constantly exposed to the attitudes expressed in the ubiquitous popular literature, are in some way affected by them. So if we are constantly reading that Muslim women are much more oppressed than are Western women, we will at some level expect that to be the case. Popular stereotypes of Muslim society, combined with ethnocentric assumptions and androcentric bias (Ahmed 1992; Morsy 1978; Steady 1993), have resulted in a situation in which much of the anthropological literature seems to have been ignored in favor of a model of Islamic society that, although simplistic, somehow "feels" more correct than ethnographic data.

Fieldwork in Nubia

I chose to do my fieldwork among the Nubians for several reasons. The first is that the Nubians are an African people. My interest in the peoples and cultures of Africa, and their history, spans more than three decades. As an African American, I feel more than just an intellectual curiosity about these topics. The civil rights and pan-African movements in the United States and my previous trips to Africa led me to think of Africans as various types of kinsfolk, not as exotic subjects of scientific study; and because of this atti-

tude, I expected my field experience to be different from that of most Euro-American anthropologists. By this I mean that, going into the field, I did not expect to view Africans as “other,” as had been the case for so many throughout the history of anthropology. As a researcher who was not indigenous, but feeling that I was not quite an outsider, I wanted to move beyond the barriers that so many nonindigenous anthropologists face.

My training in anthropology, however, included the belief in the tenet that field-workers could be more “objective”—that is, better able to maintain the distance necessary to participant observation—when studying a society not their own. And while the indigenous field-worker/“native anthropologist”/“halfie” undoubtedly has certain advantages (Abu-Lughod 1991; Altorki and El Solh 1988; Fahim 1982), these might be outweighed by a tendency to take for granted or overlook cultural patterns that the non-indigenous researcher, as an outsider, would see. Several “native anthropologists” have written about the many positives that are unique to their particular situations (Abu-Lughod 1991; Foster 1996; Medicine 2001; Nelson 1996; Zavella 1996), but they also remind us that they may often have the same problems of acceptance that nonindigenous researchers frequently have: “native anthropologists are seldom considered insiders by default; instead they experience various ‘gradations of endogeny’ throughout the course of their fieldwork” (Jacobs-Huey 2002: 792).

As an African-American anthropologist in Africa, I expected that my path would be somewhere between the two: not an indigenous field-worker, but not quite an outsider. Although I wanted to try to maintain objectivity in participant observation, I found it impossible to accept the discipline’s “Western-us/exotic-other” dichotomy, and I wanted to do my research in Africa in order to find another method of framing my relationship with the people of the village I was going to.

While I did not view Africans as “other,” I received various messages as I prepared for my fieldwork that Africans would see me that way. One of my professors told me that Africans would classify me as “white,” despite my skin color, because I came from the United States. From time to time, articles would appear in local newspapers to the effect that most Africans despised African Americans, for a variety of reasons. Despite these messages, I maintained my belief that I would be more readily accepted by my future informants because I looked like them and because they would feel a kinship with me. This expectation may not have been realistic for all areas of Africa, but it certainly was true for Nubia. The Nubians whom I met while living in the village, as well as the Sudanese in Aswan, were all very interested in me as a representative of Blacks in the United States. They wanted to know how we lived in the United States, how large a population we were, and whether we were still segregated. To this last question, I told the truth as I knew it. Although segregation is no longer legal, *de facto* seg-

regation still exists, especially in housing and in the schools. To other questions concerning African-American daily life, I answered as truthfully as I could, reasoning that if they should ever take a trip to the United States, it would be better for them to be prepared for an occasional negative experience than to be caught off guard by it.

The Nubian villagers, because of their history, tend to be rather secretive about their behavior. However, they felt more inclined to trust me, they said, because we were of common ancestry. A song that was enjoying popularity while I was in Egypt in 1981, sung by a musician of Sudanese descent who was living in Cairo at the time, was entitled “We Are All Sudanese.” While this song may have originally referred to the civil war that has been plaguing Sudan for so long, my informants and friends in Nubia perceived in it a more global interpretation. They told me that they felt that the people of African descent in North, Central, and South America, as well as in the Caribbean, were all related to one another and to them. I believe this awareness that most of our ancestors came from the same continent (the Nubians are of mixed descent, as are most African Americans) was instrumental in allowing me access to the village and people of West Aswan. The villagers accepted me openheartedly, calling me “Nubian American” at first, and then finally a “real Nubian woman,” and giving me an ancient Nubian variation of my name: Ani. When I wore Nubian clothing, which I always did when in the village, I disappeared into the crowd of women. People who did not know me—both villagers and tourists—assumed that I was Nubian.

My position was an anomalous one, however; although I looked like an ordinary Nubian housewife, I was a very well educated (a *doctora* in 1986), mature, married woman who was American. I was allowed much more freedom of movement than other women were, and my ability to relax and talk with unmarried young men of the village every afternoon was entirely because I was in an anomalous position. This status did not make me an “honorary male,” however, because I could do what males could not; no foreign or Nubian male, no matter how highly placed, would have been allowed to sit and talk freely with the unmarried girls, or the married women, either, day after day. My position was better than any male’s could be: I was able to hang out with the young men, the young women, and/or the mature women; the only group that I could not relax with on an ongoing basis was that of the mature men. And I believe that my appearance opened doors more quickly and more completely than would have been the case had I been a European American. The villagers often said, “We like you, Ani, and we want you to live among us, because you are the same color we are.”

Nevertheless, I often felt ambivalent about being mistaken for a Nubian woman, since I was not a Nubian and rarely did I actually feel as I imagined Nubian women to feel; nor did I believe that the villagers who knew me really thought of me as one of them. I was seen, I think, as a caring partici-

pant, as a welcome guest, and/or as a distant relative (one of my friends related to me that, when asked who I was, he replied, “She is our relative who is visiting us from abroad!”). As such, I could be trusted, eventually, with information about their lives. These feelings of ambivalence have been discussed by other anthropologists who had also found themselves in this not-quite-indigenous but not-quite-outsider position during their fieldwork (Abu-Lughod 1986; Cervone 2007; Jacobs-Huey 2002; Koentjaraningrat 1982; Marshall 1970; Morsy 1988; Nelson 1996; Williams 1996). And despite my desire to move beyond that “us/other” barrier, I, like these other field-workers, managed to do it only intermittently and incompletely.

Indigenous anthropologists, and those of us who are not-quite-indigenous, are also acknowledging a unique kind of responsibility toward those among whom we have lived (Cervone 2007; Jacobs-Huey 2002; Nelson 1996). We understand that our informants will hold us accountable for what we publish about them. The closer we have come to feeling like insiders, the more we have begun to understand what full disclosure of certain kinds of information would do to “our” families and villages. This book, for instance, is one in which the villagers are very interested, and that many of them intend to read. In fact, a part of the first draft was already read, and additional suggestions made, by two villagers who could read English, and another, a scholar at El Azhar University, would be translating it into Arabic for those who cannot. The villagers want to know that this ethnography is about them, and this is the reason that I use no pseudonyms. They are proud of their history and culture, and want to share it; they see my book as their vehicle to that end. At the same time, however, they wish to see their way of life celebrated—presented in its ideal and without flaw. They feel that the honor of their village, and of all Nubians everywhere, lies in covering up the negative aspects of their lives and in setting forth only the positive.

On my first visit to the field, the women among whom I lived sought to present an idealized picture of their lives and their relationships. It was only when I returned to the village the second time that I realized how much they had shielded the more disharmonious aspects of village life from my gaze. I believe that my second trip indicated to the villagers that I cared about them, and thus they allowed me to become privy to their less-than-perfect reality. Each time I have returned to Gubba since then, I have been allowed to see more and more behind that shield. In writing this ethnography, then, my dilemma has been how to fulfill my function as a field-worker of presenting a total picture of village life while remaining sensitive to Nubian concerns about that picture. I certainly do not portray West Aswan as a paradise, but I do omit people, situations, and/or activities that I know the villagers would not wish to acknowledge publicly.

A second reason for doing fieldwork among the Nubians is that they are Muslim. My interest in gender roles in Islamic societies has already been

mentioned, and the chance to combine my interests by pursuing research in an African Islamic society was quite exciting. Little work has been done among Nubian women (Fernea 1970; El-Katsha 1969; Poole n.d.; El-Sawy 1965; Shukairy 1963; Smith 2006a), and the recording of their daily lives, their familial and extrafamilial concerns, is still in its infancy. Research among them has given me a chance to investigate theories concerning information sharing among women in Muslim societies.

Muslim women in Africa, like women in other parts of the world, are greatly dependent upon their social networks for information sharing and for social control. Networks, which can be defined as the people with whom an individual maintains consistent contact, may also include such social aggregations as solidarity groups and voluntary associations. These are used in many places throughout the world by women to influence situations, exert pressure, and shape events and behavior in areas that might otherwise be outside of their control. For instance, the matrons of the Iroquois Nation are legendary (Brown 1970; Richards 1974), as are the market women of West Africa (Forde 1951; Sudarkasa 1973). In parts of West and Central Africa, women's secret societies used their sanctions as a means of social control (Paulme 1963), while village voluntary associations protected their economic and social interests against inroads by physically stronger males and/or coercive governments (Steady 1993; Van Allen 1972).

African Muslim women's networks are essential components of their lives, not just for the dissemination of information or for social control but also for support within the private domain. The Hausa women of northern Nigeria maintain very extensive networks, including bond-friendships and patron/client relationships, for economic and financial support (Schildkrout 1982; Smith 1954), as do lower-class Berber women in Morocco (Maher 1978). In Sudan, female litigants in court use their networks to receive advice and support as well as information (Fluehr-Lobban 1993). My research shows that Nubian village women also are involved in social networks, which they begin forming in childhood, throughout their lives. Nubian women give one another needed economic and social support through their networks, especially during life-crisis occasions. During such times as the birth of a child, marriage celebrations, and mortuary observances, women aid one another in the cooking of food, the preparation of clothing, and the all-important act of being physically present, to share their emotions, at the time of ceremony. The participation of women is vital to the successful performance of these celebrations, since it is only through intensive female labor that feasting can occur. It is upon the willingness of such women to work that the status, honor, and reputation for hospitality of a man and his family rests.

Social networks among Nubian village women also allow them to share information about their fellow villagers. Information management in the

female domain enables women to arrange marriages and to contribute to the preservation of moral and social order through gossip. Both of these activities are fundamental to the maintenance of Nubian village society, and both are recognized by the society as within the rights of women to mediate. Marriages are of very great importance in a village society, as they are not simply links between two people, but political and economic alliances between groups as well. Marriage arrangements are initiated by women—usually the mothers of the future bride and groom—based upon the information that they have garnered through their networks, information that only women possess. In the same way, the women's sphere is the marketplace of intelligence that can make or break an individual's reputation; women can and do affect the behavior of fellow villagers through the use of information about them. The day-to-day relationships of women within their friendship groups set the tenor of village life and color the emotional environment in which people live.

Although the commonly accepted model of gender roles in Islamic societies maintains that the male sphere is more important than the female sphere, my research indicates that this is not a part of the Nubian belief system. Nubian village life, like that of other peasants and other Muslims who are not peasants, is domestic-centered: The female domain, its inhabitants and concerns, are readily acknowledged as important. Sexual segregation, although seemingly detrimental to women, does not exclude them from important decisionmaking, since many of the most important decisions in village life are made in the women's sphere. The male and female spheres of Nubian society work interdependently to further the maintenance of traditional Nubian values and social organization; and Nubian women, contrary to the popular stereotype, are not prevented from engaging in important decisionmaking processes but are expected to contribute their knowledge and expertise to them.

Lastly, I was very interested in doing research among the Nubians after having read the history and prehistory of Nubia. Archaeology has shown Nubians to be, so far as can be determined, the most ancient people in the Nile valley. Many people believe them to be the ancestors of the pharaonic Egyptians and the major contributors to that civilization. I have been fascinated by ancient Egypt since childhood and, like many other African Americans (and Africans), view it as ancient Africa's proudest achievement. As more information about the history of the ancient Nubian kingdoms of Kerma and Meroë has become more widely known, many of us have begun looking farther south for that designation.

Since the history of the Nubians is a record of their syncretic adaptations of foreign influences melded with their own ancient ways, I had hoped to be able to identify pharaonic "survivals" among the modern Nubians. I

saw very few that I could recognize as pharaonic (hairstyles, names, and certain articles of clothing), but I was pleased to be able to identify some pre-Islamic, pre-Christian observances (which may also be pharaonic) that are still being practiced in the village.

Nubians have been known for selecting only certain aspects of foreign cultures, while preserving the basics of their own way of life, throughout innumerable invasions. Now with the influx of tourism to the area, they are once again being inundated with a flood of foreign peoples, foreign merchandise, and foreign ideas. Rapid culture change is affecting all of the people of this area; part of this ethnography has become a record of the ways they have handled the stresses engendered by such changes over the past twenty-five years. Tourism, especially, has presented new challenges, and Nubian women have become very involved in the tourist trade.

The involvement of village women with tourism is a prime example of women's informal economy activity. The "informal economy" can be defined as a variety of occupations in which people work for goods instead of money, or for money that is not reported to the government and so remains unrecorded in official figures and left out of official reports. Data concerning women's remunerative occupations in the Muslim world are seriously lacking, not only because Muslim males have so often denied that their female relatives and wives work outside of the home, but also because so many women earn their money in the informal sector. Researchers who are interested in women's work have begun to investigate female income-generating activities in the informal economy of the Muslim world (Boserup 1970; Feldman 1991; Lobban 1998; Nelson 1981; Singh and Kelles-Viitanen 1987; Young 1988); more investigation into the entry of village women into the tourist market would be welcome. However, since one of the major benefits of informal-sector activities is that money earned remains unreported, it is doubtful that great numbers of women would be willing to discuss this topic. While the women whom I knew and saw every day were open about the amounts of money they earned, women who hardly knew me were not so forthcoming; deeper or wider investigation by anthropologists, economists, and so forth, might be seen as spying for the government.

Nubian women's activities in the tourist trade raise yet more questions for future research. If women can continue to earn remuneration for what is essentially their domestic labor, will that further increase the importance of the female domain? Will those women have even more domestic decision-making power, and if so, how would this affect gender complementarity? Future research must question the extent to which women's increased moneymaking activities would bear on not only individual relationships in the

home but also the complementarity of the male and female spheres of the entire community.

My original intent has always been to publish a longitudinal study of Gubba and its people; this new edition is the latest step in that plan. Chronicling the transformations that have occurred in the past twenty-five years has been a source of some surprise, as well as a labor of love.