Lost Cultures: Living Legacies

Episode Title: The Nubians of Egypt: Preserving a Lost Homeland

Episode Summary:

How is it that people belonging to one of the oldest civilizations in the world have lost so much of their ancestral homeland? What steps must they take to preserve their culture in the face of such challenging circumstances? Anthropologist Yasmin Moll and Dr. Menna Agha, along with Mona Sherif-Nelson, founder of the Nubian Foundation, share the history of the Nubian people of Egypt, delve into the ways women played a central role in their culture, and address how modernization has forced them to scatter across the country and the world. They discuss how, as they venture into the future, the Nubian people of today are adapting and finding creative ways to keep their culture alive and connected to its past.

Episode Type: Full
Episode Rating: Clean
Season Number: 1
Episode Number: 8

== Part 1: Cold Open. ==

Yasmin Moll: I'm directing a documentary film called ‘Finding Nubia,’ which is about a group of young Nubian Egyptians who've never seen Nubia and who grew up in Cairo, about their efforts to both educate other Egyptians about Nubia, and also to educate themselves at the same time. So Nubians in Egypt encounter a lot of everyday racism from other Egyptians. And there's a lot of stereotypes and misinformation about their culture and their history. And they're often seen as foreigners, even though Nubians have been continuously in Egypt for millennia. So the film follows this group of young cultural activists as they go around putting on plays or putting on performances or craft shows or storytelling shows. And it shows how, in trying to teach other people about Nubia, they're really finding Nubia for themselves. Because Egyptian schools do not teach about Nubian history, they don't teach about Nubian languages. So, oftentimes, you have to take it upon yourself as a Nubian to go and find out information about your heritage
and your tradition. So the film is about their struggle to find Nubia, and also then the reaction of an older generation to their efforts. So it's also about intergenerational dynamics and contestations over what it means to find Nubia. My name is Yasmin Moll. And I'm an Egyptian Nubian anthropologist, currently at the University of Michigan where I live in Ann Arbor, but I grew up in Cairo, Egypt.

Alisha Prakash (Host): Many people have heard the term “Nubian,” but may not know exactly who it describes or where the people come from.

Music: Lost Cultures theme begins as bed and continues under Narrator.

Alisha Prakash (Host): Like many of the cultures we’ve discussed on this show, it’s a culture that exists both in antiquity and in our modern day. What’s perhaps unique about the Nubian culture, though, is how recently they went through an event that so acutely altered their way of life. Welcome to Lost Cultures: Living Legacies… a podcast from Travel + Leisure. I’m your host, Alisha Prakash.

=== Part 2: Series & Episode Intro. ===

Music: Lost Cultures theme fades up from bed to full volume, then back down to bed.

Alisha Prakash (Host): What can we learn about a place by delving into the people who once lived there? In what ways do cultures build upon each other as populations come and go? How do they complement each other, interact, and leave their marks on the people that come after them? And are cultures truly ever lost, even if the people move on?

Music: Lost Cultures theme fades back up to a climax, then ends. After a beat, incidental music fades in as bed, then continues under Narrator.

Alisha Prakash (Host): The Nubian people, like so many others we’ve discussed, have endured a massive event – an event that, in many ways, cut them off from parts of their culture. But the experience of the Nubian people and the ways in which they have adjusted to their circumstances have only shown the strength of their culture. It’s also shown that the whole history of a people can be carried within their identities if they’re able to continue engaging with it — and the Nubian people have done just that.
Alisha Prakash (Host): At the start of the episode, we heard from Yasmin Moll. Now let’s hear from two other guests who will help us better understand the history and culture of the Nubian people…

Music: Incidental music continues, then fades out under guest.

Dr. Menna Agha: My name is Menna Agha. I am currently an assistant professor of design and spatial justice at Carleton University, in Canada. And I’m a Fadijja Nubian of third-generation displaced, which means, the active generation that had to bear the brunt of that move was the generation of my grandmothers. I come from a village named Qustul, that is now sitting within the displacement zone that is sometimes called [unknown word] in the south of Egypt, but originally our ancestral land is somewhere slightly north of what is now the Sudanese-Egyptian border.

Mona Sherif-Nelson: My name is Mona Nelson. Known in America as Mona Nelson, known in the village as Mona Mohi Eddin Hassan Sherif Ali Dawood Ahmed Khalil Debbabea Kakea (laughs). And so far in the Social Security Office, they decided that my name is Mona Sherif-Nelson. I am Nubian, I'm Fadijja Nubian, from the village of Abu Simbel, I am married to American, and I have two kids, a son, Shamseddiiin, and my daughter Nabrasha.

Alisha Prakash (Host): She is also the founder of the Nubian Foundation. And Mona Sherif-Nelson has spent her lifetime studying and documenting Fadijja Nubian culture so, we’ll return to her in just a moment for some cultural history.

Music: incidental music fades up to a dramatic pitch as we head into Part 4.

=== Pt4: Origin & Ancient History ===

Mona Sherif - Nelson: Our history starts with Noah of the Ark, who had Ham, one of his kids. Ham had three sons; one of them is Cush, the oldest one and he sent him to start a kingdom
where in the Upper Nile, the White Nile and the Blue Nile connect. And then he sent his second son, Mizraim, to start the kingdom of Egypt in the Lower Nile, in the North. And then he sent his third son Canaan where now it is known as Iraq. Where they started the three kingdom, and we always knew the Egyptian as our cousin. Our land, our ancestor land, it is the area in the south of Egypt, north of Sudan, according to the political borders the British put later on. And our kingdom, it’s a Nubian Kingdom, it was Kushite Kingdom. We had three main languages and three main group of people. Fadijja, us, we were the owner of the land. We had lots of very hard rocks like basalt and really lots of rocks formations, which the Egyptians took for their buildings, their temples, and sculpture, and stuff. And between the Nile and those rock formation there was a small area where it was for cultivation and Fadijja Nubian, we lived in that area. The owner of the land, they are the one who ruled Africa and Nubia. And then there is Danagla, the Kenzi people. They were able to navigate the Nile, and the Nile was very difficult to navigate, and one of the reason why we were very protected because not too many people they can navigate the Nile in our area because of the under the water waterfalls, they called it cataract. And those underwater waterfall they make a pool which you have to avoid them and only the Kenzi, those Nubian, they are the one who were able to figure it out, and avoid them and work around them, and they were merchant. So they would go up the Nile, taking stuff, and trading, and so on. So they lived as a trader. They move all the time. Then the other side of the Nile, which is considered the West Bank of the Nile, that is a desert. Sand dunes and completely dry desert. And there lived the Falasha or the people who were trader, but through the desert.

**Alisha Prakash (Host):** According to Sherif-Nelson, her people – the Fadijja Nubians – were the ones who ruled over Nubia, building more pyramids and temples than their Egyptian cousins. And while their pyramids were smaller in height and footprint than the Egyptian ones, they were just as magnificent and important to their culture. So why is it then that the Egyptian pyramids and culture have been so popular among archeologists and even the general public as compared to those of Nubia?

**Mona Sherif - Nelson:** The reason the Nubian history or the Nubian archaeology is not as glamorous as the Egyptian one is because as Nubians we believed that our rulers are only people on earth, they are not like the Pharaohs, God on earth. Because Pharaoh is a God on earth, part of the ceremony or the prayer it is to record everything that God did on earth, including what was happening, how he ate, what did he fight with, his name, all kind of things. An Egyptian temple is an open book. They don't have to guess. It is absolutely more fascinating than what they will find in the Nubian side which is the prayers. So they have to figure out (laughs) who is doing this prayer and during era of whose king and all kind of things which is in the end not as exciting as how the Egyptians, they put it.

**Alisha Prakash (Host):** Yet while ancient Egypt may be more readily accessible due to the more thorough records it left of itself, there is also much to be found in the history of Nubia and its people for those who take the time to look.

**Yasmin Moll:** Nubians are a linguistic and ethnic group that has lived for millennia in North East Africa. And Nubians have their own complex ancient civilization that rivals that of Pharaonic
Egypt, which is much better known. But in fact, Nubians ruled over Pharaonic Egypt as a 25th dynasty. They also had a rich and flourishing culture in the medieval times.

**Alisha Prakash (Host):** Five thousand years ago, the first kingdoms were developing side by side in Egypt and Nubia. Over the centuries, though, the histories of Nubia and Egypt were as closely intertwined as you might expect given how close they also were in geography. But something else worth emphasizing is this:

**Dr. Menna Agha:** Nubians are one of the oldest communities that are still living on this Earth, but also it is a Black peoplehood. It’s a Black community that kind of sits between two different countries that are identified as Middle Eastern/North African, which is Egypt and Sudan.

=== PT5: The Dam ===

**Alisha Prakash (Host):** In fact, Nubians these days are largely either citizens of Egypt or Sudan – or perhaps they are part of the wider diaspora that has spread out across the world, especially in the last 100 years or so. And it's this dispersal of people away from their ancestral homeland, along with its cause and the ways in which the culture and people endure, that we’ll mainly be focusing on in this episode.

**Yasmin Moll:** Nubian culture, like any culture, is always changing, it’s always dynamic. No culture ever stays the same. But there was a dramatic shift in the modern period with the loss of Nubians’ ancestral homeland by the dam.

**Alisha Prakash (Host):** The dam she’s referring to is the Aswan High Dam, which holds in Lake Nasser – itself, the 6th largest reservoir in the world by volume. The dam was built between 1960 and 1970 and is, in its way, the descendent of the Aswan Low Dam further upstream, which was first completed in 1902, before being heightened twice in the following decades for greater capacity.

**Dr. Menna Agha:** The community has been through many hardships in the past 100 years, since the building of the Aswan Low Dam taking out agricultural land and taking out buildings and houses up until 1964 when the post-colonial state in Egypt built the High Dam, which submerged almost the entirety of Nubian land within the Egyptian border and a lot of Nubian land in the Haifa Valley in Sudan.

**Alisha Prakash (Host):** The Egyptian Revolution of 1952 had toppled the constitutional monarchy that was previously in place while also ending the seven decade occupation of the
country by the British. But while this may have ended the colonization of greater Egypt, the Nubians in the country now found themselves at odds with Egypt's desire to modernize.

**Dr. Menna Agha:** When Egypt became a postcolonial state, and we are no longer quote-unquote “colonized,” it was the Egyptian state that thought there is a need for modernization. Electricity is needed.

**Alisha Prakash (Host):** Essentially, the British-built Lower Dam stood as an example of success that the incoming government in Egypt wished to emulate. Or it at least stood as a quote-unquote “success”... as perceived by a new government, which yearned for further industrialized modernity.

**Dr. Menna Agha:** And again, Nubian people, Nubian culture, Nubian land was deemed an acceptable sacrifice.

**Alisha Prakash (Host):** And Dr. Agha says “again” because the Nubian people had faced similar treatment under the British as the Lower Dam was built.

**Dr. Menna Agha:** The Nubian displacement in the 1960s had a huge impact for many reasons, before that it was a British colonizer basically dispossessing people's land for extraction reasons. They just wanted to control irrigation for their agricultural purposes, and we were a sacrifice deemed appropriate.

**Alisha Prakash (Host):** Now, though, the balance being weighed was between the Nubian ancestral homeland and a push toward industrialization by an emerging regional power thinking about its future powerbase.

**Mona Sherif - Nelson:** We were asked to move so we wouldn't be flooded, which did not make any sense to us since we are flooded every year, but we didn't know that this is going to be a reservoir. So we agreed, assuming we will go back again after the Nile would recede as it usually does, and then we'll come back. Of course, that did not happen. But the government, they build us homes or villages, keeping the same name of the villages, but changed the kind of relation of the villages to each other. But we moved all our villages to areas which are away from the Nile.

--- PT 6: The Nile, Adaptability, Racism ---

**Yasmin Moll:** And Nubian life before the dam was really tied to the Nile. I can't overstate the importance of the Nile to the Nubian economy and Nubian agriculture, but also Nubian rituals, right? All the key lifecycle rituals were tied to the Nile. If you had a baby, on the seventh day you
would often take the baby to the Nile and you would put lovely fragrant things – incense and perfume and henna, you would throw it into the Nile and ask the Nile to watch over your baby. Another important ritual was after their wedding night a married couple would often go bathe in the Nile together. And you can imagine what a lovely image you have, the mountains and the moon shining down and you’re swimming in the warm waters of the Nile. So all these wonderful, lovely rituals that were tied to the Nile, obviously form such an important part of Nubian culture. They couldn’t be done any more once Nubians were resettled in the desert, far away from the Nile. At the same time, though, Nubians began adapting to the new circumstances that they found themselves.

**Alisha Prakash (Host):** Which should come as no surprise, really. The Nubian people have been around for millennia and their culture has survived, flourished, and changed as needed over the years. After all, adaptability must surely be among the arsenal of traits belonging to any people who’ve endured as long as they have. But let’s return for a moment to the treatment of the Nubian people by their ancestral cousins. After the Egyptians had just revolted against their oppressors and their colonial backers, why would they treat their own citizens so poorly?

**Dr. Menna Agha:** To me, it’s a long history that’s entangled with issues of race in Africa, but also it’s not just an African issue. The dams or development projects displace 15 million people every year according to the World Bank. So Nubians were not the first or the last people to be displaced by development projects. Development, dams, irrigation, mining – all these projects displaced people who are often minorities, who are often racialized, who are often rendered into poverty all across this world to this day. So we join or we are part of the aftermath of a global project of development that has to have a sacrificial lamb in the process.

**Alisha Prakash (Host):** But even in the face of mass displacement, carried out for reasons having to do with industrialization and modernization entangled with issues of race, the Nubian culture survives. It’s important to realize, though, that many of the people carrying the culture forward never had the chance to know their ancestral lands because of the submersion caused by the dam. So it’s not just that the culture survives, but that it also finds new ways to **thrive.** And one way it does both of those is through the sort of collective remembrance that comes from storytelling.

--- PT 7: The Land We Refuse To Let Go ---

**Dr. Menna Agha:** For me personally, it’s about the history or the land that we refuse to let go. The fact that I was born in the ’80s and my land was submerged in the ’60s, and I still identify as a Nubian from that ancestral land. Me and an entire generation, several generations identify as displaced from somewhere that we have never, ever been to. Our modes of remembrance somehow are a way for us to sustain our land, even if it’s in our consciousness, and sustain our
peoplehood, and sustain our culture, and sustain ourselves to just be and become. There are lots of stories of displacement that were documented by the AUC, or the American University in Cairo, or many other anthropologists. But I always see that people forget and overlook the stories of resistance and resilience, stories of women who took care of their communities, stories of women who formed all these alliances and counter-governance, ways of taking care of their community outside of what the state said it should be. People who didn't have their homes ready yet when they went into displacement village, and they were told that they’re going to go into this modern place where everything is ready for them, and they go there, and most of them, their houses are not even built. Nobody had doors or roofs. So this is a disaster waiting to happen. Who gets what house? Is it the stronger person? Are there fights that are going to erupt? Which would've been normal, but this community sustained itself and managed to peacefully, and in solidarity, take care of each other until they got out of these first years of displacement, but they were actually a decade of building and a decade of precarity until they could feel settled a little bit. And it took a lot of work from their side. So Nubians had a very tough second half of the 20th century, but the first half of the 20th century was not really easy as well, with all the submersions from the Aswan Low Dam. I grew up with my grandmothers, and I grew up with stories, it's not only a Nubian thing, it's an African kind of knowledge device, stories and how they take you to your history and how they sustain things, but also how they become spaces of imagination, how we tell stories about the places that were, but also the places that we want to be, And the story of displacement becomes an account, but also a mode of resistance, and becomes also a mode of sustenance to us, generations after the displacement [unknown word] though I've never even seen the ancestral land.

=== PT8: Architecture ===

_Alisha Prakash (Host):_ Another way in which the Nubian culture continues is through its influence on and incorporation into the wider cultural landscape…

_Yasmin Moll:_ Nubians, before the dam, lived in villages all along the Nile that stretched from the first cataract to the sixth cataract, so from Egypt all the way to Sudan. And the houses, the windows always faced the Nile because that is a million dollar view, right? And the houses were very big, people tended to live with an open courtyard, people tended to live in multigenerational households. And Nubian architecture is very iconic in Egypt. A lot of Egyptian architects, very famous ones like Hassan Fathy, have been inspired by Nubian architecture. And if you go to a lot of resorts in Egypt, you’ll see that they’re built in a Nubian fashion because the architecture was dome and it was really good about keeping the hot air outside and the cool air inside.

_Alisha Prakash (Host):_ That said, Nubians are able to keep some details for themselves…
Yasmin Moll: One really distinctive thing about Nubian architecture that everybody always notices immediately is the houses were always decorated on the outside with drawings, drawings of animals, drawings of fish, of flora, of trees. It was always women who were the artists of the family, who always had these drawings. And each house had its own distinctive drawing. And this is something that today, if you go to Aswan and you see a traditional Nubian home, you'll always notice these drawings on the outside, which again, makes Nubian homes very distinctive in Egypt. Most Egyptian homes are not decorated in this way.

== 9 Following Economic Opportunity ==

Alisha Prakash (Host): But while traditional homes still exist in areas where displaced Nubians were originally relocated to after construction of the dam, many people eventually found it necessary over the years to further uproot in order to survive.

Dr. Menna Agha: Nobody stays the same. It's the continuous flux of human beings and human communities across time. I think the Nubian community had centralized the sense of community, and being together. Even with diasporas, this becomes a central matter. It's more geographic even because with life in displacement villages, people started struggling with economy, there was no enough economic prosperity for everybody, and that ended up with many generations like my father's leave and seek employment in urban centers inside Egypt, but also there are many Nubians outside of Egypt and in Arab Gulf countries.

Mona Sherif - Nelson: Going from the village, where again, everything makes sense to us for thousand of years, and we understand it and we accepted it and we built on it, going to Cairo, it was a transition, it was very difficult. I am told by the government that I'm Egyptian, but I know I don't look like anyone, you know, those Mediterranean looking Egyptian or I don't speak the language or I speak it with difficulty and with an accent. You can imagine, of course, it is what you call it, fish out of water. I have to figure out how to fit in. Fitting in meant to straighten my hair and to dress with color, don't wear any gold because Egyptians, they didn't have all that gold we had as Nubians. So it was a kind of mark, so I kind of refused to wear golds and the most destructive one; it is stop speaking the Nubian language. I completely forbid even my family member to speak it because I felt that it is a way for the rest of the people in Egypt to see us as not a part of Egypt. I didn't care to be an Egyptian, but I wanted to be a part of this place where I'm sitting in. I didn't wanna be different. I wanted to melt in. But Nubians, we finish schooling and we finish universities and I did my number of masters and all my family members did it. So, we are very well-educated, including those who suffered the most, like my father and his generation. They are the one who suffered the most because they are the one who had to try to make a place for us between those two societies, to focus on holding on the Nubianity inside them. And in same times to be able to get us to understand and to help us to survive. My
father generation, they were one foot in Nubia and one foot in Egypt. The older generation, the elderly, like my grandfather, they were all of them in Nubia, in my opinion. Even though they were in Egypt, everything about them, their clothes, their way of thinking, their homes, everything, it has to be replica of Nubia. Our apartment in Cairo, we wanted to be accepted as the rest of the modern Egyptian with sofa and fridge, and whatever other Egyptians they had, a bed and all kinds of things. But in the same times we would make sure to insert all kinds of Nubian articles and decor and colors wherever we are able to squeeze it into our new place in Cairo. One of the most important thing is the gathering of the Nubian people every Thursday. Friday, usually in Egypt, it is a day off. So, starting Thursday afternoon, Nubian men mostly, they will flock into our house. If they have uniform or if they have to wear a modern suits or something like that. All of them, they would take off that and dress up in complete Nubian clothes and proudly walk street of Cairo. And I remember our house, chairs and everything would become like a circle and they will sit down and suddenly we would start hearing them talking about their memories. And I’m telling you, I can feel the sand under my feet when they were talk about how they would play in the village and they would joke about it and who is better than who and who and who fought with who and how they enjoyed feasts together or all good time and bad time.

**Mona Sherif - Nelson:** And all of us, including the young one, we would join the songs. And I remember all the songs as folkloric songs. And they would leave everyone smiling and so happy and so calm, and as if they renewed Nubianity inside them, they completely renewed it, and suddenly they are satisfied, happy and full of acceptance to whatever life is gonna bring to them after that day. And Nubians, they were known between the Egyptian to have a smile, would brighten any room. Our smile, it was full of that satisfaction and full of that acceptance and full of that happiness of who we are and what are we all about.


--- 10 Weddings ---

**Alisha Prakash (Host):** So, as people moved away from the displacement villages in search of better opportunities, they were forced to balance their identities as Nubians against their identities as Egyptians. Despite this perhaps necessary balancing act, though – or maybe even because of it – people found ways in which to express and emphasize their culture in their adopted environments. Yasmin Moll described one way in which she was able to stay connected to her culture while living in Egypt’s capital city…

**Yasmin Moll:** The main way in which we experienced Nubian culture living in Cairo was through attending weddings. The wedding season is a huge season in Nubian culture. It lasts all summer. And for Nubians who are diasporic, who are living away from Aswan, away from the resettlement villages, it's often the only space we have in Cairo to sing our songs and dance to our own music. And it's often a space where people reconnect, where you meet cousins you
haven't seen in many years, relatives who are living abroad in other Arab cities, and who would just come back home for the wedding season. So that was a huge part of my sense of what it meant to be Nubian, which is that we love dancing. (laughs) And we had amazing, amazing songs. There was a lot of other customs that went along with attending weddings that also then became important. One thing, and this is a custom that is obviously shared by other South Asian cultures, other Arab cultures, but the henna night. Nubian weddings, traditionally, were always seven nights. But with the hectic pace of modern life it's been compressed into just two nights. And one of these nights is the henna night and where the bride would gather with her female relatives. And we would, again, put on a lot of songs and dance and then have our hands decorated with henna. This is, again, a wedding custom that was really associated with Nubians in Egypt, but now has become common to other Egyptian weddings as well, and I think that's great that we were able to, kind of, pass on this cultural tradition, which itself is obviously one that's not just only available to Nubians. So, I mean, the, the upshot is, growing up, I always associated being Nubian and participating in Nubian culture through events that were happy, that were all about coming together with family and all about celebrating key life events, so there's always a lot of positive associations with our Nubian heritage and our Nubian side of the family, even though we were living as a minority within Cairo. And I think, even with all the loss – for example, most Nubians no longer speak our languages, there's been a language shift towards Arabic – what has stayed the same is the love for Nubia and coming together as Nubia. And then we try to remember Nubia in creating dishes that our grandmothers may have talked about growing up or in singing songs that date back hundreds of years or in doing kinds of dances that people used to do in old Nubia. So there's still a lot of creativity and resilience and a lot of hope for the future that Nubia will still continue to exist as long as Nubians exist and as long as Nubians care for it and remember it.

=== 11 Food ===

**Alisha Prakash (Host):** And speaking of food, Moll has definitely experienced the importance it can have in helping to sustain her culture…

**Yasmin Moll:** I think sometimes the only way to experience a culture or a homeland that has either been lost or that you are far away from is through eating. I just want to say something more general about the importance of food as a medium of connection to a homeland, especially when you're living far away from the homeland or to a heritage, especially when it's a heritage that's marginalized or minoritized in different ways. And I think oftentimes people will recreate their favorite meal that they ate growing up as a way to recreate that sense of connection with home. I think that's something that everyone can identify with at some level. So my mom, she's one of the first Nubian women, the first Black Egyptian woman to have her own regular cooking slot on Egyptian television. My mom has always loved cooking, and she's a great cook. But like so many Nubians who live in the north, she actually doesn't know much
about Nubian cuisine. So when she would go on her cooking show, she would introduce herself as Nubian – she was visibly Nubian. So people would always ask her, "Well, can you make a Nubian dish?" And she found herself wondering, “Well, why don’t I actually know any Nubian dishes?” So she asked me if we could work together to research some recipes. And also because I’m an anthropologist, I’m very interested in the social relations around these recipes and the food cultures around them. And to create a cookbook so that's been really fun. And doing the research for this I got to know really interesting stories and memories that my mother had of cooking with my grandmother. So, for example, dried okra powder is a really key ingredient in a lot of Nubian dishes as is common with a lot of Northeast African cuisines. And usually, people use it to add bulk to a dish to make it, kind of, more hefty. And so now you can buy dried okra powder online in any African food store. But back then, you had to make your own. So my mom says that a few afternoons every summer, my grandmother would gather her daughters and they would get the fresh okra and then string it together. And she said, "We would make okra necklaces. And then we would just, kind of, either hang them on the balcony for them to dry in the sun or more often than not, we would end up playing with them." But the point is, they would end up drying, and then my grandmother would pulverize them. And I thought that was such a beautiful memory because it showed how, in the preparation of all these different foods, it required a lot of being together that was intergenerational, which is something that I think now, if you just go to supermarket and just buy something, you’re gonna be losing that. So I love hearing stories like that around dishes and then trying to think about, “How do you make dishes in the modern kitchen today?” Because we have now a lot of appliances that our grandmothers and great grandmother's didn't have that was very time consuming, so trying to adapt the dishes for today’s kitchen as well.

=== 12 Village Trains ===

Alisha Prakash (Host): Familial or communal experience is of course an important way of sustaining any culture, but it takes on heightened importance when so many people are displaced and dispersed. And you have to imagine that such experiences spark certain memories for those who have moved away from Aswan, while they may also spark a particular longing for those who never lived there in the first place. So, even as the gravitational pull of those previously mentioned economic opportunities caused further dispersal of the Nubian people, the emotional pull of their homeland – at once missing and displaced – has also endured through a sort of mobile communal experience.

Dr. Menna Agha: So we have all these diasporic Nubians who create all these traditions. There is a beautiful tradition that I was a part of when I was younger. Nubians kind of have this collaboration with the National Rail where they rent entire trains. And they put village names on these trains, so you would find your village, you would be booking a ticket with all the people of your village, and the whole car in the train is basically you and your cousins and your village
people. And trains upon trains go to the village for a feast. It's a big undertaking. It's thousands of Nubians moving at the same time. It's a big kind of carnivalist event, people are happy to see each other. It's as if the train itself becomes the villages that they lost, it becomes the land that they lost. Then they go to the displacement village and celebrate with their elders for the feast. So this becomes a big part of Nubians trying to preserve what is not there.

=== 13 Social Media ===

Alisha Prakash (Host): Many of the ways in which our guests have so far described the Nubian culture enduring in the modern era have been about the community sharing and participating in activities with each other. That said, many of these practices are also undoubtedly observed by the non-Nubian people around them. But the technology that is available today also allows for projections of the culture out into the world more easily, and perhaps even more intentionally, than ever before.

Yasmin Moll: Today, I would say, Nubians and descendants of that culture are really united by a shared loss, the loss of our homeland to the Aswan High Dam in 1964. But still, we like to say that Nubia still lives inside of us, guwanna, and it lives in our songs about it, it lives in our dances for it, it lives in our stories about it, and now it lives on in social media. So, Nubians are very proud of this history, we're very proud of this culture that's often, I think, misunderstood or marginalized or seen as only belonging to the ancient past, is not really part of the present. And Nubians, in recent decades, have become much more active about trying to share that culture and that history, on social media with others. Because Nubians now, we're everywhere. I mean, we're a diasporic population and social media has become a key side of coming together to reminisce, to share songs, to share photos of “Old Nubia,” as we call it, with people who are living in Australia, in DC, in the Gulf. We're living all over the world. So social media has been really key to cultivating attachment to Nubia for new generations, who are digital natives and who are very interested in learning about their history, but, you know, don't have a grandparent to ask anymore. So social media starts performing that role of being, kind of, repository of collective memory.

=== 14 Role of Women ===

Alisha Prakash (Host): Women are, of course, important in any culture – though whether their importance is actually valued and recognized has often been another matter. In the case of the Nubians, though, women have been revered from early on. The goddess Isis was at one point the most important deity worshiped by the Nubians. And their queens tended to be more
powerful than was often the case in other ancient societies. So it’s no surprise that, even as we’ve already heard, women continued to be a source of strength throughout the displacement of the last century and now into the current one...

Mona Sherif - Nelson: It is a society run by women (laughs). I don't know if this is good or bad. I think it is brilliant, but having a strong woman in the family, it is held really high in the village... The men in the family, they actually feel very proud that they have a strong woman in the family.

Dr. Menna Agha: Nubian women after displacement created all these alliances within the community, with which, activating trust and the relationships that they have been cultivating all their lives, they kind of collected funds and built what are akin to community houses. When displacement happened, they needed funds to build these houses that were not complete. They sold their gold. Nubian women were so proud of their gold, and an average Nubian woman would have around 300 grams of gold that is inherited generation after generation, and a family heirloom or a piece of gold that travels several generations was very common. And all that had to be sold so that they can finance the building process. So imagine looking at all these houses and thinking, "Well, this material was my great-grandmother's pieces of gold that are probably 300 years old and using craft that is extinct." It doesn't exist anymore. So the values that they had to give up and the wealth they had to give up gladly to take care of their communities and their families have always been invisibilized in telling that story. They were also hands-on in the building process. 'Cause there are photographs from that time where you can see women building, but then when the narrative starts, nobody speaks about women building. So you find all these stories of Nubian women making and altering and taking care of the built environment. A big part of this is cleaning. Nubian women clean their house and their street. And it's important because your street is a part of your house. So it's this kind of ownership through care, and maintenance and sustenance of space that Nubian women have been doing for centuries. And they started doing it in the displacement village as well. So these are all place-making activities. Even if it's an everyday life activity like cleaning, or if it's a one-time activity like building or thatching or framing the window or something. It's just a whole array of micro-stories and they insidiously and intentionally are invisibilized. It's not an accident. It's because our narratives and our ways of looking at the worlds are male-centered. And when we try to look the other way, was very easy for me. The minute I just asked questions about what women did, I got all these stories. The minute I asked who built our house, and they said, "Your grandmother," I didn't dismiss it as a, "Oh yeah, she must have funded this," or something. When I followed up with another question, "How?" I got all these stories about how she was there, building and decision-making through care, and through kind of emotional labor.
Alisha Prakash (Host): And, of course, all three of our guests are themselves women who are obviously following the examples of the women who came before them by leading others toward knowledge and preservation of their culture. Specifically, Yasmin Moll is involved in a project at the University of Michigan called ‘Narrating Nubia’ that seeks to bridge the gap that sometimes exists between the people of a culture and the archeologists, anthropologists, and other scholars that study it. As she told us, one way they’re doing this is by connecting those researching Nubia with community stakeholders like artists, singers, and storytellers.

Yasmin Moll: One story that we've been telling is the story of Nubia before it drowned using photos taken of Nubia in the 1960s by anthropologists. This is the only visual record of Nubia. So when people remember Nubia, they’re remembering these photos. So we wanted to create an animation of these photos to make Nubia come alive again for a new generation. We worked with a Nubian musician to record a song for this animation, and it's been circulating in Nubian social media. So we thought this was an important project to make academic knowledge and academic research relevant and accessible to the communities to which this research really matters the most.

Alisha Prakash (Host): Meanwhile, Dr. Menna Agha’s Nubian identity has informed her work as an architect…

Dr. Menna Agha: I was trying to figure out what it means to be Nubian in this time, because I am a trained architect and I've always been taught to have this rift between my identity and my performance of my profession, as if my culture does not have the capacity to feed into this profession, which is completely not true. I grew up in a Nubian house with Nubian women. If I practice architecture, it has to be community-oriented. It has to be land-oriented, it has to be people-oriented just like how my foremothers did it.

Alisha Prakash (Host): And her work as an architect has come to inform her identity as a Nubian woman…

Dr. Menna Agha: I think every Nubian that gets the chance, and it's not afforded to all of us, we’re a community that’s been so dispossessed, and it’s very rare to find people who have access to research facilities that I have the privilege of being in right now, but once we get them, we start asking these questions ... We start thinking about serving our own communities.

Alisha Prakash (Host): For her part, Mona Sherif-Nelson is a founder of the Nubian Foundation, which is committed to preserving, spreading awareness, and fostering appreciation of Nubian culture, arts, and history. And, unsurprisingly, her daughter has become very involved in the
Foundation as well. We asked her and our other guests to tell us how the idea behind the title of our show, ‘Lost Cultures: Living Legacies,’ applies to her people and culture...

**Mona Sherif - Nelson:** Being a Nubian, it is a state of mind, in my opinion. It has nothing to do with the land itself.

**Dr. Menna Agha:** Our land is lost, but I don't think our culture is. I think this is a case of colonial imaginaries. You know, “We killed you, you should stay dead,” kind of thing. There is this image of what Nubia is, and if we don't meet this image, that means we don't exist. But we, as a community, are resilient, and we are reproducing our environments and we are reproducing our cultural performance to cope with the precarities we have. Even if you take a Nubian away from the river, that doesn't mean that you take the river out of the Nubian. So I don't think Nubian cultures are lost. It's alive and well. But it looks different now.

**Yasmin Moll:** I think it's so important to spotlight, when it comes to Nubian culture, the fact that it's still a living, real contemporary culture. I think a lot of people in the US, when they think of Nubia, they think of ancient Nubia, they think of the black pharaohs. They think of queens like, I mean, Eros, who fought off Roman armies 3000 years ago. And that's great. That's a really important history to tell. But I also think it's super important to learn that there are people who are Nubian, who identify as Nubians, who have a distinctive culture, who continue to live today in Egypt and Sudan and to not let this glorious or prestigious ancient past overwhelm this contemporary culture. And I think it would also be important to not make it a monolithic culture. I think sometimes when we think about cultures that seem distant or very different from our own, we tend to think of them as homogenous in some way. But Nubian culture is very internally diverse. Nubians speak not just one language, they speak different kinds of Nubian languages. Their architecture is not just one kind of architecture, their cuisine is not one kind of cuisine. There's a lot of internal diversity and complexity and richness to Nubian culture. And I would hope we wouldn't flatten that out into just one thing.

**Alisha Prakash (Host):** And that is a crucially important point. Much of what we've heard in this episode is specific to these three women, or the people they've known or observed. The Nubian culture, like any other, contains multitudes. If you'd like to hear, see, and experience more, we asked our guests for travel recommendations that offer a close-up perspective...

--- 16 Travel & Tourism ---

**Yasmin Moll:** So if you want to learn about Nubia, you have to go to Aswan, which is the major city in the south of Egypt. And there you have to visit the Nubian Museum, which is the only official museum in Egypt dedicated to Nubian heritage and Nubian history. This museum is actually super popular with Nubians themselves because there they have dioramas and
replications of traditional homes. Most Nubians today live in modern apartment blocks. So, oftentimes Nubians will go and take their own children there to teach them about the way Nubian life used to be before the dam. Another, that I want to recommend is a small museum called Animalia. It is run by the community, by a professional Nubian tour guide who turned his house into a, sort of, community museum. And there you'll find everyday objects from old Nubia like cooking utensils or mud stoves or how people used to decorate their living room. And it's called Animalia because he also has a huge collection of stuffed animals that were part of the Nile ecosystem. So it's always a big hit with kids, including the crocodile. The crocodile is huge. It's very symbolic in Nubian culture. And then he has his grandkids give you a tour and you can sit on their terrace, overlook the Nile and have a great Nubian lunch. So Animalia is a really great museum to visit if you want an alternative, more grassroots experience of Nubia. Visitors to Aswan will go to the Nubian village in Gharb Seheyl, which is really a very touristic commercially driven area where you can buy a lot of Nubian crafts and take a lot of fun pictures with colorful Nubian houses. That's definitely an experience. At the same time, though, I feel if you're looking for something a little bit more low key, a little bit less commodified, I would recommend visiting Hisa Island. Hisa Island has one of the only Nubian communities not to be resettled, so Nubians who are not affected by the dam. And there you get these panoramic views of the Nile and you get to really interact with people in a less touristic way. But there's also still amenities so you can still have lunch and there's also guest rooms, you can still spend the night. So I'd really recommend Hisa Island as an alternative.

**Dr. Menna Agha:** Put money back into the economy, put money back into Nubians' pockets, put money back into people's pockets and in people's hands. My advice is find people, find real houses. You're gonna get the best food, and you're going to get the warmest, warmest reception, and you're going to have friends for life. Try to learn a bit of the language, try to make an effort, try to educate yourself around the history. I know you're going for a vacation, but you are on displaced land, you are amongst very precarious histories. It's out of respect that you learn these histories and you ask about them. Try to enjoy the environment, but also learn what this environment means to people. Learn what does the Nile mean to Nubians, and respect that body of water that has been the vein of existence, the main aspect of Nubian culture and Nubian history. Learn about what things mean to Nubians. Learn about the things that matter through Nubian eyes. Don't just use us as part of the visual frame around you and just consume us visually, engage in our peoplehood, but also engage of other aspects that we grant peoplehood, like the river, like palm trees, like the animals we live around. Learn, why is the center of the Nubian house made out of sand? If you go into all these hotels, you're probably not gonna have to touch sand. If you go in the middle of a Nubian house, you're going to find a big courtyard that is made out of sand. And if you ask why, you're going to learn that this is actually a most important protection device, but also an environmental device to keep the cool in the house. But the sand shows you if there are any harmful beings crossing the courtyard. If there are scorpions, if there are snakes. What does a harmful snake's movement look like, and a non-harmful snake's movement look like? Learn around this kind of also cross, inter-species justice that lives within the Nubian house. The fact that it's okay that our geckos travel across our walls. We sleep safely, we are not afraid of them. It's okay to coexist with other beings and other animals and plants and it's not a human-centered perspective.
Music: Incidental music begins as bed.

**Dr. Menna Agha:** And from our perspective, Nubians have always had an open-door policy. All my life there were people coming into our house. Who are those people? They are guests. We cannot object. They’re guests, go get the blankets, ’cause we have guests coming.

Music: Lost Cultures theme fades up to full volume and plays for a moment.

=== 17 CREDITS ===

Music: Lost Cultures theme fades down to bed.

**Alisha Prakash (Host):** Thank you to our guests, Mona Sherif-Nelson, Menna Agha, and Yasmin Moll. Be sure to follow Lost Cultures: Living Legacies on Apple Podcasts, Spotify or wherever you listen to podcasts. And we’d love your feedback. If you could, please rate this podcast and leave us a review. We’d really appreciate it. You can also find us online at travelandleisure.com/lostcultures. In our next episode, we’ll explore the Taino culture of the Caribbean, so make sure to come back for that. Until then, enjoy your travels!

Music: Lost Cultures theme fades up for a moment, then back down to bed.

**Alisha Prakash (Host):** Lost Cultures: Living Legacies is a production of Travel + Leisure and Dotdash Meredith. I’m your host, Alisha Prakash, Associate Editorial Director at Travel + Leisure. Lottie Leymarie is our Executive Producer. Jeremiah McVay is our Writer and Co-producer. Dominique Arciero is our Audio Engineer and Editor. Stacey Leasca is our Researcher. Kyle Avallone is our fact-checker. This episode was reviewed by Bryan A’Hearn, a panelist on Dotdash Meredith’s Anti-Bias Review Board, as well as Mackenzie Price, Director of Anti-Bias Initiatives. Jennifer Del Sole is Director for Audio Growth Strategy & Operations at Dotdash Meredith. Nina Ruggiero is Digital Editorial Director for Travel + Leisure. Maya Kachroo-Levine is Senior Editor at Travel + Leisure.

Music: Lost Cultures theme fades up to full volume and plays out.