Preserving Ethnic Languages as Intangible Cultural Heritage for Sustainable Tourism Development - The Case of Nubian Language in Upper Egypt

Samar ElKasrawy
Associate Professor - Tourism Studies Department
Faculty of Tourism and Hotels, Alexandria University, Egypt

Abstract

Cultural Heritage, whether tangible or intangible, is of great importance for the tourism industry. According to UNESCO, the intangible cultural heritage designates the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, and skills that communities, groups and sometimes individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage. In addition, traditions, expressions, including language are considered as a vehicle of intangible cultural heritage.

Heritage Tourism is concerned with communities that have unique customs, arts, social practices as well as traditions and expressions. Tourists are not only interested in touring sites but also exploring the life, customs, and traditions of local people. It is claimed that heritage tourists spend generously and are of great importance to communities for their economic and sustainable tourism development.

The idea of safeguarding and listing heritage sites and later intangible heritage began when the UNESCO raised its campaign to fund and rescue Nubian temples that were threatened by the construction of the High Dam in Egypt.

However, only seven sites are listed on its World Heritage List (WHL) and eight on its intangible Cultural Heritage List (ICHL). Unfortunately, the Nubian language though its uniqueness is not listed. Nevertheless, Nubians have been able to preserve their language to date and transfer it from one Nubian generation to another as part of their valuable heritage and customs.

The research is interested in studying the phenomena of ethnic languages as intangible cultural heritage within the Nubian community. It explores all the elements concerning the idea of preserving the language for future generations, especially in the times of globalization and westernization, to achieve sustainable tourism development. The study used the qualitative approach as a research methodology. In depth interviews with Nubians as well as observation were employed as data collection tools within the case study. Results clearly revealed elements of the phenomena of ethnic language in Nubba.

Future studies in this field can be made on the ethnic language of the community in the Egyptian Oasis Siwa.

Keywords Ethnic Language, Intangible Cultural Heritage, Sustainable Tourism Development, Nubian Community.

1. Introduction

Language is not merely a tool for communication; it is a repository of cultural identity, heritage, and knowledge transmission. The preservation of ethnic languages as intangible cultural heritage (ICH) has emerged as a critical facet of sustainable tourism development, fostering a harmonious relationship between cultural preservation and economic growth. Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) is considered assets inherited from the past but of high value for the present and the future of a country.

Cultural heritage, both tangible and intangible, holds a paramount position in the discourse of sustainable tourism development. UNESCO's definition of intangible cultural heritage, encompassing "practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, and skills," provides a foundational understanding of the multifaceted nature of heritage (UNESCO, 2003). Within this framework, language emerges as a pivotal component, acting as a carrier of traditions, expressions, and the essence of cultural identity.

Tourists are not only interested in visiting and observing the sites but also exploring the life of the local people, their traditional handicrafts, folklore, language etc. Heritage tourism, a significant subset of cultural tourism, has garnered scholarly attention for its economic and socio-cultural implications. Smith & Richards (2013) argues that heritage tourism contributes substantially to local economies, emphasizing the allure of unique customs, arts, and social practices as key attractions for tourists. This aligns with the assertion that heritage tourists seek not only physical sites but also immersive experiences that delve into the life, customs, and traditions of local communities (Timothy & Boyd, 2003).

The inception of the concept of safeguarding intangible heritage traces back to UNESCO's endeavors, notably triggered by the potential threats to Nubian temples during the construction of the High Dam in Egypt (UNESCO, 2019). However, only seven Egyptian sites are listed on its World Heritage List (WHL) and eight on its Intangible Cultural Heritage List (ICHL). Generally, only a few languages are listed on the UNESCO's (ICHL). The Nubian language, despite its unique characteristics, has been overlooked in these listings.

This gap in the preservation of linguistic diversity is a critical concern, especially considering the intrinsic connection between language and cultural identity. The Nubian community's success in preserving their language becomes a compelling case study within the broader context of heritage conservation.

In summary, this paper seeks to contribute to the discourse on preserving ethnic languages as intangible cultural heritage for sustainable tourism development. By examining the case of the Nubian language in Upper Egypt, the study aims to shed light on the importance of preserving the language for future generations, especially in the times of globalization and westernization.

More specifically, the study wishes to answer the following questions:

- How were the Nubians able to preserve their language from one generation to another?
- What effect did globalization have on the Nubian language?
- How can the Nubian Language as an intangible cultural heritage raise their sense of identity and foster sustainable tourism development?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) and Sustainable Tourism

Heritage tourism is defined as "travelling to experience the places, artefacts, and activities that authentically represent the stories and people of the past and present. It includes cultural, historic, and natural resources" (Gordon, 2022). Therefore, it can serve as an effective tool to generate income, tax revenues, and jobs, diversify local economies, and improve the local quality of life (Jiang & Homsey, 2008; El-Din & Elkasrawy, 2017).

The concept of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) has gained prominence in scholarly discourse, particularly in the context of sustainable tourism development. ICH encompasses traditions, customs, oral expressions, and languages that embody the cultural diversity of communities (UNESCO, 2003). They play an extremely important role in the identities of groups and individuals.

In addition, heritage is considered as a process or performance that is concerned with the production and negotiation of cultural identity, individual and collective memory, and social and cultural value (Smith & Richards, 2013; Bialostocka, 2017). Language, as a fundamental element of ICH, plays a pivotal role in shaping the cultural landscape of a region and influencing tourist perceptions and experiences (Smith & Richards, 2013). It is considered as the main creator of identities of groups and individuals (Smeets, 2004). Thus, the loss of a language thus entails the loss of cultural heritage.

Sustainable tourism development is closely linked to the preservation of cultural heritage. The integration of ethnic languages into tourism strategies is integral to sustainable tourism development. Authenticity is a key factor in attracting tourists, and the preservation of languages contributes to the preservation of cultural authenticity, making destinations more appealing (Richards & Munsters, 2010).

Preserving ethnic languages can lead to economic benefits through cultural tourism. Studies suggest that linguistic diversity enhances the attractiveness of destinations, leading to increased tourism revenue and sustainable economic development (Salazar, 2012). The Nubian language, with its deep-rooted connection to the region's history and traditions, has the potential to enhance the cultural tourism experience in Upper Egypt.

However, when dealing with ICH of local communities, much attention should be taken so as not to commercialize it and lose its value and authenticity to the demands of tourism. This underlines the need for a carefully designed, national-scale framework which places local communities and identities at the heart of ICH safeguarding measures. Thus, local communities must have support from local, regional, and national authorities to enable them to preserve their languages and develop their ICH (Smeets, 2004; Braber & Howard, 2023)

Finally, some countries have already taken the initiatives of preserving languages by building language museums. Language museums examine the history, impact, and art of language. There are at least 58 museums of language or written culture in 31 countries all over the world. Two out of three are in Europe, and most of the museums were opened after 1990. Germany alone has ten museums, and France, USA and China are the only other countries with more than three language museums (Grepstad, 2018).

2.2. The Importance of Ethnic Languages in Cultural Preservation

Ethnic Language is one of the most important forms and practices of ICH (Bakar et al., 2014). It is said that it is of great value to people's sense of 'identity especially for ethnic groups who feel that their identity is threatened of being lost, giving them a feeling of belonging and representing their cultural capital. in addition, it can be considered as a source of inventory system for the living heritage by presenting it in the linguistic interactions of the people who produce it (Bialostocka, 2017).

Hence, the preservation of ethnic languages is the key to safeguarding cultural diversity and maintaining the distinctiveness of communities (Tong, & Cheung, 2011). The Nubian language, with its unique linguistic features, serves as a repository of the rich cultural heritage of the Nubian people in Upper Egypt. The imminent threat of language erosion underscores the urgency of documenting and revitalizing the Nubian language to ensure the transmission of cultural values to future generations.

According to the UNESCO World Atlas of Languages', there are around 8324 languages, spoken or signed, documented by governments, public institutions, and academic communities. Out of 8324, around 7000 languages are still in use, where strangely the Nubian language is stated as not in use (UNESCO.org, 2021)

It is expected that only half of these languages will survive the next two centuries. According to the Director-General of UNESCO, the safeguarding of linguistic diversity is urgent in view of the pace at which languages are disappearing (two per month on average)." *I am thinking in particular of indigenous populations for whom the defense of the mother language remains a crucial right ensuring respect for their identity and the safeguarding of their heritage*" (Smeets, 2004).

Various challenges hinder the preservation of ethnic languages. Globalization, modernization, and economic pressures often contribute to the decline of these languages (Grenoble & Whaley, 2006).

According to Bakar *et al.* (2014), the younger generations who are more capable of spending efforts to preserve their ethnic language as well as other ICH, have the least commitment towards local culture mainly because they are highly influenced by westernization. However, the elder generations with high cultural consciousness are losing their influence. Furtherly, the high socio-economic ethnic people are the least interested in practicing their language and other local cultures, while low socio-economic ones are disadvantaged from important decision-making processes affecting them. In other words, the responsibility of safeguarding ethnic languages has been blown away.

Naturally, the efforts required to document specialized layers of the lexicon of non-written languages, as in the case of Nubian language, are huge compared to the case where the language is well described and has a widely practiced writing system. Thus, in the case of non-written languages it is advisable to be actioned by larger groups; not only the ethnic one (Smeets, 2004). An effective legal and policy framework is critical for the protection of ethnic languages. Examining existing policies related to linguistic diversity and cultural heritage can provide insights into successful language preservation models (Kapchan, 2014). Moreover, advancements in technology offer new avenues for language preservation. Digital platforms, mobile applications, and online resources can contribute to the documentation and

revitalization of ethnic languages (Hinton, & Meek, 2018).

As language is so closely connected to culture, language loss is almost always accompanied by cultural and social disruption (Rowan, 2017). Understanding these challenges is essential for designing effective language preservation strategies.

2.3.   The Case of Nubian Language in Upper Egypt

Nubian language is the common feature that characterizes Nubian of today and it is the centre of their identity (Khatt Foundation, 2010).

Upper Egypt, home to the Nubian community, provides a unique context for examining the preservation of the Nubian language as an ICH for sustainable tourism development. The ancient land Nubia is located from the first cataract of the river Nile in Egypt to roughly the fourth cataract in the Republic of Sudan. During the Kushite dynasty, the Kingdom of Kush in Nubia successfully conquered and ruled Egypt during the twenty-fifth dynasty (760BC - 656BC) (Rowan, 2017). Nowadays, the Nubian (i.e. Nilo-Saharan) languages like Dongolawi, Kenuzi, and Nobiin are spoken in this border area between Egypt and Sudan (Epps & Law, 2022; Dimmendaal, 2023).

Several Nubian languages are endangered because of the growing importance of (Egyptian and Sudanese) Arabic in day-to-day interaction. The construction of the Aswan Dam also had rather dramatic effects on the stability of this language (Epps & Law, 2022, Dimmendaal, 2023). Present-day Nubian language speakers are almost bilingual in Arabic.

The Nubian writing was like Egyptian writing but developed into a completely separate one. Nubian used the Egyptian Hieroglyphic language before and during the middle kingdom in Egypt (ZiBElius-ChEn, 2014).

During the Christian Nubian era the Old Nubian alphabets had resemblance to Old Greek and Coptic alphabets. Both Coptic (31 or 32 letters) and Old Nubian (26) had more letters than old Greek (24), either to add special letters with no equivalent in old Greek (the Old Coptic) or to represent special sounds (the Old Nubian) (Khatt Foundation, 2010)

This case study delves into the challenges faced by the Nubian language, the ongoing efforts in language preservation, and the potential economic and cultural benefits of integrating the Nubian language into the tourism sector.

2.4.   Community Involvement: preservation attempts of the Nubian Language

The active involvement of local communities is vital in preserving ethnic languages. Researchers advocate for community-led initiatives that empower local populations to take charge of language preservation efforts (Salazar, 2012).

Nubian who once left their homeland seeking employment for their welfare in big industrial cities like Cairo and Alexandria, are returning once more to connect and trying to find a way that guarantees the continuity of Nubian living heritage. Accordingly, they have formed Nubian social clubs as well as Nubian associations.

They make sure that their children get to know traditional Nubian songs, music, and dances. Furthermore, there is a Nubian initiative to implement language learning classes for children of Nubian heritage who do not speak a Nubian language. These classes are informal schools, where Nubian speakers are being trained as language teachers. Culturally relevant language learning materials are also being developed and prepared by the Nubians themselves (Rowan, 2017).

Recently, the Nubian Archaeologist Dr. M. M. Khalil has drafted a textbook on how to write old Nubian. He believes that since Nubian relies mainly on produced tones (intonation or chanting) then a Nubian who talks and masters the language is more qualified and capable to establish a standard method of writing.

"The Nubian Languages and Culture Project" is assisting with safeguarding the intangible heritage and endangered languages of this ancient land, people and culture. The project was launched at SOAS (University of London) in May 2016. It aims to support the continuation and documentation of the Nubian languages and living culture. Because of its high importance, the documentation from the Project is being deposited in the Endangered Languages Archive (ELAR) at SOAS (SOAS org,, 2016)

In addition, the Nubian Community in Sudan try to preserve their intangible culture by organizing Nubian events like for example the Nubian Culture and Tourism Festival sponsored by the DAL Group Company in Sudan. It gathers Sudanese and Egyptian writers, giving lectures on Nubian literature. Discussions, workshops, and presentations were given on the Nubian orthography and writing the Nubian language (Rowan, 2017)

One of the successful initiatives to safeguard the Nubian heritage including its language, that should be followed by Egyptian Nubians, is the Sudanese Nubian Association in the UK one of their main objectives is to assist their members and their children to learn and master the Nubian language. They also aim to promote and revive the Nubian heritage through cultural events, lectures, workshops, film shows, arts and folklores, publications and social gatherings (SNAUK org., 2006)

3. Research Methodology

To answer the research questions, a qualitative approach was adopted, where a combination of indepth – semi-structured interviews with Nubians as well as observation methods were employed within the Nubian case. The main four areas tackeled by the interviews were as follows:
- Nubian language as a source of community's identity
- Difficulty of the Nubian language
- Second generation mastering the Nubian language.
- Language museum for preservation of the Nubian language

Semi-structed interviews were used to reveal information from the respondents in an organized manner while keeping the neutral environment with less attached bias from the interviewer. In this kind of interviews some questions are usually prepared in advance in relation to a topic that the researcher or interviewer wishes to cover. It produces more reliable information and may enable the interview subject to bring forward experiences and knowledge that the interviewer had not previously considered (Brinkmann, 2014).

Interviews took place in March 2023 in Aswan (especially in the Nubian Village) as well as with Nubians living in other cities outside Aswan like in Cairo and Alexandria, mainly at their Nubian clubs at both cities in September 2023. Data collected was transcribed and analyzed using content analysis to determine the presence of certain words, themes, or concepts within the data.

The reserch sample included 22 interviewees: 15 in the Nubian Village and the Nubian House in Aswan, 3 in each Nubian Club in Cairo and 4 in Alexandria

respectively. The sample included both genders with similar proportions.

All the respondents in Aswan were involved in the tourism industry; males ranged between being hotel porters, boat (felukka) sailers, horse coach riders, souvenier sellers, while women were mainly henna painters, handicrafts sellers, serving tourists in their homes by offering local drinks. The age of the interviewees ranged mostly between 30 and 55. The majority were of moderate to low education. However, the Nubian interviewees in Alexandria and Cairo were all highly educated and had jobs as engineers, teachers, government employees as well as marine soldiers. However, they were second or third generation and could not master the Nubian language.

The calm and pleasant environment in Aswan along with the friendliness of Nubians brought openess and richness of responses. Nubian Interviewees in Cairo and Alexandria were also very friendly and cheerful and appreciated the academic research.

Table 1. The Research Sample Description

Gender	Freq	%	Age	Freq	%	Educ.	Aswan		Cairo & Alex.	
							Freq	%	Freq	%
Male	12	54.5	30-45	14	63.6	Low-medium	13	86.7	0	0
Female	10	45.5	45-60	8	36.4	high	2	13.3	7	100
Total	22	100		22	100		15	100	7	100

The collected data revealed information that answer inquiries about how Nubians perceive their language, their efforts for preserving their language from one generation to another in the times of globalization and whether they accept non-Nubians learn their language.

4. **Results** and Discussion

Responses from the interviews were categorized as follows.

4.1. Language and Identity

All Nubians living in Nuba share the same pride towards their language. They acknowledged that it is the source of their identity.

They believe that their language was one of the reasons that made Egypt win its 6th October war against Israel in 1973. They look to Ahmed Edris, who created a Nubian-based code during the war, as their own ultimate Nubian hero (Edris commanded 344 coders and sent encrypted messages in the Nubian language).

In addition, Nubians in Aswan insist that they use their language among them, especially at home with their children. Some use Arabic and Latin letters to write it as spoken and some parents use this way to make it easy for their children to memorize the language.

They use it with pride even in front of others.

Some examples of their wordings were "*this is our language, it is our belonging, it is who we are*"

4.2. Difficult Language

When asked whether they would teach their language to non-Nubians, respondents were all insisting on the "no" answer. Some respondents tried to justify this by clarifying that the language must be taught from childhood, due to its difficulty. It was clear that most of them (80%) do not wish to share their language with non-Nubians and deal with it as private property. This might be due to their fear that the language will be influenced by other languages and will lose its purity. However, this might have a negative

impact on preserving the Nubian language as an ICH, because more and more the number of Nubian speakes will decline. According to Salazar (2012), local communities should lead the preservation of their ICH; in this case, these are the Nubians. However, previously stated by Smeets (2004) the preservation of non-written languages is extremely difficult and must involve larger groups and be supported by legal frameworks and policies.

However, few of the interviwees (13%) stated that they try to teach tourists some Nubian words as this pleases them and encourages them to buy their products more or use their touristic services, e.g., like sailing in felucca (a small boat) or riding in a horse-coach (hantour). This finding is consistent with what Smeets (2004) and Braber & Howard (2023) cautioned from concerning the fear of ICH being commercialized.

One of the interviewees revealed that he uses social media to teach the language to Nubians who live outside Nuba or to non-Nubians who are interested in their language.

4.3.   Second generation

Interviees declared that none of them know how to write the Nubian language and can only speak it. Usually, the second generation born outside Nuba cannot practice the language at all. This finding is consistent with what Dimmendaal (2023) concerning that the Nubian language is endangered due to the influence of the official Arabic language as well as the influence of building of High Dam and immigration of Nubians.

Interviewees in Cairo and Alexandria stated that they feel embarrassed when visiting their families in Nuba as they can not understand them, when they communicate in the Nubian language, and they sometimes laugh at them.

4.4.   Language museum

Interviewees were resisting the idea of having a language museum. For example, one of them said that there is no such thing called a Language Museum.

However, after discussing the benefits of safeguarding their language in such a museum and there are many successful examples of it in Europe and America. Further explained benefits included bringing more attention and tourists to their destination which will eventually bring economic benefit to them.

5.   Conclusion and Recommendations

Preserving ethnic languages as intangible cultural heritage is essential for sustainable tourism development. This literature review highlights the interconnectedness of language, cultural identity, and tourism, emphasizing the need for holistic strategies that involve communities, consider policy frameworks, and leverage technological advancements.

The ICH is at risk if the local community does not recognize what is happening to their cultural heritage and might erode if no action or protection is taken. Therefore, awareness   should be raised among the Nubians.

Concerning the need to preserve and document their language. Nubians are the ones who should be the leaders in all attempts and projects to revive, document and preserve their language.

As previously presented at the literature review concerning the importance of language museums in preserving languages (Grepstad, 2018), a language museum should be built in Aswan, where the Nubian language will be its point of attraction. This

language museum should be like a lighthouse that guides the local community and attract them. It should be responsible for raising awareness among Nubians concerning cultural heritage preservation and tourism.

Moreover, collaboration between museums should take place to be able to link them in a network in a way that links Nubians everywhere as well as achieving mutual benefits in spreading and preserving Nubian language.

As this research unfolds the story of the Nubian community in Upper Egypt, it simultaneously opens avenues for future exploration. The ethnic language of the community in the Egyptian Oasis Siwa; Amazigh language, emerges as a potential subject for further investigation, offering a comparative lens to enrich our understanding of linguistic diversity and heritage conservation.

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