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Egypt's ancient temples rescued from the Nile 50 years ago

One of the world's biggest archaeological rescue operations was successfully concluded 50 years ago after a massive ancient Egyptian temple complex was dismantled and hoisted to higher ground to prevent its flooding by the damming of the Nile River. The groundbreaking UNESCO-led project to relocate around 20 gigantic monuments in Abu Simbel complex was officially concluded on September 22, 1968, after an eight-year international effort involving hundreds of workers. Here is a look back at the remarkable feat.

More than 2,500 years old

The two Abu Simbel temples—named after their village location—were carved out of cliffs overlooking the Nile in the time of Ramses II, the ruler of Egypt from 1298 to 1235 BC. The larger has four colossal statues of a seated Ramses II at the entrance, through which there are succession of rooms and galleries stretching back 63 meters (207 feet).

The temples are among the jewels of the ancient Nubia region that extended down the Nile from Aswan in southern Egypt to present-day Sudan.

Threatened by Nile dam

In the 1950s, Egypt's president Gamal Abdel Nasser launched a project to dam the mighty Nile at Aswan in order to generate electricity for the region, increase cultivable land and reduce flood-

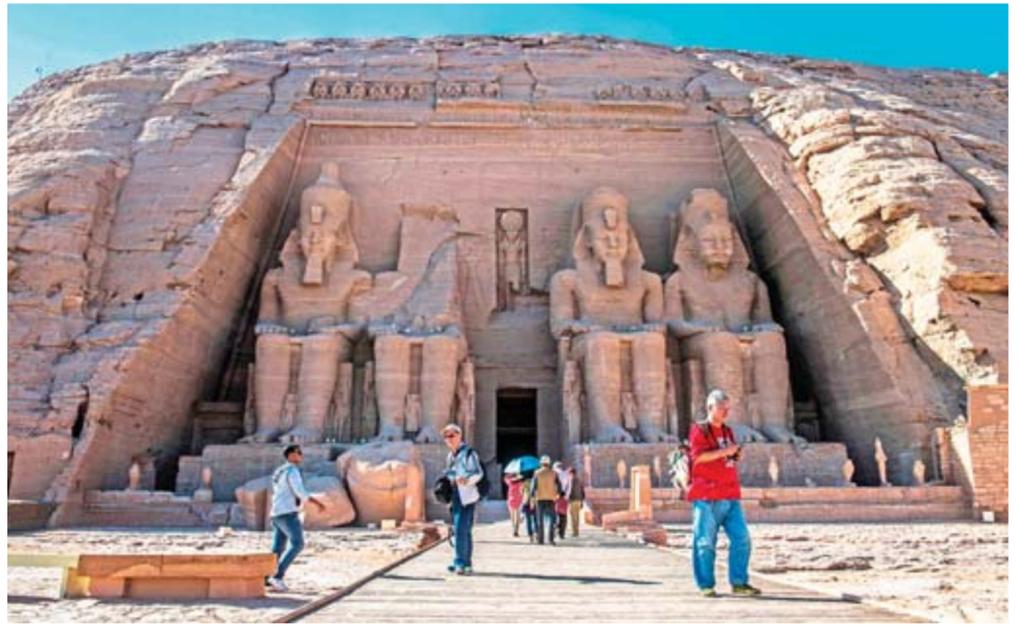
ing. The construction would create a huge artificial lake behind the dam wall, requiring the resettlement of tens of thousands of indigenous Nubians from villages in the area and also threatening monuments. Pharaonic and Greco-Roman temples including those of Abu Simbel risked being submerged.

Technical feat

In 1960, UNESCO, the UN organization dedicated to preservation of culture, launched an appeal to save the temples. Several projects were put on the table but, too costly, they were quickly put aside. Eventually a Swedish-Egyptian proposal was selected. Work was launched on April 1, 1964 with the construction of a temporary dam to protect the site and the excavation of the cliff around the two temples.

The Abu Simbel temples were cut into 1,035 blocks each weighing between 20 and 30 tons. The four seated statues of Ramses II and six others of the king standing up were sawn into pieces. Jacks, cranes and powerful winches hoisted the enormous stone weights to the top of the cliff, 64 meters (210 feet) from their original location. There the blocks were reassembled to reconstitute the two temples exactly as they were.

Artificial hills were then created around the site as a protective barrier against the river. For four years about 800 laborers and 100 technicians worked in the desert under a red-hot sun to complete the project, which cost 36 millions dollars.



An international effort

At a ceremony on September 22, 1968 to mark the completion, UNESCO director general Rene Maheu said it was "the first time that we have seen international cooperation in action on such a scale in the sphere of culture." It was an "unparalleled undertaking, in which over fifty countries... have combined their efforts to save the artistic and historical treasures of the temples of Abu Simbel." The original site is today completely submerged by Lake Nasser.

Follow-up rescue

An operation—also part of UNESCO's Nubia Campaign—to save the temple complex on Philae island, around dozen kilometers upstream from Aswan, started in 1972. Involving 40 archaeologi-

cal missions from around the world, it ran for eight years and cost more than 30 million dollars. About 20 temples, statues and monuments known as "the jewel of the Nile" were dismantled and transported, stone-by-stone, to the nearby Agilkia island, on higher ground.

UNESCO director general Amadou Mahtar M'Bow praised the "wealth of talent, energy, experience and capital" mobilized to save the Nubia monuments. "Nowhere, perhaps, has the sacred art of Egypt defied time so majestically as in Nubia, part of which is vanishing before our eyes today," he said. — AFP

In this file photo tourists visit the Ramses II complex at the ancient Egyptian temple of Abu Simbel, some 1120 kilometers south of the Egyptian capital Cairo.—AFP



A picture shows Lend Mustafa a transgender man carrying a banner reading "I Promise To Be Your Voice" while marching on Kosovo's first pride parade in Pristina.

Being LGBT in Kosovo: A battle to come out from the shadows

On paper, the legal request was small: changing his name from Blerta to Bert. But it was a big—and risky—move by Bert Morina, a transgender man trying to bring Kosovo's marginalized LGBT community out of the shadows. The request to change his name to the more masculine version, and his gender to male, was rejected by authorities in the tiny Balkan democracy, where a gay and trans community is forced underground despite progressive laws in its 10-year-old constitution.



Lend Mustafa a transgender man speaks for AFP in Pristina.—AFP photos

There are no gay clubs or bars in the capital Pristina, and only two coffee shops are considered safe in the city of half a million. There have been reports of owners of other cafes kicking gay customers out on the street. Determined to change this way of life, Morina has filed a case with the Constitutional Court, despite the dangers that come with going public. The 28-year-old only knows a few openly gay people in Kosovo, where the majority of the population are Muslim ethnic Albanians.

"For me it is very important to continue this route, because it is the first case (of its kind), we need to prove that you can push this till the end," he said, speaking inside a secret "safe house" in the capital. It is the headquarters of his NGO, Centre for Equality and Liberty (CEL), which pur-

posefully does not list the address on its website. The details are shared by word of mouth among members, a network estimated to be around 1,800, according to the NGO. "I am out therefore I am," reads a banner above the entrance to the living room.

'We will burn you'

A 2015 study of the US-based National Democratic Institute (NDI) found that Kosovo is the most homophobic country in the Balkans, a region that is not known for tolerant views on sexuality. More than 80 percent of LGBT Kosovars interviewed said they had been subjected to psychological abuse because of their sexual orientation, while 29 percent reported being victims of physical violence. Lend Mustafa, another transgender man who works with Morina, rattles off the threats he has received for his own transition and broader LGBT rights campaigning. "After being the main speaker at last year's pride parade I personally received hundreds of threats from religious extremists, including life-threatening ones," he said.

"Most of them are: we will eradicate you, we will burn you, you are ruining our society, what is this perversion that you are advertising in the media, etc." Despite a high number of threats and even physical attacks in recent years, only around 20 cases have been reported to the police since 2012, according to the Center for Social Group Development, an LGBT advocacy group in Kosovo. "This happens either as a result of fear of retaliation, fear of exposure, or fear of no proper investigation and treatment of the case by law enforcement authorities," the group said in a 2016 report.

'Shadow life'

Discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation is outlawed by Kosovo's 2008 constitution, which was written after the former province split from Serbia in a bloody separatist war. It is "one of the most advanced constitutions in the region in terms of human rights and in particular LGBT rights", said Habit Hajredini, who leads a government office in charge of minority rights.

But the letter of the law has little bearing on reality. "We need to work hard in raising awareness to understand the importance and rights of this community," Hajredini said. There are also public figures who espouse openly homophobic views. Fuad Ramiqi, a leader of the Islamic Movement to Unite political party, has said that LGBT people should seek medical care because "they have deviated from their reality". "If (accepting them) is a condition (for European integration) it is better for Kosovo not to enter Europe than to fulfill it," he said.—AFP

Kenya's gay community revels in screening of lesbian love story, 'Rafiki'

The lights dim in the packed cinema as the holding music fades. The film title "Rafiki" flashes up on the screen, and some 230 hushed spectators burst out in euphoric applause. After being banned for months due to a lesbian love theme, the film whose title means "Friend" in Swahili was screened for the first time yesterday in its country of origin, Kenya. "It is really a victory," said Nairobi resident Daisy Oriiri, 24, who attended the historic showing at a movie house near the city center with a female friend. "This is the kind of movie that makes it possible for mentalities to evolve, that makes people understand that we have rights and that we are human beings," she told AFP, clearly moved. "It was a beautiful movie, it tells a part of my life."

Earlier this year, Rafiki became the first Kenyan film ever selected for showing at France's prestigious Cannes Film Festival. Director Wanuri Kahiu went to court after the Kenya Film Classification Board banned Rafiki for "promoting lesbianism", a decision that rendered it ineligible for the Oscars. A judge ruled on Friday that the film can be shown to "willing adults only" for a period of seven days—the minimum requirement for a film to qualify for



In this file photo (from left) Kenyan actress Samantha Mugatsia, Kenyan director Wanuri Kahiu and Kenyan actress Sheila Munyiva pose as they arrive at the screening of the film 'Rafiki' at the 71st edition of the Cannes Film Festival in Cannes, southern France.—AFP

Oscar consideration. Yesterday's showing happened in a fun, relaxed environment in a country where homophobia is rife, with youngsters taking selfies to capture the memory. Laughs and boos met the censorship board's logo and announcement that the film is restricted to over-18s. Theatre manager Celcius Aloo said Sunday: "I expect it to be full every day."—AFP

America's first art exhibition for dogs



Ryokou the Australian Shepherd cross dog and Big Bear the Pit Bull check out a dog sculpture (not seen) by artist Alex Sheriff at "dOCUMENTA".



Pico the long haired Chihuahua checks out a dog sculpture (not seen) by artist Alex Sheriff at "dOCUMENTA".



Pico and Mickey J are pictured beside a mural by artist Ruben Rojas at "dOCUMENTA", billed as America's first art exhibition for dogs.



Ryokou the Australian Shepard cross dog checks out a dog sculpture by artist Tibi Tibi Neuspel at "dOCUMENTA", billed as America's first art exhibition for dogs, in Los Angeles, California. The exhibition invited various artists to create works appealing to the canine sensibility through a variety of media, from sound and sculpture to kibble and squeaky toys.—AFP photos