

HYDROPOETICS

MYTH, REALITY, AND LITERATURE IN THE EASTERN NILE BASIN

by

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## DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

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Doctor of Philosophy

Department of Comparative Literature

June 2023

Title: *Hydropoetics: Myth, Reality, and Literature in the Eastern Nile Basin*

How do literary and folkloric traditions of the Nile inform the region's water politics? My dissertation answers this question by analyzing poetry and songs from Ethiopia, Sudan, and Egypt—three of the five countries of the Eastern Nile Basin. I take the Nile as a quintessential site for comparison across regions, languages, and genres at the intersection of African Studies, comparative literature, and global cultural studies. In the various chapters of my project, I consider how poetry is, at times, inseparable of the nationalist projects of respective governments and, at other times, a challenge to the constraints of cultural and linguistic identity, nationalism, and the legacies of historical water treaties. Hydropolitical debates regarding water policy anchor my project, and each poem and song I examine demonstrates some of the cultural and literary impacts these forms have on imagining relationships to the Nile. I take seriously the linguistic, formal, and generic dimensions to the poetry and songs I address, spanning Amharic, English, Ge'ez, Arabic, and Nubian, as well as lyric, free verse, prose, and popular song. I weave historical and political documents together with mythology and other folkloric expressions as a crucial backdrop to discussions of the present-day situation in Egypt, Sudan, and Ethiopia. My project thus considers the dynamic interplay between

historical and mythological moments that reemerge in the 20th century in the eastern Nile basin.

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To  
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# INTRODUCTION

This dissertation on hydro-poetics is about an eclectic mix of Nile issues: diverse voices and collective identities, religious and intercultural connections, political and environmental concerns, as well as historical international relations. There has been a torrent of news stories regarding political developments in the basin throughout the writing of this dissertation: Ethiopia's frequent boundary disputes with Sudan, the most devastating civil war in recent world history and the humanitarian crises in all its corners, intermittent civil war in Sudan and the alleged involvement of Egypt, Ethiopia, and other countries.<sup>1</sup> All of these various events suggest a general trend of Nile-related developments that gesture to the possibility of a larger war looming on the horizon.

The connections among these crises, including Ethiopia's internal<sup>2</sup> and external conflicts,<sup>3</sup> as well as its historical foreign policies,<sup>4</sup> indicate that the Nile is both directly and indirectly a significant factor in regional politics. The longstanding relationships entangling Ethiopia and Egypt, for example, through shared histories of the Nile and the church, attest to the multifaceted bonds connecting these nations.

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<sup>1</sup> "What role do outside players have in the war in Sudan? Al Jazeera: Inside Story." <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TIMg9YAXvcY> Retrieved 4/23/2023.

<sup>2</sup> Bearing in mind the effects of the hyperethnicised politics and ethnic federalism set in place by the EPRDF since 1991, the places where ethnically targeted Amharas have been frequently "killed like chicken" (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jun/19/ethiopia-more-than-200-amhara-people-killed-in-attack-blamed-on-rebels>) for over three decades, especially in the past five years, are the Benishangul Gumuz region where the GERD is located and Wellega in Oromia Region bordering with Sudan.

<sup>3</sup> For historical hostilities and the question of utilizing Nile resources, see Tilahun W. (1979:29-30); For the Ethio-Egyptian war of Gura and Gundet in 1875-76 and its outcome see Erligh, H. (2000:183).

<sup>4</sup> The historian Bairu Tafla (2000) contends that together with Islam and the Red Sea—up until Ethiopia became landlocked following Eritrea's secession—the Nile was the most significant factor that guided Ethiopia's foreign relations for over a thousand years (p. 153).

To consider the Nile's global significance, we might turn to a recent situation in which the river entangles (North-Eastern) Africa, the Middle East, the Western world, and international financial institutions all at once. For each of the main actors of the Eastern Nile Basin (Ethiopia, Sudan, and Egypt), the end of February 2020 was the long-awaited date for signing the final version of the agreement on the filling and operation of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD). The trilateral discussion had continued for almost a decade, and the four-year deliberation had come to a standstill before, and for the first time, the Egyptian president invited the United States' government and the World Bank to step in as a broker and observer respectively.<sup>5</sup> At the end of the broader ministerial negotiation in Washington DC, however, only Egypt and Sudan signed the agreement. Ethiopia declined to sign the agreement on account of its dissatisfaction with a number of technical details and legal provisions in the document. Ethiopia argued that the brokered agreement was merely a reiteration of the contested colonial and post-colonial water treaties, which had long put Ethiopia at a disadvantage. Calls for war from among negotiating parties ensued, and mediators warned of potential cuts to aid. The United States announced a suspension of about \$130 million of foreign aid to Ethiopia unless it signed the agreement. The United States president went so far as to suggest that Egypt may "blow up the [Ethiopian] dam which will stop water from flowing into the Nile."<sup>6</sup> Subsequently, the Arab League passed a resolution supporting the downstream

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<sup>5</sup> Morsy, Ahmed."GERD in US hands." *Ahram Online*, Wednesday 6 Nov 2019.  
<https://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/50/1201/355404/AlAhram-Weekly/Egypt/GERD-in-US-hands.aspx>

Ethiopia had originally accepted the participation of outside parties as observers.

<sup>6</sup> Mr. Trump voiced his anger over Ethiopia's "disobedience" during a three-way phone call with Prime Ministers Benjamin Netanyahu and Abdalla Hamdok, concerning the Peace Deal between Israel and Sudan in 2020.

( <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eFpXz-Xbse4> ).



nations, denouncing Ethiopia's "unilateral" action of first-phase filling and calling for the UN's intervention.<sup>7</sup> Ethiopia responded to both calls as unconscionable, and the tripartite negotiation among Egypt, Sudan, and Ethiopia continued under the auspices of the African Union.

It is well worth highlighting that, for Egypt, the Nile is not just a river but its lifeline. As a hydro-electric power dam, however, the GERD does not stop water from flowing downstream, and Egypt certainly knows better than to blow up the Ethiopian dam. Understandably, Egypt's concerns of water scarcity and its unflinching demand for water securitization has "implicitly and on occasion explicitly led itself to reserve for itself the right to intervene in the affairs of other states to protect its water interests."<sup>8</sup> All of that said, my interest in this dissertation is not to celebrate or condemn the rhetoric and the resulting actions of rival factions, but to interrogate the discourses, trace their origins, and analyze the ways in which nations manage internal as well as transboundary cooperation. In the end, drawing together the political dynamics of the region, I explore how creative artists of the basin engage the complexity of these issues.

### Little Abbay, Little Me

I was born about a mile away from the source of the Blue Nile (called *ጣቢ/Abbay* in Ethiopia), and the river has always fascinated me. Before my engagement with creative artists, I encountered critical questions as a third-year Geology student at Addis Ababa

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<sup>7</sup> Al-Jazeera. "Arab states call for UNSC intervention over Ethiopian dam dispute." 15 June, 2021. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/6/15/arab-states-call-on-unsc-to-convene-over-ethiopian-dam-dispute>  
Retrieved 4//24/2023.

<sup>8</sup> Waterbury, J. *Hydropolitics of the Nile Valley*. Syracuse University Press. 1979, p. 5.

University. A requirement for the fulfillment of the Bachelor of Sciences was to participate in a three-week geological field project in the Blue Nile Gorge, about 150 miles away from the source of the river. In my geological study area, I was drawn to the magnificent views of the canyon, which has been created by millennia of erosion, and I was drawn to the alluring geological explanation of the rock stratification. My awe was amplified by the strikingly similar myths, legends, and rituals around the river, both in the gorge and near its source. The myths, legends, and histories told about the river, as well as the artistic works and rituals performed around it, suggest that the Nile is indeed far more than just a river.

I grew up hearing the legends of the sacred spring, and little did I know at the time that በባይ ጸባል/the “Abbay Holy Water” is the head of a river that is a matter of life and death for hundreds of millions of people downstream. Originating from Gəsh Abbay at about 2750 meters or 9000 ft. above sea level, the Blue Nile drains the Ethiopian highlands. This source at the foot of Gəsh mountain in Sekela is designated as a sacred spring by the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church<sup>9</sup> and is a major pilgrimage site where devotees from near and far flock to benefit from the water’s curative power. Apparently, the whole stretch of the river through Ethiopian territory is considered holy by many Ethiopians. It is believed to be the Gihon River mentioned in the Book of Genesis as flowing out of Paradise and encompassing the whole land of Ethiopia.<sup>10</sup> *Holy is the Abbay water*,<sup>11</sup> sings Tsegaye B. Selassie capturing the people’s relationship with

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<sup>9</sup> Oestigaard and Abawa, 2013.

<sup>10</sup> Ullendorff, Edward. *The Ethiopians*. London: Oxford University Press, 1960, p. 1.

<sup>11</sup> “Welcome to the Highlands” is one of the 20 soundtrack songs scored by David Giro and Steve Wood in Pasquale Scaturro’s river running film *Mystery of the Nile* (2005.)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t4dOhrBhp6Q>

the river and my childhood memory of the spring's power to cast off evil spirits, cleanse devotees of sins, and heal all sorts of physical and spiritual ailments.

<i>ያባይ ወሃ ነው ጠበል፣</i>	<i>Holy is the Abbay water</i>
<i>ከኢትዮጵያ አገሪ ይፈልቃል፣</i>	<i>From my country it emanates</i>
<i>ካርቱምንም ያበላል፣</i>	<i>It also feeds Khartoum</i>
<i>ግብጽም ምድር ላይ ያበቅላል።</i>	<i>And cultivates Egyptian lands.</i>

We are told that Ethiopia is an outlet for the river flowing straight from the Garden of Eden<sup>12</sup> and that it feeds the Lands of Sudan and Egypt.

The tremendous range of forms and genres in the literature on the Nile bespeaks the river's uniqueness and centrality in the lives and histories of the people surrounding the basin. With its inherently complex nature, the Nile serves both as a bridge and a barrier among the riparian states, and it animates complex national and transnational interests, reflected in the deep-rooted connections the people have with the water. The Nile is the longest river in the world, but its relatively small discharge (compared to its length)<sup>13</sup> and the asymmetric hydropolitical configuration prevalent in the basin<sup>14</sup> are among the characteristics that contribute to its complexity. These dynamics are manifest in the diverse myths, legends, beliefs, and ideologies in the cultural and artistic productions in the region.

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<sup>12</sup> For the Egyptian Islamic notion of the Nile as a river of Paradise, see the analysis of Shawqi's poem in Chapter Three.

<sup>13</sup> (Kliot, 1994; Collins, 2002)

<sup>14</sup> (Dereje, 2017)

### Ethiopia, Egypt, Sudan, and the Nile

The historical connection of Egypt and Ethiopia at almost any point in time revolves around the Nile. This situation is partly due to geographical factors, but other riparian states are not equally dominant in the region's hydropolitical discourse. Ethiopia and Egypt are the main regional actors for various interrelated reasons. Egypt claims historic dominance as it is a major dependent country of the Nile Basin. The Nile River, the only major source of freshwater for the country, plays a crucial role in the life of the Egyptians. Compared to the other riparian states, Egypt is the only country that is almost entirely dependent on the Nile River waters. This absolute dependence makes Egypt vulnerable to any actions that would jeopardize the flow of the Nile. In 1988, for example, Marshal Muhammad 'Abd al-Halim Abu Ghazala, who was then Egypt's minister of defense, made it clear that Egypt's army is always on standby. He asserted that "the Egyptian army would strike if the free flow of the Nile waters was tampered with."<sup>15</sup> These sorts of threats were neither the first nor the last that has solicited various forms of response and non-response.

On the other hand, Ethiopia is the source of the Blue Nile and other Nile tributaries. It generates over 86 percent of the Nile waters, while benefiting least from the resource. In fact, Ethiopia uses less water from the Nile runoff than any other Eastern Nile Basin state.<sup>16</sup> In terms of access to electricity the overwhelming majority of its population lives in total darkness where "about 70 percent of the population in Ethiopia

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<sup>15</sup> Warburg, Gabriel. "Hot Spot: Egypt and Sudan Wrangle over Halayib" *Middle East Quarterly*, March 1994. <https://www.meforum.org/218/hot-spot-egypt-and-sudan-wrangle-over-halayib>

<sup>16</sup> Yakob and Imiru, "Ethiopia and the Eastern Nile Basin." *Aquatic Sciences*, March 2005, 67(1). p. 15

live without electricity.”<sup>17</sup> For this reason, Ethiopia is a proponent of an “equitable share” model as defined in the Helsinki Accords of 1966.<sup>18</sup> The “equitable share” model helps to mediate between the use of Nile waters by Ethiopia (and other upstream states) and “historical rights” by downstream states, especially Egypt. It informs two diametrically opposed standpoints over which the “debate is still lurking in the background [of the Nile dialogue] creating political tension and potential crises.”<sup>19</sup>

In this context, the proclamation of “historical rights,” can be traced back to Isma’il Ali’s 19<sup>th</sup>-century dream of an “All-Nile African empire”<sup>20</sup> which gave way to the 20<sup>th</sup>-century ambition of annexing the region under the “unity of the Nile Valley.” It asserts Egypt’s absolute authority over the Nile waters as promulgated by exclusionary water treaties that have made it difficult for upstream states to develop the Nile River. This situation has led to the resentment of the upstream people for centuries, and it can be seen reflected in the artistic productions of Ethiopia. In 2011, the government of Ethiopia took a bold move to fully finance the construction of the GERD, which is expected to be the biggest hydro-electric power dam in Africa. That the dam was built on a site surveyed by United States’ engineers in the 1950s has sparked a glimmer of hope among Ethiopians. The dam is seen to provide the country leverage to end Egypt’s long-standing hegemony and to start meaningful water development. Both the framework of underdevelopment (before the dam) and future hope (after the dam) manifest in the poetic works under investigation in the chapters that follow.

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<sup>17</sup> The World Bank Group. “Ethiopia’s Transformational Approach to Universal Electrification.” <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2018/03/08/ethiopias-transformational-approach-to-universal-electrification>. 2018.

<sup>18</sup> Erlich, Haggai, *The Cross and the River: Ethiopia, Egypt, and the Nile*, (Colorado: Lynne Rienner publishers, 2002), 7.

<sup>19</sup> Waterbury cited in *ibid*, 11.

<sup>20</sup> *Supra* note 18, p. 85

Sudan's post-colonial political power and condition regarding the Nile is dependent on its eastern and northern neighbors, namely Ethiopia and Egypt. At the same time, Sudan is a significant player in the hydropolitics of the Nile as part of the negotiations of the aforementioned treaties. Even with its liminal position geographically and ideologically, Sudan is not insignificant to my study, especially now that it is bound to lie between two consequential mega-dams: the Aswan High Dam in Egypt and the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) in Ethiopia. In the wake of the overthrowing of Omar Hassan Albashir, Sudan is in an intermittent internal turmoil, including the events of April 2023. Sudan remains in spite of it all in a border confrontation with Ethiopia that involves "claiming Benishangul Gumuz, the region where the GERD is being constructed as its land."<sup>21</sup>

#### Statement of the Problem and Scope

Examining the deep-rooted connection of the people with the river as reflected in the various literary products vis-à-vis the overall political, historical, and cultural relations in the basin, one comes to learn that *Abbay*/the Nile goes beyond the general notion of a river as is reflected in Ethiopian, Sudanese, and Egyptian literature and oral traditions. A rigorous multidisciplinary comparative study of the poetics and politics of the region,

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<sup>21</sup> Yassin, Mohammed Amin and Walid Abdulrahman "Sudan Is Reconsidering Ethiopia's Sovereignty over Benishangul Region" *Asharq Al-Awsat Newspaper*, 2 May, 2021. <https://english.aawsat.com/home/article/2950691/sudan-reconsidering-ethiopias-sovereignty-over-benishangul-region>

See also Ethiopian Ministry of Foreign Affairs's response:

MoFA. "MoFA Condemns Sudan's Claim Over Benishangul-Gumuz Region" Embassy of Ethiopia in Washington D.C., May 4, 2021.

<https://ethiopianembassy.org/mofa-condemns-sudans-claim-over-benishangul-gumuz-region-may-4-2021/>

which is lacking in the vast literature of the Nile, is worth a scholarly engagement in order to make better sense of the Nile hydropolitics. This gap coupled with my childhood fascination inspired my further inquiries especially on the lores, poetry and songs of the Nile since my master's studies in Literature in 2012.

My dissertation leads me to methods in Folklore and African Studies for exploring myths and oral traditions; methods in ecocriticism and hydropolitical concepts for exploring the hydro-hegemony and counter-hegemony in the region; and methods in comparative literature for close reading and literary analysis. Employing this multidisciplinary theoretical framework, I address the gaps and limitations detected in the literature of the Nile. While historico-political narratives related to the Nile often contrast general downstream glorification to upstream lamentation, my dissertation complicates the national traditions in literary studies to examine the nuanced transnational and translingual interactions of Nile poets.

By drawing from distant folkloric traditions, I focus my dissertation primarily on Nile poetics of the 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup>-centuries, and I trace the historical resonance that beliefs, attitudes, myths, and legends have in our contemporary moment. What are the historical moments that reemerge in the 20<sup>th</sup> century in the Eastern Nile Basin? Embedding my analysis in the language, history, myths, culture, and identity of the Basin dwellers, I bring to the fore poetic voices that reveal some of the cultural and literary impacts of imaginary relationships with water.

This dissertation analyzes poems and songs from Ethiopia, Sudan, and Egypt—that is, three of the five Eastern Nile Basin countries.<sup>22</sup> On the one hand, I weigh

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<sup>22</sup> The remaining two riparian states of the Basin, Eritrea and South Sudan, are relatively new and less involved hydropolitically.

historical and political sources, including the contested colonial and postcolonial Nile treaties that have been points of long-standing divergence between upstream and downstream countries. And on the other hand, I critically consider linguistic, formal, and generic dimensions to the range of poetry and songs from across the region.

### The Nile Basin and Its Sub-basins

The Nile Basin is divided into two subsystems: the Eastern Nile subsystem and the Equatorial Nile subsystem. These subsystems are further divided into ten major sub-basins. The Eastern Nile subsystem comprises the Main Nile sub-basin in Egypt and northern Sudan; the Tekeze-Atbara Sub-basin draining northern Ethiopia, southern Eritrea, and eastern Sudan; the Blue Nile Sub-basin draining parts of central and north-west Ethiopia, and south-east Sudan; as well as the Baro-Akobo-Sobat Sub-basin draining parts of the south-west Ethiopia, and eastern parts of South Sudan. The Equatorial Nile subsystem comprises the Lake Victoria Sub-basin, Albert Nile Sub-basin, Victoria Nile Sub-basin, Bahr el Jebel Sub-basin, White Nile Sub-basin, and Bahr el Ghazal Sub-basin.<sup>23</sup>

Before it empties into the Mediterranean Sea, the Nile drains about 3,176,541 sq. km. (an area about ten percent of the African continent) in eleven countries: six Equatorial Nile Basin states (Tanzania, Burundi, Rwanda, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Kenya, Uganda) and five Eastern Nile Basin states (South Sudan, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Sudan, and Egypt). The basin is also home to more than 257 million people or

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<sup>23</sup> Nile Basin Initiative. "Major Sub-Basins of the Nile." *Nile Basin Water Resources Atlas*, <https://atlas.nilebasin.org/treatise/major-sub-basins-of-the-nile/>



around 20% of the population of the continent.<sup>24</sup> The two major tributaries, the White Nile and the Blue Nile, are said to start from Lake Victoria (the biggest lake in Africa which lies in the territories of Uganda, Tanzania, and Kenya) and from Lake Tana (the largest lake in Ethiopia). Both of these two lakes are fed by various rivers, which serve as the true sources. Both lakes are part of streams that contribute to these natural reservoirs. A popular couplet from Ethiopia encapsulates this notion of the lakes being parts of the river system, and not actual sources:

ዐባይ በጣና ላይ እንዴት ቀለደበት፣

ላንድ ቀን ነው ብሎ ዝንታለም ሄደበት።

Oh, Abbay! How he tricked poor Tana,

He pled for a Day Pass but eternally

traversed the lake!

This is to uphold the belief that ወተት ዐባይ/The Little Abbay that rises from Gish Abbay is the true source, and that it just flows in and out of Lake Tana to form the Abbay proper. The spring of the Luvironza river in Tanzania 6,825 kilometers (4,200 miles) away from the river's Mediterranean mouth is the most remote source.<sup>25</sup> Another southernmost source of the White Nile is a spring from the Kiziz mountain in Burundi.<sup>26</sup> This stream, together with other rivers from Burundi and Rwanda, forms the Kagera river, the

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid. In a basin where the average annual population growth rate between 2010/2015 is between 1.6% (in Egypt) and 3.3% (in Uganda,) the population data is drawn from the NBI's edition for the years 2016-2023.

<sup>25</sup> Waterbury, John. *Hydropolitics of the Nile Valley*. 1979. p.13.

<sup>26</sup> Collins, Robert. *The Nile*. 2002. p. 29; Tesfaye. Tafesse, *The Nile Question: Hydropolitics, Legal Wrangling, Modus Vivendi and Prospects*. 2001, p. 28.

catchment of which is about one-third of the total inflow of the Victoria Lake.<sup>27</sup> The Kagera river flows directly into the western side of Lake Victoria, and the water then leaves the lake at Jinja around the northern shore of the lake. From Jinja in Uganda to Lake No in South Sudan, the river is called the Victoria Nile and becomes the White Nile downstream. The White Nile<sup>28</sup> drains the majority of South Sudan and proceeds north to Khartoum where it meets the Blue Nile (መባብ/Abbay from Ethiopia.)

The small sacred stream from Mount Gesh in Sekela garners other tributaries and flows north-west with the name of ግልገል መባብ/Gəlgäl Abbay (little Abbay) down to Lake Tana, a shallow lake with an area of about 3626 sq.km (1,400 square miles). The historically and religiously important Lake Tana is often considered the principal source of the Blue Nile. In the same manner, River Abbay leaves Lake Tana in a southeasterly direction, flowing through a series of rapids and plunging through a deep gorge. It then flows west and then northwest to join the White Nile at Khartoum in Sudan.<sup>29</sup> Combined the two main tributaries flow north to Egypt and empty in the Mediterranean Sea.

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<sup>27</sup> Waterbury, *supra note* 10, p.14.

<sup>28</sup> The southern section of the White Nile in South Sudan between Nimule and Lake No is called Bahr el Jabal.

<sup>29</sup> Moorehead, 1962; Bruce, 1790; Britanica.com, 2019; Cheesman, 1936; Ludwig, 1937; Waterbury, 1979; Collins, 2002.



Major Sub-Basins of the Nile. Source: Nile Basin Initiative.

### Hydropolitics of the *Eastern Nile Subsystem*

Given the complex connections and flows that the Nile enables, I take it to be a site of comparison for the analysis of the poetry and songs from Ethiopia, Sudan, and Egypt. This dissertation focuses on the Eastern Nile subsystem, mainly the Blue Nile Sub-basin in Ethiopia and Sudan and the Main Nile Sub-basin in Egypt.

The Blue Nile system covers about 32 % of the area in the country and carries about 59% of the water that makes up the main Nile, and with other rivers that emanate from its highlands, Ethiopia contributes about 86% of the total Nile flow. The White Nile that starts in the highlands southwest of Lake Victoria, on the other hand, contributes less than 15% of the flow.<sup>30</sup> Factors such as water availability, flow contribution, and water use politics inform the ways in which inhabitants connect with water and thus how nations engage hydrologically.

The Nile Basin is considered one of the world's major sites for hydrological strife<sup>31</sup> mainly due to scarcity of water that results from rapid population growth in the region, hence, high demand, environmental degradation, and asymmetrical water use politics. Hydrology is a relatively new term which generally refers to the politics that affects the national and regional water management of transboundary rivers, as well as relationships between states that share the rivers. Elhance Arun, in his book *Hydrology in the Third World: Conflict and Cooperation in International Rivers*, defines hydrology as "the systematic study of conflict and cooperation between states over water resources that transcend international borders."<sup>32</sup> Examining the conflict and

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<sup>30</sup> R. O. Collins, 2002. pp. 88-89.

<sup>31</sup> Dereje Z. "The Nile Basin Cooperative Framework Agreement Negotiations and the Adoption of a 'Water Security' Paradigm." 2017, pp. 422, 440.

<sup>32</sup> Arun, Elhance. p. 3.

cooperation elements of hydro politics, in 2005, the South African water resources management scientist Anthony Turton, argues that the studies are biased towards the conflict aspect of it. He writes, “[The] drivers of cooperation seem to have been under-researched in the hydro politics literature, with its natural bias towards water and conflict rather than water and cooperation.”<sup>33</sup> The first person to use the term ‘hydro politics’ is the political scientist John Waterbury who coined the word and used it in his 1979 book *Hydro politics of the Nile Basin*.<sup>34</sup> Waterbury, examining especially the relationship between Egypt and Sudan in the use of the Nile river, addresses the question of how sovereign states can pursue national self-interest and cope with the challenges of transnational cooperation in using transboundary water sources.

In the book where he introduced the term, Waterbury writes about the relationship between transboundary rivers and states as: “Rivers have a perverse habit of wandering across borders [...] and nation states have a perverse habit of treating whatever portion of them that flows within their borders as a national resource at their sovereign disposal” and discusses the Nile hydro politics at length.<sup>35</sup> He emphasizes Egypt’s influence in the basin and its concern of losing control by the involvement of great powers in the region’s affairs, and contends that “this concern has implicitly and on occasion explicitly led [it] to reserve for itself the right to intervene in the affairs of other states to protect its vital water interests.”<sup>36</sup>

Having examined the biases of each hydro political study since the inception of the concept, Turton and Henwood divided elements of hydro politics into four. My study uses

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<sup>33</sup> Turton, Anthony. 2005, p. 32.

<sup>34</sup> Geneva Water Hub. “Bibliography ‘Hydro politics’.” University of Geneva, 2016.

<sup>35</sup> Waterbury, John. 1979, p.2

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, p. 5.

those elements or dimensions of hydropolitics which include “water and environment” (specifically scarcity caused by water pollution), “water and security”, “water and conflict/cooperation or diplomacy”, as well as “water and society and culture.”<sup>37</sup> Considering a combination of these elements in the management of Nile waters from source to mouth, the power play seems to be among a few riparian states. Accordingly, who controls the outflow of the Nile at various stages has long been a source of conflict for the countries dependent on its waters owing, inter alia, to the water treaties in the region.

### Nile Treaties

The hydropolitical debates that anchor my project center primarily on Egypt and Ethiopia. As the lowest riparian country in the driest region of the basin, Egypt is almost entirely dependent on the Nile and tends to be suspicious of any water development projects in the upper riparian states. The Egyptians are concerned with their water security, which they claim emanates from their historical rights over the river. These rights have their roots, among others, in colonial and post-colonial water treaties that have left indelible marks on the relationships among the riparian states. Among the nine major water treaties signed between 1891 and 2010,<sup>38</sup> four stand out for this study.

The Anglo-Ethiopian Agreement of May 15, 1902 was signed to demarcate the boundary between Sudan and Ethiopia, but it contains one article addressing the Nile. According to Article 3 of the agreement, Ethiopia shall not make any construction on the

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<sup>37</sup> Turton, A. and Ronald H, 2002, pp. 14-15.

<sup>38</sup> Petros J. *No More Thirst: the Citizens of the Nile*. 2010, p. 22.

Blue Nile or Lake Tana that would “arrest” the flow of the river.<sup>39</sup> The translation of the word “arrest” between the Amharic and the English versions of the Agreement makes it still a point of discrepancy and contestation.<sup>40</sup> The Amharic version requires Emperor Menelik II not to construct or allow the construction of any structure that would “block the flow from end to end”<sup>41</sup> to which he agreed. However, unlike the predominantly linguistic discrepancy in Article 17 of the Ethio-Italian Treaty of Wuchale (May 2, 1889) that brought about the battle of Adwa, the Anglo-Ethiopian agreement of 1902, Ethiopia, “under duress, surrendered its territorial patrimony and got stuck with an unequal treaty”<sup>42</sup> According to a British Foreign Office memorandum of May 3, 1902, which was written only 12 days before the signing of 1902 boundary agreement:

“If [Menelik] does not settle the frontier within a short time...it will be a matter for serious consideration whether we ought not settle the question once for all.”<sup>43</sup>

The May 7, 1929 Agreement between Britain<sup>44</sup> and Egypt permitted Egypt and Sudan to utilize 48 and 4 billion cubic meters of the Nile flow per year respectively. It also gives Egypt veto power to decide on any development work upstream. As a result of this clause, among others, the twenty-million dollars Lake Tana project of 1927 was cut short.<sup>45</sup> Apart from the Egypt’s veto power to override any waterwork decisions upstream, Britain’s initial opposition that the Lake Tana design was made without their

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<sup>39</sup> Ullendorff, Edward. “The Anglo-Ethiopian Treaty of 1902” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, University of London , 1967, Vol. 30, No. 3, p. 643.

<sup>40</sup> Hailu W/Ghiorghis. *Leabbay Wuha Mugit*. 2000 EC. p.102

<sup>41</sup>See the translation of the phrase “ከዳር እዳር” መድረግ in Leperkane, Thomas Laper Kane. p. 1734.

<sup>42</sup> Tilahun Wondimneh. *Egypt’s Imperial Aspirations Over Lake Tana and the Blue Nile*. 1979, p. 65.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid. p. 64.

<sup>44</sup> Britain signed this treaty representing its colonies in the basin—Sudan, Kenya, Uganda, and Tanganyika (now Tanzania). The full title of the Agreement is “Exchange of Notes between Great Britain and Northern Ireland and Egypt in Regard to the Use of the Waters of the River Nile for Irrigation Purposes, Cairo, May, 1929.”

<sup>45</sup> Hailu W/Ghiorghis. *Leabbay Wuha Mugit*. 2000 EC. p.121.

knowledge<sup>46</sup> and, thus, pressure on the US from both Egypt and Britain,<sup>47</sup> the death of Empress Zewditu in 1930, and the Italian invasion of Ethiopia in 1936 have contributed to the abortion of the project. However, pressure on the U.S. from Britain and Egypt stopped the plan.<sup>11</sup> Britain offered to help Ethiopia build a dam at This content downloaded from

The 1959 Agreement between Egypt and Sudan allows for the “full utilization” of the Nile Waters and is a reiteration of the 1929 Agreement increasing the water quota between Sudan and Egypt. The 1959 Agreement effectively expanded the share of Nile water delineated in the 1929 agreement, allowing Egypt access to 55.5 BCM and Sudan access to 18.5 BCM by Sudan—that is, a total of 74 BCM.<sup>48</sup> This sum is essentially 100 percent of the Nile waters, leaving nothing to upper riparian countries. The average annual discharge of the main Nile measured at Aswan is 84 BCM, and about 10 BCM is left for evaporation.<sup>49</sup>

These two agreements were not binding for Ethiopia<sup>50</sup> as it was never a party to them in the first place. Ethiopia has made a concerted effort to counter the hegemony of lower riparian states albeit with a lot of political and economic challenges. It is against this historical backdrop that the most recent agreement on the Nile is especially significant. The Comprehensive Framework Agreement (CFA)—signed by five Riparian States (Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Rwanda) in May 2010, with Burundi signing it as well in 2011—is meant to establish the rights of upper riparian states to use the

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid. p. 120. Azazh Workineh of Ethiopia signed the contract with the American company called White Engineering in 1927.

<sup>47</sup> Zewde Gebre Selassie. *The Blue Nile and Its Basin: An Issue of International Concern*, Forum for Social Studies, 2006, pp. 8-9.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid. p.121.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid. p.14.

<sup>50</sup> D. Bardonnnet (1962) cited in Ibid. p. 220.



waters of the Nile. Moreover, these six countries “have introduced this international "legal" instrument not for its legal value but its political and counter-hegemonic value.”<sup>51</sup> The consequences of these interrelated treaties have a direct impact on the lives of people across the region and are often reflected in their literary works, even if few ever reference treaties directly as their thematic concern. The various literary works in the chapters that follow either influence or were influenced by water-management policy and the regimes under which they were produced.

### Poetry and Policy

*Do not touch the Nile if you do not  
exert effort, Its pure water is not  
created for the indolent Work hard  
everywhere in the galaxy Or find  
another river to satisfy the thirsty*

(Ismael – Egypt)

*Ninety thousand men, women and children  
dragged their dust to rivers,  
dams were never built for.*

(K. Eltinae – Sudan)

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<sup>51</sup> Abadir Ibrahim. “The Nile Basin Cooperative Framework Agreement: The Beginning of the End of Egyptian Hydropolitical Hegemony.” *Missouri Environmental Law and Policy Review*. 2011, p. 284

*O Arabia, how could you so conveniently have forgotten  
While your breath still hangs upon the threads of my  
springs  
How could you so conveniently count down  
In miserable billions of petty cubic yards  
The eternal drops of my life-giving Nile to you ?!*

(Tsegaye, Ethiopia)

Given the importance of the Nile, it is perhaps surprising that the comparative analysis of the poetics and politics across the region has received scant attention. This dissertation draws together important Nile poets and singers from Ethiopia, Sudan, and Egypt. I contextualize literary productions historically and geographically. I draw from both implicit and explicit hydropolitical concepts that characterize the relationships among the riparian states in the Eastern Nile basin. Although hydropolitics emerges as a concept about two decades after the 1959 treaty, its significance for analyzing Nile basin relations connects to colonial-era water agreements in the region as well as more modern interstate treaties. The relationship of literary and other discursive works to these developments is direct, though not always causal.

Politics, more specifically hydropolitics, refers to the socio-political dimensions determining: access, control, use and ownership of water and water dependent

resources.<sup>52</sup> The dimensions include water and environment (for example, scarcity caused by water pollution), water and security, water and conflict/cooperation or diplomacy, as well as water and society and culture (folklore, religion, and domestic politics). I consider these categories alongside and in dialogue with poetic texts.

I espouse a formalist approach in my entanglement of poetic and political valences of these works. In his essay, “Art as Technique,” Viktor Shklovsky introduces the concept of defamiliarization, defining the difference between ordinary usage and poetic usage of language. The technique of art,” suggests Shklovsky, “is to make objects ‘unfamiliar’.” And the purpose of this technique is not to distance the observer from the object of observation, but to “impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known,”<sup>53</sup> thereby allowing closeness and the establishment of identification with the object. The purpose is to force us to notice what is otherwise unnoticed or utterly ignored. Put another way, poetry, as a form of art with special intensity to language and expressions, through the technique of defamiliarization, refreshes and renews a language to which we have become habituated through our ordinary linguistic discourse—politics included. Thus, considering poetic language as ordinary-language-made-unfamiliar, I argue that Nile riparian literary expressions (poems and songs with the Nile as their subject) are a form of political engagement that either affects or is affected by Nile policies.

The political engagement in the vernacular poetry and songs of the region is not always expressed in the same manner. In the case of Amharic poetry, for example, the

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<sup>52</sup> I draw from Anthony Turton’s definition of water politics from his essay “Hydropolitics: The Concept and Its Limitations. *Hydropolitics in the Developing World: A Southern African Perspective*” (2002).

<sup>53</sup> Shklovsky, V. (translated in 1965, p. 12.)

content/concept in the poems is concretized by the “quine”—the Ethiopian technique of double entendre called the “seminna werq”/meaning, “wax and gold” in order to resist repression and to bypass censorship. There is a curious echo in this work of the dynamic connection between poetry and people described by the German poet and critic Johann Gottfried Herder:

From [political and military] history, we rarely learn more about a people than how it was ruled and how it was wiped out. From its poetry, we can learn its way of thinking, its desires and wants, the way it rejoiced and the ways it was guided either by its principles or its inclinations.<sup>54</sup>

In a spirit similar to Herder, John Updike connects fiction to people: “my fiction about the daily doings of ordinary people has more history in it than history books, just as there is more breathing history in archeology than in a list of declared wars and changes in government.”<sup>55</sup> And likewise, Nile poetry and songs enliven specific events and universalize the pains and pleasures associated with the gains and losses in history because—as Aristotle recounts—“historians record what has happened, while poets record what might have happened.”<sup>56</sup>

Drawing from this speculative function of poetry in Ethiopia, the proverbial question “Eregna min ale?” (meaning, “What do the shepherds say?”) is said to have been frequented by rulers in the past who sought to learn about what is going on in the minds of their subjects regarding the rules, politics, and administration in the country.

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<sup>54</sup> Herder, Johann. *Against Pure Reason*. 143

<sup>55</sup> Updike, John. *Conversations with James Updike*. 1994, p 37.

<sup>56</sup> See Aristotle’s “Chapter 9” of his *Poetics*.

Kings (of kings), politicians, officials, and governors in the old days reportedly used to pay due attention and benefit from the messages from the young shepherds who consistently conveyed the pains, frustrations, critiques, prophesies, plots, or warnings of the general public through songs. For centuries, poetry and song have been almost inseparable genres with their inherent rhythmic nature or musicality. In *Poetry and Its Others* (2014), Jahan Ramazani contends that “Song has long been conceived as poetry’s closest generic kin.”<sup>57</sup> He further implies that the strong bond between songs and poetry, especially lyric poetry which is originally meant to be “sung to the lyre,” has loosened with the advent of print technology—when “a poem became ‘essentially graphic’.”<sup>58</sup> In drawing together both published poetry and songs, I help emphasize this blurred boundary between the two, but also contrasting uses of the two forms. Egyptian poets mostly convey messages of hope, gratification, and contentment, whereas Ethiopian poets tend to offer lamentations over hunger, thirst, despair, and general frustrations of the people.

If this section began by pairing an exultation of the Nile in Egypt and a curse of it in Ethiopia, I turn now to a couplet that sheds light on the complex relations between the two countries and their most important connections—the river and the church. Mahtemworq Eshete couplet, written in 1920, provides a prescient prelude to the political and religious divorce that would follow between the two countries in 1959:

በባቡር ተጉዞ ምንድን ነው ቅልውጡ፤

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<sup>57</sup> Ramazani, Jahan. *Poetry and Its Others*. 2014, p. 184.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

ግብጾች ለሐበሻ ደግሰው ላይሰጡ<sup>59</sup>

Why all this long voyage—sponging off others

Egypt but won't throw a feast to us the Habesha!

To begin with, a literal translation is not effective as the quine style characteristically renders some expressions untranslatable. Roman Jakobson asserts that “poetry, by definition, is untranslatable.” It can only be “creatively transposed.” Of all the possibilities of creative transposition, I find what he calls “interlingual transposition” more fitting to my case.<sup>60</sup> This technique involves the use of expressions that are integral parts of the target language. Accordingly, by transposing the meaning of the Amharic quine text into English, I have attempted to generate a target text that is as faithful as possible to the original text's sense and purpose.

The couplet is an expression of the long-standing resentment of Ethiopian scholars and clergymen over Ethiopia's failure to assign her own Abun/church father and consecrate her own bishops. The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church used to get its Abun from Alexandria from the beginning of Christianity and the appointment of Abuna Fremnetius or Selama in the 4th century until the 1950s. The church as a social institution served as one ideological state apparatus by setting a trend which was proclaimed in the *Fətəha Nəgäst/Justice of the Kings*:

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<sup>59</sup> Quoted in Yohannes Admasu. *Qegn Geta Yoftahe Nigussie: A Short History of His Life and His Writing*. Edited by Yonas Admasu. AAU Press, 2004 E.C. p. 84

<sup>60</sup> Jakobson, R. 1959, p. 132

Ethiopians were not allowed to assign patriarchs from their own for they were “under the suzerainty of the Alexandrian seat and therefore, it’s only the Coptic Fathers who could hold the position with exception of ranks below archbishop”<sup>61</sup>

The mutual provision of nature and religion was based on the belief that “Ethiopia as the source of the Nile for Egypt and Egypt as the source of the Bishop for Ethiopia.”<sup>62</sup> This trend continued until 1959 when Ethiopia finally assigned her own Abun. The hidden meaning of this *quine*-poetry lies in the Amharic double entendre ደግሰው/dägsäw read as one or two words. Its direct meaning (the wax) is related to the idea introduced in the first line—to the act of sponging or desiring to take part in somebody’s feast uninvited. And read as one (ደግሰው) word it refers to the act of *having given a feast/throwing a party*. Whereas the “gold” in the *quine*-poetry is the other meaning found in the two words (ደግሰው), which mean *good/kind person*. This *quine* is a scathing comment against the Egyptian Coptic establishment that promulgated that kind of relationship between the two Churches in general—and against Abune Mathewos in particular. According to historians, the young journalist Mahitemeworq Eshete, the editor of the weekly newspaper Berhannena Salam, which Tafari Mekonnen (later Emperor HaileSelassie I) established in January 1925, “spared no rhetoric in exposing Abuna Matewos as a greedy foreigner, unfaithful to Ethiopian interests.”<sup>63</sup> Seen against this backdrop, the second line reads totally differently: “The Egyptians hardly ever send us a genuine person.” It does not stop here, though. The “*quine*” tradition is such that once the “gold” has been

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<sup>61</sup>Fetha Negast Nibabuna Triguamewu Part I Article 4 (50) cited in Gashaw A. “Egypt’s Quest for Hydro Hegemony and the Changing Power Relation,” EJSS Vol. 5, No. 1, May, 2019.

<sup>62</sup> Erlich, H. *The Cross and the River*. 2002, p. 9.

<sup>63</sup> Erlich 2002, p 98.

“extracted,” the meaning shifts across the entire text. In this case, the first line implies that the sponging is not for want of food, but to beg for consecration of the clergy from another country, completely losing one’s pride and honor.

This instance was by no means the first or last time Mahitemeworq and others harshly criticized Egypt, the Nile, and the Abun.<sup>64</sup> There were scholars who published similar arguments (some in quine-poetry) and those who debated against it.<sup>65</sup> In this couplet, we encounter an instance where the media used a state apparatus to transmit a message in opposition to the established ideology. Why, we might wonder, did the author want to draw the reader closely to the text by defamiliarizing the language as such? Not that he wanted to, but he was forced to do so by circumstances. Under Emperor HaileSelassie I’s administration, the unspoken rule was to say as little about the Abbay as possible so as “not to arouse Egyptian emotion” and to appease the Arab League.<sup>66</sup> When political manifestos fail to convey the people’s emotion, poetry offers a means to do so.

### Poetry and Ecology

In thinking about the literary analysis of works dealing with transboundary water management (TWB), I have been drawn to an ecocritical approach to push beyond the nation state. Water resources, after all, are not just national but transnational. For this

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<sup>64</sup> See Bairu’s report of another incident of written criticism that involves all of these. (2000, p. 165).

<sup>65</sup> See Yohannes Admasu’s *Qegn Geta Yoftahe Nigussie* (2004 E.C.) for another quine-poetry by Kidanewold Kifle (p. 84) and the list of other Ethiopian scholars who published their arguments (p. 98) in *Berhanena Selam* Newspaper in 1927.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*; Hailu W/Ghiorghis. 2000 E.C. p. 154.



reason, I find it important to reflect on some ecocritical categories pertinent to the project and the connections it forges between the local and the global.

In various ways, I grapple with such questions as: What idea of national sovereignty should an ecocritical approach consider? What is an ecological identity? What constitutes it? Is it communitarian, or is it an interlocking of local community and global identity? What is the idea of a “green state” that would allow us to rethink sovereignty and national identity in order to address the problem of water resources in the basin? How selfish or how open to the needs of the people in the basin are the existing arrangements/national boundaries—that are put in place by colonialism and colonial treaties?

In his book *Ecological Identity* (1995), Mitchell Thomashow defines “ecological identity” based on the existing definitions of “identity” and “ecology” and writes that it “refers to all the different ways people construe themselves in relationship to the earth as manifested in personality, values, actions, and sense of self.” In this definition, as opposed to typical sources of identification such as objects, people, or ideas, “nature becomes an object of identification....and [ecological identity] includes a person’s connection to the earth, perception of the ecosystem, and direct experience of nature.”<sup>67</sup> In relation to a person’s connection to “the earth”/a place, Thomashow identifies two paths for the exploration of “ecological identity”: “memories of the special places of childhood, and the experience of disturbed places.”<sup>68</sup> In other words, how a person’s special place has changed/deteriorated is seen inseparably from their memories of the places.

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<sup>67</sup> Thomashow, Mitchell. *Ecological Identity*. 1995, p. 3.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid. p. 9.

Further on the significance of places in enhancing the idea of "common goods", Thomashow argues that: "Before people can become citizens, they must see themselves as neighbors. It is their attachment to a place, the fact that they all live there and care about it that brings them into relationship with one another, making them neighbors."<sup>69</sup> This strong attachment plays a role in the "revival of [ecological] citizenship"<sup>70</sup> that does not end at the human boundaries, but which leads to the formation of the "green state" or "larger-than-nation and transnational formations."<sup>71</sup>

### "The Green State"

Another key aspect of my analysis is the principle of the green state. The Green State transcends the traditional nation-state as we know it. Robyn Eckersley defines it as "a democratic state whose regulatory ideals and democratic procedures are informed by ecological democracy rather than liberal democracy"<sup>72</sup> Thus, in her book, she attempts to confront the traditional concepts of "democracy," "sovereignty," and "nation-state" or "develop a normative theory of the *transnational*, green democratic state"<sup>73</sup> (emphasis added) as an alternative. Murphy notes the significance of the two key terms democracy and sovereignty in her book's subtitle— and adds: "Ecotheory, environmentalism, environmental justice, and ecopolitics have all called for radically extending the concept

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid. p. 97.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Murphy, Patrick. *Ecocritical Explorations in Literary and Cultural Studies*. Lexington Books, 2009, p. 39.

<sup>72</sup> Eckersley, Robyn . *The Green State: Rethinking Democracy and Sovereignty*. 2004, p. 2

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

of democracy to embrace entities beyond the human in political deliberations and have all called for the debunking of the myth of sovereignty.”<sup>74</sup>

Considering the fact that ecocriticism is a theoretical field that is not anthropocentric (regarding the human as the central or even the only important element of existence) at all, when we talk about ecological identity, we include not only humans. Hence, in the discussion of the ecological identity of the Nile basin, how far would one consider the needs of other “entities beyond the human” such as aquatic life, flora, and the river itself? This is a question that is inherently part of the ecocritical discourse, and despite the degree of emphasis, it exists in every part of the Nile region. Eckersley writes:

In relation to the making of any decision entailing potential risk, the relevant moral community must be understood as the affected community or community at risk, tied together not by common passports, nationality, bloodline, ethnicity, or religion but by the potential to be harmed by the particular proposal, and not necessarily all in the same way or to the same degree. For example, for a proposal to build a large dam, the community at risk might be all ecological communities in the relevant watershed regardless of the location of state territorial boundaries.<sup>75</sup>

In this case, the ecological community at risk in the watershed could be the human inhabitants that are forced to be displaced due to the dam construction; or the

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<sup>74</sup> Murphy, Patrick. *Ecocritical Explorations in Literary and Cultural Studies*. Lexington Books, 2009, p. 36.

<sup>75</sup> Eckersley, 2004, p. 113.

“non-human others” such as the species of aquatic life destined to be trapped by the dam or the wild life that are rendered homeless due to massive deforestation of the dam site. This has been the case in the Nubian region of Sudan during the construction of the Aswan High Dam (AHD) in Egypt in the 1960s, and especially deforestation is a case in point in Ethiopia due to the construction of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD)--in progress since 2011. In connection to dam building and anthropocentric pollution, the alarming rate of the Nile river pollution that is a risk to many humans as well as non-human inhabitants in Egypt is in some cases related to the AHD. Hala Ewaidat shows this indirect association quoting Ray-Shamroukh, “Usage of pesticides and fertilizers also pollute the river, as agricultural practices near the river use a high quantity of fertilizers and pesticides to cope with the changes in irrigation caused by the building of the dam”<sup>76</sup>. This is due to the deterioration of the soil fertility resulting from the silt from the Ethiopian highlands being blocked by the dam.

In comparison with Eckersley’s state theory, Murphy talks about the repeated imagination and description by literary artists of “both the steps toward a green democratic state and various versions of such a state in operation” and discusses why poets, novelists, and political theorist alike entertain these “alternatives to the nation-state”<sup>77</sup>. He writes about the problems of formation of the nation-state--i.e., the organization of nation-states around the “alleged homogeneity of a group of people within a given territory”, and the “appeal to the unity of the people that is frequently used as a justification for the expansion of territorial boundaries or the annexation of another

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<sup>76</sup> Ewaidat, Hala. 2015, p. 90

<sup>77</sup> Murphy, p.37.

state.”<sup>78</sup> Accordingly, in connection to the call “for debunking the myth of sovereignty” he agrees with Eckersley that “a new kind of ‘patriotism’ is needed in which there is a sense of shared membership” as human homogeneity in nation-states is simply a “myth”. The new kind of “patriotism” to have progressive environmental potential, must take a different approach to the territory than the “modern nation-state”<sup>79</sup> Because human homogeneity in modern nation-states is not true, like anywhere in the world, the international borders in all riparian nation-states arbitrarily divide the same community into neighboring sovereign states. The Nuer, in the Baro-Akobo subbasin, whose settlement straddles the international Ethio-Sudanese border, are a typical example of having an “ecological identity” and not rigidly political. Dereje Feyisa writes, “the Nuers subscribe to a flexible view of a political community. [for them] a tribal boundary (Cieng) is permeable. Individual Nuer change identity as situations demand, this often being dictated by their search for “greener pastures.”<sup>80</sup> The pastoralist Nuer community is, in the phrase of Deleuze and Guattari, a “nomadic community” that “anticipates and wards off the state from its orientations to movement and space are just two elements of this” (Kuehls, 45), because “far from being given entities, sovereign territories (including their populations) are created entities. And the creation of sovereign territory carries with it profound ecological consequences (xiii).

### Environmental Justice

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Dereje Feyissa, “The cultural construction of state borders: the view from Gambella.” 2009, p. 314

What are the rules that are needed to implement the idea of the two interlinked ecocritical categories mentioned above? This question leads to the third one that is about environmental justice. In other words, “ecological identity” and “the green state” could be implemented through “environmental justice.” Environmental justice is “the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, national origin, or income, with respect to the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies”<sup>81</sup>

Both the reverence and love for the Nile reflected in the poetry of many of the basin states, especially of Egypt, and the curse and lamentation in the poetry of some others, especially Ethiopia, often have one thing in common: that the river is not a resource to do without, and that cooperation and mutual benefit through an equitable use of the resource is the way forward. The status quo in the region is such that the asymmetry of power, resource utilization and development is the cause of resentment, suspicion and conflict. Thom Kuehl questions: “If sovereignty is a rule over a specific territory, but the physical effect of political decisions made in one sovereign territory spill over into other sovereign territories, is not the sovereignty of these various territories subverted?”<sup>82</sup> As I will discuss in my next categories, this is a relevant question that has to do with hydro-hegemony in the Nile basin.

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<sup>81</sup> U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, (EPA, 2019).

<sup>82</sup> Kuehl, Thom. *Beyond Sovereign territory: the Space of Ecopolitics*. 1996, p. xi.

## Who Owns the Nile? Hydro-Hegemony vs Counter Hegemony

Following the concept of ‘environmental justice,’ the problem of hegemony comes as an important hydropolitical category that I will consider relevant to address the problem of water resources and inter-riparian relations in the Nile basin. Antonio Gramsci importantly distinguishes between hegemony and dominance. In general, Gramsci defines hegemony as follows: “hegemony is a practice of power that rests substantially on the consent of various strata achieved by groups possessing or seeking state power, whereas dominance is a practice of power relying primarily on coercion.”<sup>83</sup> This kind of discussion, however, does not solve the core of the problem unless hegemony is specified and seen in light of the ‘ecological identity.’ What, though, constitutes the specific category of hegemony, called hydro-hegemony?

Transboundary water researchers define hydro-hegemony as “hegemony at the river basin level, achieved through water resource control strategies such as resource capture, integration and containment,”<sup>84</sup> and their understanding of its achievement seems a slight mix of Gramsci’s hegemony and dominance. According to Zeitoun and Jeroen, the strategies of water control “are executed through an array of tactics, such as coercion-pressure, treaties, knowledge construction, etc.”<sup>85</sup> This combination of Gramsci’s concepts sounds like a fitting approach for my engagement of the hydropolitics in the Eastern Nile Basin. Among others, considering knowledge construction through the age old historical and religious (Coptic-Orthodox Tewahedo) connections, Egypt’s repeated attempts of physical occupation and coercion, as well as its capability of putting direct and indirect

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<sup>83</sup> Cited in Noaman G. Ali. “Reading Gramsci through Fanon: Hegemony before Dominance in Revolutionary Theory.” 2015, p. 1.

<sup>84</sup> Zeitoun, Mark and Jeroen. Warner. “Hydro-hegemony—A Framework for Analysis of Trans-boundary Water Conflicts,” 2005, p. 435

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

pressure on Ethiopia using colonial and non-inclusive post-colonial treaties helps to have a good grasp of the asymmetric power play in the region.

Zeitoun and Warner contend that two features of water conflict are under-considered: “the existence of varying intensities of conflict” and “power relations between competing riparians,”<sup>86</sup> for example, Ethiopia and Egypt, or Turkey and Syria, or Palestine and Israel (where Ethiopia, Turkey and Palestine are upstream riparian states on the Nile, Tigris, and Jordan respectively.) However, only Turkey, among the upstream states of the above-mentioned transboundary river basins, has a geographical advantage. The reason, argue the authors, “is found in power play.” Position matters only if assisted with power. “Upstream states use water to get more power, while downstream nations use power to get more water.”<sup>87</sup> This is generally the case between Ethiopia and Egypt due to Ethiopia’s dominant geographic power and Egypt’s possession of dominance and in the other three forms of power,<sup>88</sup> but not between for example Israel and Palestine due to the latter lacking all forms of power.

Speaking to power dynamics, Elisa Cascao and Mark Zeitoun distinguish four pillars of power for hydropolitical analysis, namely: geographic power, material power, bargaining power, and ideational power. These crucial categories subtend the present situation in the Nile basin, and I would like to tie hydro-hegemony to the (ideal) ecocritical categories discussed above. Why is it important to consider these different categories in the two fields together for a harmonious utilization of the resource?

When we speak about the ‘green state’ and how we must go beyond the national perspective, we have to think about how it might be achieved. Should the transformation

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid. p. 436

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid. p. 460



occur through force or through a sort of cultural hegemony (culture, literature, and so on). What would an ecological awareness of the area offer to implement the kind of harmony envisaged in the ‘green state’? If we are not aware of having a shared “ecological identity,” then there is no political discourse that may solve the problem of water resources in the area. Who is developing a hegemonic discourse that will allow all the states to become aware of the need to interact responsibly? I argue that Egypt’s water-hegemony rooted in colonial treaties is devoid of the notions of “ecological identity” and “green state”—and that Ethiopia’s recent move of using the water (geographic power) to get more power is an act of counter-hegemony. As a methodological framework, these are the categories in the two fields (ecocriticism and hydropolitics) that speak to the analysis of the Nile riparian literature.

#### Folklore and Literature: The Nile in “Myth, Literature, and the African World”

Having gestured to the relationship between people and poetry as well as the notion of hydro-hegemony might pose the questions, what exactly is the relationship between folklore and literature? What does the study of folklore lend to the study of Nile literature? In order to respond to those questions, in this section, I will highlight the significance of a couple of studies in the field of folkloristics that are pertinent to understanding the convergence of literature and folklore in general mythology, and oral traditions in particular. In my study, of the three major narrative categories regularly distinguished by folklorists (myth, legend, and tale),<sup>89</sup> myth and legend and their function in the Nile poetry is the primary concern.

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<sup>89</sup> Oring, 1986; Bascom, 1954

Myth is a term used for a narrative generally regarded by the community in which it is told “as both sacred and true,” while “legends are considered narratives which focus on a single episode, an episode which is presented as miraculous, uncanny, bizarre, or sometimes embarrassing.”<sup>90</sup> In line with the above relation between folklore and literature, the most obvious form of the relationship between myth and literature as Robert Seagal rightly noted “is the use of myth in works of literature,”<sup>91</sup> which is what this dissertation seeks to show.

In *Myth, Literature and the African World* (1976), Wole Soyinka proposes an African world-view that needs to be born out of the literature which in turn emanates from the African rituals and myths. The book is a compilation of five essays on drama, ideology, social vision, and Yoruba mythology. The principal theme linking all the essays in the book—which otherwise focus on Yoruba traditions, gods, tragedy, music, and rituals—is the theme of the “African world-view” as reflected in myth and literature. Soyinka questions whether dissociation of African rituals and African drama is at all possible and engages some African plays to demonstrate his argument that drama and Yoruba ritualistic mythology are closely interlinked.

Scholars also forge a special type of confluence between myth and literature in which myth is made through literature. Ralf Hemann expands upon Soyinka’s suggestion that an African world-view employs a technique called ‘mythopoeia’ which he defines as the “creative approach to myth.”<sup>92</sup> For Hermann, the etymology of the term means “creating of myth, giving rise to myth, [myth-making],”<sup>93</sup> and he argues that Soyinka’s literary engagement is dominated by such style—the use of mythological and religious patterns. In

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<sup>90</sup> Oring. 1986, p. 124-125

<sup>91</sup> Seagal, Robert. *Theorizing Myth*. 2004. p. 79.

<sup>92</sup> Hemann, Ralf. “Creation Snake and “Möbius Strip: The Mythopoeic Structure in Wole Soyinka’s Writing.” 1995, p. 7.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

the following chapters, I will analyze instances of such engagement and their effects in the works of Nile poets, such as the Ethiopian poet and playwright Tsegaye Gebre-Medhin (1936-2006), who is a contemporary of Wole Soyinka, and the Egyptian “Prince of Poets” Ahmed Shawqi (1868-1932).

Tsegaye’s background in traditional education and his research interest in ancient Africa seems to have contributed to his being steeped in his own tradition. He employs his linguistic skills and his knowledge of ancient Egyptian and Ethiopian myths and legends in his work. In that regard, both Soyinka and Tsegaye seem to agree with Thomas Wright when he writes:

There is no subject of inquiry relating to the history of a people more interesting than its popular mythology and superstitions. ... In these we trace the early formation of nations, their identity or analogy, their changes, as well as the inner texture of the national character, more deeply than in any other circumstances, even in language itself.”<sup>94</sup>

Although poetry is an art by itself, when it goes beyond “language itself” as we have seen earlier, it has other art forms that are closely related to it, such as song/music. Song is, in turn, closely related to performance—another such art form in which popular mythology is well delivered.

The Amharic *quine*-poetry is characterized by its sophistication of the language, but an accomplished *quine*-poetry, more than the language, refines “the writer’s philosophy and

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<sup>94</sup> Thomas, William. Cited in Georges and Jones. 1995. p. 160.

sharpens the mind of the reader.”<sup>95</sup> Arabic poetry, like the Amharic quine-poetry, also has the characteristic of orality. Ruth Finnegan tells us that ‘in parts of Africa, the distribution of writing in the Arabic script has often involved interaction between oral and written forms.’<sup>96</sup> Finnegan also admits that “the distinctive nature of oral literature lies in its performance.”<sup>97</sup> Bascom supports this idea of longevity of stories in orality and quotes Malinowski: “The stories live in native life and not on paper, and when a scholar jots them down without being able to evoke the atmosphere in which they flourish he has given us but a mutilated bit of reality.”<sup>98</sup> In line with this, Davidson also maintains that it is poetry that enlivens stories better than any other form of presentation, saying that even “folktale which may contain elements which are thin and cheap ... are capable in the hands of a poet of turning into myth and becoming deeply significant”<sup>99</sup> and powerful. On the other hand, looking for historical accuracy and obscuring the folktale element in a poem, suggests Davidson, makes it hard “to see how it could have been more than a pale academic exercise from which only the most dedicated scholar could have derived enjoyment.”<sup>100</sup>

### Organization of the Study

What stands out in literatures across Egypt, Sudan, and Ethiopia is the complexity of the positions taken by poets of the Nile regarding their experiential realities of life. It is not always easy to grasp the full context of human relations, especially those involving complex social-cultural, historical, and political entanglements like the Nile, but it is even

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<sup>95</sup> Solomon Deressa. *Zebet Elfitu*. Tewanney Studio. Artistic Printers. 1998, p. 9.

<sup>96</sup> Finnegan, Ruth. “How Oral Is Oral Literature?” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, University of London, 1974, Vol. 37, No. 1, In Memory of W. H. Whiteley (1974), pp. 52-64

<sup>97</sup> Cited in Long “Oral Literature and Folklore in Africa: A Review Article”

<sup>98</sup> Bascom. “Four Functions of Folklore.” (p. 282)

<sup>99</sup> Davidson, H. Ellis. “Folklore and Literature” *Folklore*, vol. 86, no. 2, pp.81-82.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.* p. 82.

more challenging to transcend the polemic of political and legal wranglings and the burden of history unless we consider the popular imagination and go with the flow.

This dissertation consists of five parts: an introduction, three body chapters, and a conclusion. In this introduction, I have pointed to the significance, scope, and limitations of the study and definition of key terms. I have discussed the methods and procedures used for analysis, and I provided a general background of the study, including its unique geography, the characteristics of the river, the basin dwellers, and the riparian states. My theoretical framework draws together various categories of analysis: folklore, history, ecology, politics, and geography. I ultimately situate my project within the context of river-based literary studies to consider other sites for comparison.

The first chapter—“Romance Without Borders: Tsegaye’s Grand Transnationalism and Regional Consciousness”—draws on the techniques of mythopoetry and folk etymology to examine how Ethiopian poet, playwright, and art director Tsegaye Gabre-Medhin forges a “Nilean” identity by challenging confinements of border, history, culture, and religion. This chapter engages Tsegaye’s 1972 Amharic poem, “ዐባይ/*Abbay*” and his 1997 English poem “Nile,” both of which complicate geographical, historical, and cultural concepts, and consider the river’s flow not just as the flow of water but as the continuity of history, culture, myth, and identity. With masterful word play in languages spanning Hieroglyphics, Amharic, Arabic, Ge’ez, and Oromigna, Tsegaye situates the Nile as a cradle of various religious beliefs and ancient human civilization in what he celebrates as a once-unified territory. This chapter examines his borderless romanticization of the river and transnational identity formation.

The second chapter—“An Upstream Muse: Abbay in Ethiopian Poetry and Songs”—explores the entwined relationship between poetics and politics of the Nile at a national level. I investigate the images of the Blue Nile in Amharic poems and songs as reflections of the feelings and perception of the people. While some poets grapple with the plight of Ethiopians (and their frustrations of thirst and hunger), still others praise and exalt the river in accounts filled with hope, optimism, and confidence. Poets in both categories anthropomorphize the Nile, acting as voice to the voiceless river. They either admonish governmental powers and propose policy changes, or they promote their respective governments’ rhetoric of water development and praise policy measures.

The third chapter—“A Downstream Muse: The Nile in Egyptian and Sudanese Poems and Songs”—discusses a range of Egyptian and Sudanese poems. Some of these works deify and praise the Nile, others speak to cooperation or conflict in the region, and some frame resistance to local Egyptian politics. The chapter examines the Nile poetry in the context of Egyptian national, regional, and cultural hegemony. I track real and perceived water scarcity in the region, as well as Egypt’s claims of natural and historical rights as part of what can be described as its hydro-hegemony. It also examines how Sudanese and Nubian poets, as those who are bound to live between two consequential mega-dams—the Aswan High Dam and the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam—imagine the Nile.

The final section draws together the three core chapters, offers a summary, and makes recommendations for further inquiry. The conclusion explores the positive contributions the dissertation makes toward the diverse and ever-changing body of research on the Nile and the underexplored relationship between hydro-poetics and

hydropolitics. Rather than exacerbate conflicts between Ethiopia and Egypt, this study brings to the fore instances where Nile poets stand in solidarity with one another, even though they write in different languages and in different time periods.

# CHAPTER ONE

## ROMANCE WITHOUT BORDERS TSEGAYE'S GRAND TRANSNATIONALISM AND AFRICAN CONSCIOUSNESS

As much as the Nile basin has been understood to pose political and economic problems with regard to the sharing of scarce fresh water equitably among the riparian states, it also helps to define the relationship among the people in the states along its banks. There are some scholars who emphasize the importance of considering all elements of water politics, especially the connection between water and society. They draw these connections in order to have a more complete understanding of the region and community in question.<sup>101</sup> I expand this understanding by taking literature's function as the true mirror of a society's ills and values, unlike "[political and military] history where we rarely learn more about a people than how it was ruled and how it was wiped out."<sup>102</sup> I take literature and poetry in a volatile region as the Nile basin to be a deeply meaningful source for the analysis of cultural politics. Tsegaye—the poet at the heart of this chapter—himself alludes to this important entanglement:

... culture and history are inherently free from deception.... Culture is like a perennial spring that continuously pours off visionary love. On the contrary, propaganda/politics is like a flash flood that suddenly washes everything away.

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<sup>101</sup> See Anthony Turton's definition and discussion of water politics in his essay "Hydropolitics: The Concept and Its Limitations." *Hydropolitics in the Developing World: A Southern African Perspective*. 2002, p.15.

<sup>102</sup> Herder, *Against Pure Reason*, p. 143.



One of art's abstract characteristics, I think, is that it offers a venue for sharing a healthy and positive sentiment with one another.<sup>103</sup>

Tsegaye shares his general view that art and culture have a great deal to do with the psychological interconnectedness of different identities. Similarly, Terje Oestigaard contends that the development of the Nile basin region “involves people’s identities and cultural and religious dimensions of water.”<sup>104</sup> In dealing with the Nile history and politics, I believe poetry on the Nile impacts lives of the inhabitants of riparian countries in such a way that it portrays societal changes, it shapes political systems, and it documents human experiences. Furthermore, poetry being “a mode of knowledge that reveals what is most essential in mankind,”<sup>105</sup> this chapter engages the works of the Ethiopian poet and play-wright Tsegaye Gabre-Medhin’s 1970 Amharic poem, “ዐባይ/Abbay” and his 1997 English poem “Nile”.

In both “ዐባይ” and “Nile,” Tsegaye complicates geographical, historical, and cultural concepts, and considers the river’s flow not just as the flow of water but as the passage of history, culture, myth, and identity. With masterful word play in the languages of Egyptian, Arabic, Amharic, Ge’ez, and Oromiffaa, he situates the Nile as a cradle of various religious beliefs and ancient human civilization in this, according to him, once-unified territory. Tsegaye wrote in Amharic and in English, and he is duly honored for both, but perhaps more internationally than domestically. *The Oda Oak Oracle* (1965), *Azmari* (1966), *Collision of Altars* (1977), and *Tewodros* (1983) are some of his plays in English that have been staged in Ethiopia, various African countries, as well as Europe

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<sup>103</sup> Gabre-Medhin, Tsegaye. “The Choice is His.” Interview in *Tobia*. vol. 6, no. 1, 1990 E.C.

<sup>104</sup> (Oestigaard, 13).

<sup>105</sup> (Laude, 2005: 161).

and the United States. His wide participation in international literary festivals and his acquaintance with some of Africa's prominent writers (such as Leopold Cedar Senghor, Chinua Achebe, and Julius Nyerere) have surely broadened his view of matters African in his literary engagement. He has also adapted Shakespeare's plays *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, *Othello*, *Hamlet*; Moliere's *Tartuffe* and *Le Medecin malgre lui*, as well as Bertolt Brecht's *Mother Courage*. Some of his over 30 Amharic have been variously banned due to censorship in the different regimes.

Nothing, however, seems to stop Tsegaye, whom his biographer describes as “a perennial verse weaver.”<sup>106</sup> For his rising talent and popularity, Tsegaye, at the age of 29, was honored with the prestigious Haile Selassie I Prize Trust Award for Amharic Literature in 1966 and became the youngest person ever to receive that award.

He was also interested in research pertinent to African history and culture. While many of his poetry and dramatic works, as well as his numerous interviews and lectures are fruits of his Afrocentric research, he was also engaged in academic publications. Apart from his “presentations of his research on such topics as “Art in the Life of the Ethiopian People” at the First World Black Arts Festival Colloquium organized by UNESCO in Dakar, Senegal, and on “Kamit of Black Egyptian Theatre” for the Pan African Cultural Festival organized by the OAU in Algiers; and “Africa as the Origin of the Early Greek Theatre Culture” at international Africanist and Black Arts Congresses,”<sup>107</sup> In 1984 Tsegaye published his highly acclaimed essay “Footprint of Time.”

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<sup>106</sup> Fasil Yitbarek. *Soaring on Winged Verse: The Life of Ethiopian Poet-Playwright Tsegaye Gabre-Medhin*. (Los Angeles: Tsehai Publishers), p.199.

<sup>107</sup> Ayele, Negussay. “Poet Laureate Tsegaye Gabre-Medhin Of Ethiopia: A Short Walk Through His Literary Park.” ([www.ethiopians.com/tsegaye/](http://www.ethiopians.com/tsegaye/)), n.d.

Tsegaye is one of the writers featured in Amon Saba Saakana's edited volume *African Origins of Major World Religions*, published in 1988. Here, in his chapter, "The Origin of the Trinity in Art and Religion: Ethiopian Roots in the Egypto-Greek and Hebrew," Tsegaye traces the African origin of the Trinity. He addresses the ancient black Egyptian origin of major world religions and artistic expressions: "The outdoor ceremony performed by the priests of Isis Ba is of great interest in the history of religious practices." And he discusses how the ancient custom of throwing coins, gold, and different gifts into the Nile has survived across major world religions, including "the Jewish kabbalah, in the Old Testament rites, in the New Testament rites, in the Ethiopian Oromo Ka Ada, and in Islam."<sup>108</sup> Regarding the "Ka-Ba-Ra" form of Trinity that is "steeped in the ancient Nile civilization," Tsegaye explores the relationship between the goddess Isis and the two gods Osiris and Horus as the basis for ancient Egyptian triad forms of divinity – the Ka (The Creative Force), Ba (The Spirit Force), and Ra (The Light [Sun] Force) – and contends that this concept of Trinity dates as far back as the prehistoric mythology of *Kamit* (the Black Land).<sup>109</sup>

For Tsegaye, the myth of Osiris is central. He describes how the mythology of the Ka-Ba-Ra forms the basis of the ancient Egyptian religion, which eventually spreads to the Roman Empire and beyond in various forms. The myth goes as follows: Seth is an envious brother of Osiris and Isis. Out of envy, Seth kills Osiris, dismembers his body, and scatters the fragments far and wide. Isis laments, and at night she gets out in search

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<sup>108</sup> (Tsegaye Gabre-Medhin in Saakana, Amon S. *African Origins of Major World Religions*. (London: Karnak House). 1988 p. 100. Tracing the historical accuracy and the direct relationship between ancient Egyptian myths and modern rituals, for example the Oromo Ka Ada (Gadaa,) is beyond the extent of my study and not relevant to my argument, but I point readers to works of Aba Bahriy, Asmerom Legesse, Enrico Cerulli, and Shaykh Zainuddin Makhdam.

<sup>109</sup> (Ibid. pp. 101-102; cf. Budge, Wallis. *The Book of the Dead: The Papyrus of Ani in the British Museum*. 1895, p. 62).

of the parts of her brother Osiris. She collects the scattered bits, performs her divine skill of resurrection, raises Osiris from the dead, and Horus Ra is born unto them (posthumously?). Horus engages in repeated combat against the guilty Seth and kills him to become the first pharaoh Horus-Osiris-Ra.<sup>110</sup>

Tsegaye asserts that this myth has a major influence on later major world religions and on ancient Greek literature. He suggests parallels between the characters and events in the Greek and Egyptian stories: “this same mentality is much later carried into Homer's *Iliad* and it tells about the story of Oedipus (Osiris) who was killed by his uncle Eteocles (Seth) out of envy who scatters the fragments of the body far and wide when Antigone (Isis), the sister of Oedipus, goes out in search of the body at night, she finds it and performs her skills (incest) over it out of which Agamemnon (the first king of Greece is born).” He continues to demonstrate how this myth finds expressions in Biblical stories, such as the story of Abel, Cain, and Eve; and the story of Jesus, his “brothers who killed him for illegitimacy”, and Mary.

Beyond the involvement of three figures, and the events of murder, search, and miraculous resurrection, Tsegaye invites his readers to listen to the words of the ancient Festival-of-Isis songs addressed to Osiris, and to notice their striking similarities with the ones we here in modern religions today—in Christianity, for example: “He is the giver of life from the beginning.... Life springs up to us from his destruction.”<sup>111</sup> He even examines relatively recent works of art, inter alia, Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and traces the ancient Egyptian tradition of “brother-kill-brother” Ka-Ba-Ra in the play.

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<sup>110</sup> (Ibid. pp. 102-105).

<sup>111</sup> Budge, Wallis. *The Book of the Dead: The Papyrus of Ani*. 1895; (Cf. “With His stripes we are healed.” Isaiah 53:5 King James Version).

In furthering his arguments that ancient Egypt is the origin of various arts and cultures, including the early Greeks' "adaption of the Egyptian Ba and Ka ceremony as *Bakara (Bachus)*," Tsegaye cites Herodotus, the Greek "father of history" himself, who visited Egypt early in the days and wrote about a Melampus. Herodotus was "one of the first to bring the cover art of performance into Greece."<sup>112</sup>

Melampus ... cannot, I think, have been ignorant of this ceremony; nay, he must, I should conceive, have been well acquainted with it. He, it was, who *introduced into Greece the name of Bacchus, the ceremonial of his worship and the procession of the phallus*, and the Greeks learned from him the ceremonies which they now practice. I therefore maintain that Melampus (who was a wise man) had acquired the art of divination having been acquainted with the worship of Bacchus through knowledge derived from Egypt, and introduced it into Greece... For I can by no means allow that it is by mere coincidence that the Bacchic ceremonies in Greece are so nearly the same as that of Egyptians. They would then have been more Greek in their character and less recent in their origin. Much less can I admit that the Egyptians borrowed these customs or any other from the Greeks.<sup>113</sup>

Tsegaye proclaims that "at once [the performance tradition] was an act of creative, religious, and political magnificence" that was firmly founded upon the concrete cradle of the Nile civilization.<sup>114</sup> He reiterates Herodotus's account of how the Ka-Ba-Ra art

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<sup>112</sup> Cited by Gabre-Medhin in Saakana, Amon S. *African Origins of Major World Religions*. (London: Karnak House). 1988. p. 106).

<sup>113</sup> (Ibid. p. 107).

<sup>114</sup> (Ibid. p. 109).

tradition influenced Greek culture, she suggests that *The Book of the Lamentation of Isis* is where we find “the earliest clue of the prenatal mythology of “Bacchus Ka-Ba-Ra.”

Above and beyond Tsegaye’s Afrocentric activism, this writer is so many things at the same time. He is, as his biographer describes, “a playwright, a director, an anthropologist, etymologist, and an Africanist. But he was a poet more than anything else.”<sup>115</sup> While anchoring my analysis in Tsegaye’s way of recentering Africa in history, art, and culture, I move on to what he does even better in what I describe as his hydropoetry.

### በባይ/Abbay

In 1966 E.C.,<sup>116</sup> Tsegaye wrote the poem entitled “በባይ/Abbay,” which was emblematic of the poet’s style of writing, but also of the river’s high place in the heart and minds of the people of the region. Tsegaye’s “Abbay” foregrounds the idea of grand unity and continuity: both the unity of the river system from the source to mouth, and the unity and continuity of cultures, civilizations, wisdom from the origin in the distant past through the present moment. The poet is a literary genius who never misses an opportunity to use for his expression of unmatched literary fidelity for his motherland, and thus he used no less an entity than the Nile to go as far back in time as the imagination allows and to offer a clearer present and to envisage a better future. Employing the concept of transnational identity formation, I examine the poet’s project of pushing literary borders and his romanticization of the river for that purpose.

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<sup>115</sup> Fasil Yitbarek. *Soaring on Winged Verse: The Life of Ethiopian Poet-Playwright Tsegaye Gabre-Medhin*. (Los Angeles: Tsehai Publishers), p.199.

<sup>116</sup> The Ethiopian calendar (E.C.) is 7 to 8 years behind the Gregorian Calendar: 7 years from September to December and 8 years from January to August. When I am not certain about the month of publication of Amharic texts, I use the E.C.

Here are a couple of lines from his 109-line poem, *ዐባይ/Abbay*:

ዐባይ የምድር ዓለም ሲሳይ  
የቅድመ-ጠቢባን አዋይ  
ዐባይ የጥቁር ዘር ብስራት፣  
የኢትዮጵያ ደም የኩሽ እናት፣  
የዓለም ስልጣኔ ምስማክ፣  
ከጣና በር እስከ ካርናክ፣  
በጡትሽ እቅፍ እንዲላክ  
ለራህ ለፀሐዩ ግማድ ለጣህ ለዋክብት አምላክ  
ከጥንተ ፍጡራን ጮራ የመነጨሽ ከኩሽ አብራክ

ዐባይ የምድረ ኩሽ መኩሪያ  
በቅድመ ታሪክሽ ጥርጊያ  
ከደም-ቢያ እስከ ኑ-ቢያ  
ከሜምፊስ እስከ ሜሮኤ  
በስልጣኔሽ ትንሳኤ  
ከዴልታሽ እስከ ዴር-ሠልጣን  
ከኡመ-ራህ እስከ ኡመ-ዱርማን  
ዓባይ የአቴስ የጡቶች ግት፣  
የዓለም የስልጣኔ እምብርት፣  
ጥቁር ዓባይ የጥቁር ዘር ምንጭ፣  
የካም ስልጣኔ ፍንጭ፣

ከምንጭ የጥበብ ሳሎን፣  
ግሪክ ፋርስ እና ባቢሎን፣

ጭረው በቀዳት ሰጥን፤

ዓባይ የአማልክት አንቀልባ፤

[O Abbay, blessing of the earth

The guiding spirit for the early erudites

Abbay, the herald of the Black Race

Ethiopia's blood—mother of Cush—

So the prelude to Civilization

Would through your breasts be transported

From the gate of Tana down to Karnak

To Ra, the piece of the Sun

—to Ptah, the god of the celestial bodies

You, who sprung from the womb of Cush

—From the cradle of the forerunners

O Abbay, pride of the land of Cush

During your pioneering way of the prehistory

From Dem-biya to Nu-biya

From Memphis to Mero'e

And in the dawn of your civilization

From your Delta to the Deir-Sultan

From Ume-Ra to Ume-Durman

Ates' udder filled with milk



Abbay the heart of World's civilization

Black Nile the cradle of the Black race

Conception of Ham's wisdom]

(Tsegaye, 159)

Like the river itself, Tsegaye's imagination in this poem crosses boundaries. Or better yet, his imagination eliminates them. As is characteristic of the poet, the poetic persona frequently alludes not only to ancient history, but also to legend, mythology, and current affairs in the region in order to weave a grand identity that encompasses the cultures and people of the basin from source to mouth: “\_From Memphis to Mero'e/From your Delta to the Deir-Sultan/From Ume-Ra to Ume-Durman\_”. He wrote this remarkable poem at a time when such reflections on the Abbay were scarce. What makes him exceptional is that he reflects on the Nile—this contested river—not solely through Ethiopian history and myths, but through an entwined history of ancient Egyptian and Nubian mythology from the prehistoric Nile civilization. He thus suggests regional harmony through the Nile based on knowledge of a deeply historical past and its persistence in the modern present.

Acknowledging Tsegaye's literary caliber and lofty style, I follow Yonas Admasu in his understanding of Tsegaye as “an Ethiopian nationalist in a class all his own.”<sup>117</sup> To my knowledge, no Nile poem of this literary depth was written for years after Tsegay wrote “Abbay.” Bairu Tafla notes that praise or criticism of the Abbay was “by no means

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<sup>117</sup> Yonas Admasu. *Narrating Ethipoia*. 1995, p. 34.

unique in Ethiopia, though the general tendency under the last emperor was apparently to say a little about the Abbay as possible so as not to arouse Egyptian emotion”<sup>118</sup>

By the time Tsegaye wrote this poem, Emperor Haile Selassie’s administration had for a long time decided to downplay the Nile mainly due to the rising pressure from the pan-Arabic movement spear-headed by Gamal Abdel Nasser. Even works like “Abbay,” proclaiming grand unison and harmony in relation to the Nile, were not encouraged. Historians such as Robert Collins, Bairu Tafla, and Haggai Erlich, remind us of Haile Selassie’s situation regarding the Nile, which was deliberately removed from the international picture. During the 1960s and the early 1970s, “Ethiopia and Haile Selassie seemed to have accepted, painfully, the loss of its leverage against Egypt. Church relations were also rendered marginal following the 1959 separation.”<sup>119</sup>

It was this “loss” that Tsegaye refuses to accept in this poem, and it was this unwritten law of being less vocal about the national and transnational significance of the river that he willfully transgressed. By obscuring the spatiotemporal difference of events and places and by narrating civilizational accounts from source to mouth, Tsegaye helps to establish a new type of identity. His poetic “deterritorialization”—to use Deleuze and Guattari’s concept—is a bold act that enables the reader to track the construction and reconstruction of identity which renders a new understanding of an Abbayawi/Nilean community plausible. I use this uncommon, possibly dated, term (Nilean) to refer to the transnational “Abbayawi/Abbay-based” identity Tsegaye establishes with authority using the natural entity, Abbay, and skillfully mystifying its relation with his ancient greater Ethiopia. Through this identity, current state territories are constantly questioned and

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<sup>118</sup> Bairu, “The Nile in Ethiopian Literature.” 2000, p. 165.

<sup>119</sup> Erlich, Haggai. *The Cross and the River*, 2002, p.146.

negotiated. He talks about, for example, the stretches of civilization from the Upper Land (the region that included present day northern Sudan/Nubia, and the influence of which stretches to present day Ethiopia—with a varying direction of influence across times) to the Lower Land (the land to the lowermost region of the Nile, i.e., northern Egypt up to the Mediterranean Sea.) He juxtaposes names of deities, rulers, historical and religious sites from the two lands to show the movement of culture, religion, wisdom, civilization, nourishing milk, and life “blood” (159) in the form of water from. Here are some examples: “The gates of Tana” in Ethiopia to “Karnak” in Egypt referring to two of the age-old temples/monasteries in each country; from “Ume-Ra” in Ethiopia to “Uma-Durman” in Sudan (159) modifying the Ethiopian place name of a region called *Humera* into “*Ume-Ra*” meaning *mother* of Ra—the Egyptian god of Sun and air; and changing the Sudanese town name Omdurman into *Uma-Durman*. Robert Kramer contends that “the actual origins of the site, as well as the meaning of the name Omdurman (Umm Durman [which literally translates as “mother of Durman”]) are likely to remain a mystery.”<sup>120</sup>

Tsegaye’s introduction of new sensible words from existing words using similar Arabic, Geez, Oromoiffa, or Amharic prefixes or suffixes, creates a relative proximity among places in the basin that otherwise are spatiotemporally far apart. He describes the movement of the river from “Dem-Biya” in Ethiopia to “Nu-Biya” in present-day Sudan suggesting that the presence of the common suffix “biya” in many African place names is not just an accident—Tsegaye believed “biya” stands for “land.” In the same manner, he talks about the stretch of land connected by the water from “Memphis” in Egypt to

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<sup>120</sup> Robert S. Kramer et al. *Historical Dictionary of the Sudan*. Fourth Ed. The Scarecrow Press Inc. 2013, p. 338.

“Meroe” in present-day Sudan. Considering what he does with the names of the gods and the pharaohs, Tewodros Gebre, for example, interprets the alteration of the name Piankhy into the “Oromized” Biya-Hanke as “the Land of the Kind; Land of good-natured people.”<sup>121</sup> Piye/Piankhy, is sometimes transliterated as Pankhy, Piankhi, and Paankhi. Tsegaye might have used this variation in transliteration at different times to come up with one that is closer to himself—a Kushite rendition of the name, Biya-Hanke, which would emphasize that Piankhy is a Kushite king who founded the twenty-fifth dynasty and ruled Egypt from 744-714 B.C. It should also be noted that Tsegaye’s conception of Ethiopia in this poem takes the names Kush or Nubia to be subsets of Ethiopia or, perhaps, alternates names for it. The poet dims the sense of boundaries in order to assert a transnational Nilean identity by engaging the folk-etymological Ethiopianization of Nubian and ancient Egyptian names of deities, kings, and places,.

Tsegaye also touches upon a sensitive issue regarding Ethio-Egyptian relations around the time he wrote the poem—the case of Deir al-Sultan. Here too, he creates Nilean connections by juxtaposing names of kings and queens, ancient Egyptian gods/goddesses, as well as names of places along the River Nile. After the separation of the two churches and Emperor Haile Selassie’s repeated unsuccessful attempt to have access to the key to the Deir al-Sultan convent, Ethiopia’s policy was to say as little about Abbay as possible in order not to draw Egypt’s attention into its internal affairs.<sup>122</sup> And yet, alluding to the significance of Abbay in the relationship between Ethiopia and Egypt outside of the two lands, the poetic voice in Tsegaye’s poem tells us about two broad

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<sup>121</sup> For the analysis of the use of folk-etymology, nature, religion, and history in this poem, see also Tewodros Gebre (2016).

<sup>122</sup> Hailu, W/Ghiorghis. 2000 EC, pp. 154-155; Erlich, 2002:146.

stages of civilizational history. He alludes to those who were valued in the Cushitic world during these periods:

ዐባይ የምድረ ኩሽ መከራይ  
በቅድመ ታሪክ ጥርጊያ  
ከደም-ቢያ እስከ ኑ-ቢያ  
ከሜምፊስ እስከ ሜሮኤ  
በስልጣን ትንሳኤ  
ከዴልታ እስከ ዴር-ሡልጣን  
ከኢሙ-ራህ እስከ ኢሙ-ዱርማን  
ዓባይ የአቴስ የጡቶች ግት፣  
የዓለም የስልጣን እምብርት፣  
ጥቁር ዓባይ የጥቁር ዘር ምንጭ፣  
የካም ስልጣን ፍንጭ፣

(Tsegaye, 159)

During this prehistory, Memphis, the capital of the Lower Land, and Mero'e that of the Upper Land (Nubia) are mentioned as taking pride in ancient Abbay's mission of trailblazing. Dembia (Dem-Biya) is from Ethiopia. ደም/Dem in most of the Semitic languages, such as Aramaic, Amharic, Arabic, and Hebrew, is blood, and ቢያ/Biya in the Cushitic Oromiffa means land/country/field. Therefore, Dembia etymologized as Dem-Biya to mean something like a "field of Blood,"<sup>123</sup> and it represents Ethiopia, who "sends

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<sup>123</sup> In one sense, if Tsegaye is not directly alluding to the Aramaic name for a place in Jerusalem associated with the land bought with money from Judas' betrayal of Jesus (Matthew 27:7; Acts

along” her Life Blood (159) in the form of water. This water, for the ancient Egyptians and for the Nubians is the primeval water, Nu, from which all gods were born, and thus, the speaker calls that land Nu-Biya—the Land of Nu. The reverberation of pride in the early Abbay-civilization spreads from the source of the life blood for gods in the “land of the gods.”

In the poem, the narrator does not keep the description, “Land of the Gods,” exclusive to that part of the basin only. Instead, the mother-child relationship between Ethiopia and the most prominent of the gods—Ra himself—is suggested: “From Ume-Ra to Ume-Durman.” Again, folk etymologizing the name of Humera, a region in the northwestern part of Ethiopia, into *Ume-Ra/Mother of Ra*, the poetic persona indicates that Ethiopia has given birth to the god of gods. This is akin to the accounts regarding the conquest of Egypt by a god of Ethiopian origin—Osiris. A first-century AD historical account by Diodorus Siculus corroborates an Ethiopian origin for Osiris the Conqueror: “Egyptians, according to one tradition, were colonists sent out by the Ethiopians under the leadership of Osiris, who was worshiped in Ethiopia.”<sup>124</sup> Going one step further, concerning the similarity between Osiris and Ra, an ancient Egyptian hymn to Osiris written in 240 BC reads: “Homage to thee, Osiris, Lord of eternity, King of the Gods, whose names are manifold, whose forms are holy, [...] *Thou art the Soul of Ra, his own body...*”<sup>125</sup> (Emphasis added.) The belief in the soul and body union of Ra and Osiris which appears in the hymn from the Greco-Roman Egypt also goes back in time to the

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1:18–19), it won’t be illogical to assume that he is referring to long years of Ethiopia’s internal as well as international bloody wars through the ages.

<sup>124</sup> Cited in Snowden, Frank M. *Blacks in Antiquity: Ethiopians in the Greco-Roman Experience*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.) 1970, p. 189.

<sup>125</sup> Budge, E.A. Wallis. “Hymn to Osiris” *The Papyrus of Ani (The Egyptian Book of The Dead)* Translated by E.A. Wallis Budge.

old dynasty. Wallis Budge writes: “Ra the local form of the Sun god, usurps the place occupied by the more ancient form Temu, but before the close of the VI<sup>th</sup> dynasty, Osiris had taken his place in the Pyramid Texts as the greatest of the gods.”<sup>126</sup> Thus, by etymologizing a place name in Ethiopia– Humera – into Ume-Ra (alluding to the Ethiopian origin of Ra/Osiris,) Tsegaye goes deep into establishing the far-stretching ancient religious connection in the Nile valley. He also repeatedly creates the image of the physical union of the upper and lower lands by likening the flow of the Nile to the act of plowing a furrow that stretches from source to mouth. Further, he likens the furrow to the አክርማ/eleusine plant.

አንቺ የምድረ ዓለም ሲሳይ	Oh, bounty of the world
በረሃውን ጥለሽ ግዳይ	Ransacking the desert
ሰሃራን እንዳክርማ ተልም	And having it as your trophy
ሰንጥቀሽው በወዝሽ ደም	With your toil–your blood
	Cutting a furrow through the Sahara
	Like splitting the <i>Akrəma</i> -grass

The Sahara is denied its aridity and rendered dead by the persistent flooding of the Nile, the narrow strip of land on either side of the river extremely fertile. The plant called አክርማ/akrəma is a family of goosegrass that has long upright shoots and stem with a heavy head due to the flowering branches on top. Imagining the Nile as the akrəma-plant, the speaker evokes the image of the Nile River Valley that resembles a lotus flower, the ancient Egyptian symbol for the regeneration of life. For the Egyptians, “the long, narrow

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<sup>126</sup> Budge, Wallis. *The Book of the Dead: The Papyrus of Ani in the British Museum*. 1895, p. 45).

river valley is the stem, the delta that spreads out in the shape of a triangle is the flower, and Fayum Region is the bud.”<sup>127</sup> The Nile imagined as a furrow that eternally “*cuts across the Sahara Desert in the shape of the Akrima-grass*” in the excerpt above would have its roots in Ethiopia, its stem(s) in Sudan, its flower with fruits/seeds in the Delta region of Egypt.

### Abbay Beyond the Seas

The pride in the reverberation of Abbay’s grace in the early days of civilization, according to the speaker, has been shared in all parts of the region. Of all the place names mentioned, “the Deir-Sultan” is the only place not comfortably situated within the Nile Basin, which makes it look like a bit of both anachronism and anatopism. It is important to observe, however, that “in the dawn of [Abbay’s] civilization,” Abbay continues to be revered by (inhabitants of) relatively modern sites. This is an interesting shift in the poem from prehistory to recent history. Following the advent of Christianity in Africa, Abbay served for far too long as a two-way link between the peoples of Ethiopia and Egypt. While the age-old spiritual and material relation is symbolized by the *abun*/patriarch from Egypt, and the *water* from Ethiopia, the Middle Eastern connection of these two countries beyond the Red Sea. The Sinai Desert has another dimension—Deir al-Sultan. Deir al-Sultan in Jerusalem is a disputed monastery between Ethiopia and Egypt, and this reference was about the time when the “dispute reached a climax.”<sup>128</sup> It reached a climax in those years because the Jordanians “forced the Copts to hand the key over to Ethiopia,”

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<sup>127</sup> (Mysteries of Egypt: <https://www.historymuseum.ca/cmhc/exhibitions/civil/egypt/egcgeo3e.html>).

<sup>128</sup> Erlich, 2002, p. 146.



and within a couple of months, with the pressure from Nasser, the key was handed back to the Egyptians. In 1969, just two years before the writing of this poem, “the Israelis, having conquered East Jerusalem [in the Six-day War of June 1967] handed the keys of Deir al-Sultan to the Ethiopians”<sup>129</sup> And just as this back and forth of the key to Deir al-Sultan continued, so too did “matters of interchurch rivalry”<sup>130</sup>

Regardless of the diplomatic tussle of the time, Haile Selassie seems to have chosen to accept Tsegaye’s hydro-poetic engagement as a sort of panAfricanist call. The poem was published, perhaps as a literary rendition of what had been happening in Africa since the establishment of the OAU in 1963. With the leadership of his prime minister Aklilu Habtewold, the emperor had worked hard towards that goal, albeit in the opposite direction of the Nile agenda. He turned to other parts of Africa for cooperation which helped to extinguish Nasser’s pan-Arabism and to draw his attention to the rest of Africa.<sup>131</sup> This shift continued only as long as Nasser stayed in power. Anwar Sadat succeeded him with his own Nile agenda.

As is normally the case with change of governments in the region, especially in Egypt and in Ethiopia, the Nile politics and rhetoric shifts accordingly. With Anwar Sadat’s arrival to power, the relationship soured to the extent that the Ethiopian emperor himself had to fly to Cairo to seek a resolution to the matter. Governor of the federated State of Eritrea at the time, *Bitwoded* Asfaha recounts what he witnessed as a member of the delegation. In a move that sounded like appeasing Egypt and the Arab world, Emperor Haile Selassie turned a blind eye to the millennia-old Israel-Ethiopia

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<sup>129</sup> Erlich, Haggai. *The Nile: Hystories, Cultures, Myths*. 2000, p. 42.

<sup>130</sup> Erlich, Haggai. *The Cross and the River: Ethiopia, Egypt, and the Nile*, Boulder, (Colorado: Lynne Reinner publishers). 2002, p.146.

<sup>131</sup> Bairu, 2000, p. 185; Erlich, 2002, pp. 155-156.

relationship. He said to Sadat, "As far as our relationship with Israel is concerned, rest assured that it is limited to the ancient Solomonic heritage, but with The State of Israel, we don't have any special relationship whatsoever."<sup>132</sup> With more pressure from the Arabic-speaking members of the OAU, which was at that time “committed to a militantly anti-Zionist policy,”<sup>133</sup> and from the Arab Middle East, seem to have caused the shift in diplomacy. Much in the same way that Ethiopia had to play around the regional and global pressure,<sup>134</sup> in 1973 the Emperor officially broke relations with the Jewish state, which formerly supplied “security and police training, and high-level University personnel.” Revolution ensued, and a few months later, the last emperor of the Solomonic Dynasty was deposed. The Jerusalem connection (of Ethiopia and Egypt) continues “from the [Nile] Delta to the Deir al-Sultan [monastery].”

### The Greco-Roman Connection

Be that as it may, it is interesting to note the poet’s conscious reminder of the modern-day reality of the Nile in the midst of his engagement of establishing a grand nationalism using Abbay, the “*daughter*<sup>135</sup> of Cush” (159), as “the *anqelba*-backpack<sup>136</sup> for the gods” (162); Abbay, “*the pride of the whole land of Cush*” (159), who is destined to live carrying on her back all of the gods from the two lands together with “prehistoric prominence” (160) has unequivocally been given the huge responsibility of motherhood

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<sup>132</sup> Achamyeh Tamiru. *Bitwoded Asfaha*. Interview 1986 E.C. (<https://youtu.be/K266ibXDU3o>)

<sup>133</sup> Pankhurst, Richard. “Developments of the 1950s and 1960s.” *Together We Learn—Ethiopia*. n. d.

<sup>134</sup> See the previous chapter (*Introduction*.)

<sup>135</sup> For Tewodros Gebre, unlike the present interpretation, Abbay is alternatively male and female (2016:4).

<sup>136</sup> Thomas Leiper Kane defines the Amharic term “አንቀልባ/Anqelba” as “leather backpack for carrying a baby, made of tanned and dyed goatskin and decorated with cowrie shells” (1990, v.2:1216).

symbolized by the *anqelba*-backpack. Through that symbol, the poet reminds us of the Ancient Egyptians' belief that the gods were born from water, and that water is no less than the Nile itself. In connection with this relationship, Budge tells us how the Egyptians tried to explain the origins of their gods. Referring to M. Maspero, he writes: “[...Ancient Egyptians] reduced everything to one kind of primeval matter which they believed contained in embryo; this matter is water, Nu, which *they deified*, and *everything which arose therefrom was a god.*”<sup>137</sup> (Emphasis added.)

Through the Ethiopian symbol of motherhood, Tsegaye weaves the unmistakable correlation between Abbay and Nu (also spelled Nun). Nu, whose name means “primeval waters” and who is “the oldest of the ancient Egyptian gods ... was also thought to continue to exist as the source of the annual flooding of the Nile River.”<sup>138</sup> No other Ethiopian poet has ever consistently and purposefully represented Abbay with the feminine gender. This association of Abbay with the feminine, to my mind, is both significantly mythopoetic and logical considering what rivers offer in helping humans obtain the food they need to sustain themselves and how women in many cultures have primary responsibility of feeding their children and managing the household. More specifically, Tsegaye's advocacy of the powerful, spiritual roles that garnered women respect and reverence in Ancient African societies, and the role of the Nile in giving life to the mortal humans as well as the immortal gods/goddesses bridges a connection between reality and myth.

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<sup>137</sup> Budge, Wallis. *The Book of the Dead: The Papyrus of Ani in the British Museum*. 1895, p. 143).

<sup>138</sup> Encyclopedia Britannica. “Nun-Egyptian-god.” <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Nun-Egyptian-god>

The refrain lines in the opening and closing of the poem demonstrate the significance of his decision. As Cush's daughter, Abbay has been entrusted with the huge motherly responsibility, inter-alia, of "carrying in her breast/bosom and transporting" (Lines 7&103) "Ethiopia's blood"<sup>139</sup> (L4) from Tana—popularly believed to be its source, though not accurately—down to the Lower Land. Indeed, it seems for this grand purpose that Abbay "sprung from the bosom of Cush" (LL 9&105): So that Ethiopia—who is mother of Cush and the Prelude to World's Civilization (LL. 4&5), and who, for Tsegaye, is always the *GrandMother*, the origin—can "send along" (LL 7&103) her life blood to the Egyptian deities and to the lands they rule.

This image of ancient Ethiopia's 'grandness' and geographic reality of generosity evokes some sort of importance which also finds expression in the Greco-Roman classical images of Ethiopia and its people. Although Ethiopia's geographic descriptions by the earliest Greek poets were somehow vague, in their mind Ethiopia had an image of greatness that is closer to divinity. For Homer, "Ethiopians are remote peoples, sundered twain, the furthestmost men, some dwelling where the sun rises and others where it sets."<sup>140</sup> Regardless of their remoteness, the "blameless" Ethiopians were accessible to the Olympian gods, and perhaps only to them. Snowden again sites Homer from *The Iliad* when the latter tells us that "the Olympians were fond of visiting the Ethiopians. Zeus, followed by all the gods, went to feast with the blameless Ethiopians where he remained for twelve days."<sup>141</sup> (Emphasis added.)

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<sup>139</sup> Also "Ethiopia's blood" (L 99): Tsegaye doesn't seem to approve Ethiopia's name being an exonym from Greek meaning "the burnt face." Instead, he uses "Ethiopia"—the mythical grandson of the Queen of Sheba for whom Ethiopia is allegedly named.

<sup>140</sup> Snowden, Frank M. *Blacks in Antiquity: Ethiopians in the Greco-Roman Experience*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.) 1970, p. 101

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.* p.144

Tsegaye adds another dimension to this association of divinity and antiquity—refuge/parent-child relationship. In "Abbay," he alludes to flight of the Greco-Roman gods seeking refuge in the Nile in a time of distress. In the excerpt below, the poetic voice tells us about a different version of subcontinent's connection with other worlds—that the ancient Abbay was also a generous refuge to the wise and to the deities of those civilizations. Not only do we see in “Abbay” that “Greece, Persia and Babylon/Gathered wisdom from her source” (162,) but we are also told that the Egyptian gods happen to be the parents to the Greek ones.

ዓባይ-ዓቢይ ዓባይ-ጊዮን፣  
ለአማልክቶች አምላክ ለአሞን  
የኪነት ምንጭ፤ እምትሆን  
ለአሩስ ርቱአ አከናፋት  
ለነድዮናይሶስ አባት

(Tsegaye, 162)

The Greek god of fertility and winery, Dionysus is the son of the god of gods, Zeus (Romanized as Jupiter and whose Egyptian counterpart is Amon/Osiris.) As we have seen, according to ancient Egyptian mythology, Amon, Ra, and Horus share certain characteristics. Ra—the sun god was portrayed as a falcon, just like “the perfect-winged” Horus (whom the persona calls Orus.) And in the New Kingdom (16<sup>th</sup> century BCE to 11<sup>th</sup> century BCE), Amon and Ra fused, and became known as Amun-Ra with, of course,

the characters of the Falcon, aka Horus.<sup>142</sup> Likely on account of this association, the poetic voice calls Horus father to the Greek gods such as Dionysus. This parent-child relationship between the Egyptian and the Greek/Roman gods may find expression in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* when the former served as refuge for the latter. In Book 5: Minerva and the Muses—The story-telling competition, one maiden's story song goes:

The monstrous Typhon, sprung from the deepest bowels of the earth,  
Had struck such fear in the heaven dwellers, that all in a body  
Were put to flight, until in exhaustion they found a refuge  
In Egypt, close to the banks of the Nile with its seven mouths

(*Metamorphoses* 2004, 5: Lines 321-324)

The maiden continues to tell us that the gods have been pursued by the Typhon, and in fear they had to “conceal themselves under alien<sup>143</sup> guise.” Thus, Jupiter becomes a ram<sup>144</sup>, Apollo becomes a crow, Bacchus<sup>145</sup> a goat, and so on. That way, the Nile gives refuge to (in this case) the Roman gods, and Tsegaye gives primacy to the Abbay as the cradle of civilization and to the ancient Egyptian gods as parents to the Greek gods.

In the poem, due to the length of time, though, the whole world seems to have lost track of Abbay's prominence due to, “*yesterday's foreign loud noise / Today's mayhem of ignorance.*” At the same time, since the narrator in some places deliberately and masterfully confuses ancient Abbay and ancient Ethiopia (perhaps Africa), they seem to

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<sup>142</sup> Hart, George. *A dictionary of Egyptian gods and goddesses*. Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986. p.6.

<sup>143</sup> The gods essentially metamorphosed into the Egyptian gods' sacred animal forms

<sup>144</sup> The ram with curved horns is the preeminent sacred animal of Amon-Ra (Hart, 1986:4). Note that Jupiter, the supreme god of the Romans, in order to escape the Typhon's wrath, assumes the same sacred animal as that of Amun-Ra, or Horus the falcon.

<sup>145</sup> Bacchus is the Roman name for Dionysus.

suggest that the disregard to origin, to history, and to contribution to world civilization is rendered possible first due to colonialism followed by ignorant dictatorship on the continent. This long-term “divergence of our languages” (162) has also brought about the differences in place and personal naming systems resulting from differences in space and time, as in “Here called *Damam*, there called *Tamam*” (162). Considering the fact that the Amharic term “Demam” means “a person of good complexion”, “beautiful/handsome”; and “tamam/تمام” in Arabic is with a similar positive meaning—“okay”/“perfect,” the poet suggests deep examination of the oneness in the far past.

In sum, the language usage in this poem challenges readers’ understanding of the Amharic language; not because the words and sentences the poet uses are unreasonably complicated, but because of the sophistication of the concepts, events, and cultural significance those words carry. Abbay, as described, is an obedient daughter and a caring mother figure that carries on her back her children—the gods—for eternity; is a huge archive of history, art, and wisdom; is the cradle of various religious beliefs and creeds as well as of human civilization; is milk for the gods and humans in the lower land; is life blood sent from Ethiopia; is home/refuge for those who are distressed; etc. In general, Abbay is not just a river that flows for eternity. It is an epitome of eternity. Abbay is not a stream of not just water, but of history, culture, and identity. She is but a grand spiritual power.

Tsegaye in this poem makes two fundamental moves. On the one hand, he uses the Nile to delve deep into the African past and expose its civilizational origins, which, he believes, have influenced other civilizations: namely, through conceptions of time and calendar systems, conventions of religion and worship, cultural and artistic wisdom, etc.

By demonstrating Africa's contribution to the globe, he relocates Africa to its proper place in world history and geographic imagination. On the other hand, he tries hard to establish a transnational identity within the Nile region by deliberately demolishing current political geographical boundaries. By using his traditional wax and gold technique of etymologizing place names in different parts of the Eastern Nile basin to create the feeling that they all are collected. This technique helps to visualize the river as a site of mutual coexistence rather than bringing it down to a simple utilitarian purpose. The creation of false proximity between people and places, which otherwise do not have any geographic connection, is facilitated by the poet's careful study and usage of some of the major languages in the region from ("From Tana to Karnak"). He employs his knowledge of the history of ancient African indigenous religions to play with words and to blur the "self/other" dichotomy. At no point in the entire poem does he mention Egypt, Sudan, or Ethiopia in their present designations. His vague allusion to such designations instead serve his efforts to bridge the past and present through the Middle-Eastern link. He similarly uses the names of Ethiopia and Cush to evoke their ancient, broader, and less defined extent, as well as place names from all parts of the basin (from "the land of Cush") making them look as though they lay side by side in a unified nation. In so doing, he forges a transnational identity for a Nilean cultural community, one that stands in contrast to the struggles and hierarchies at play in the 20<sup>th</sup> century project of "unity of the Nile Valley."



## Nile

The pervasiveness of folklore is evident in our day-to-day lives, such as holidays, rituals, beliefs, customs, communications and so on. While the term “folklore” as a collective name may refer to “the manners, customs, observances, superstitions, ballads, proverbs, etc., of the olden time,”<sup>146</sup> folklore’s prevalence is also assisted by literature. Georges and Jones contend that “Literary works and mass media productions make use of folklore, thereby contributing to its pervasiveness” In *Myth, Literature and the African World*, Wole Soyinka reiterates this fact and makes the cycle complete when he proposes an African worldview that needs to be born out of the literature, which in turn emanates from the African rituals and myths.

Tsegaye’s poem in English—“Nile”—lies in this cycle of mutual self-creation of myth and literature. Nile poetics flourishes in Nile myths, and Tsegaye’s poetic creation contributes to the evolution of the Nile myths.<sup>147</sup> Tsegaye’s religious education as well as his research interest in ancient Egypto-Cushitic readings seems to have contributed to his style even in English. He is steeped in his own tradition, and he employs knowledge of the hieroglyphic literature, as well as the Axumite and pre-Axumite, Meroetic, Cushitic and ancient Egyptian myths and legends. In this regard, Tsegaye seems to agree with Thomas, who contends that mythology and superstitions are capable of tracing the history of a people “more deeply than any other circumstances” including language itself.<sup>148</sup>

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<sup>146</sup> Thomas, William. Cited in Georges A. Robert, and Michael Jones. *Folkloristics*. (Indiana University Press), 1995.

<sup>147</sup> Tsegaye, Gabre-Medhin. A long poem published in 1977 online ([heim.ifi.uio.no/~abie/Nile\\_Tsegaye.pdf](http://heim.ifi.uio.no/~abie/Nile_Tsegaye.pdf))

<sup>148</sup> (Ibid. 160).

Nile myths have long inspired poets from all over the world. Ovid's narration of Phaeton's fire and Nile's obscured "head" myth; later poets such as Lucan taking inspiration from this and musing at length about the mysteriousness of the head/source and then influencing new ones, "younger" poets like Keats and Shelley furthering the myth through their romancing the Nile. Tsegaye follows the same tradition making sure his African worldview emanates from the African legends themselves. He goes further back in time than his predecessors in search of pioneering folkloric expressions on the Nile's deep past.

Close to three decades after he publishes "Abbay," in Amharic, in 1997 Tsegaye composes a poem "Nile" in English. This is a time when governments in all parts of the region have changed, when the hydropolitical discourse has been heated up, and when a number of angry Ethiopian poets have come to the fore. And yet again, Tsegaye's "Nile" stands out among other Nile poetry produced in Ethiopia not just because he wrote the poem in English, but also because of his skillful treatment of the root cause of hydro-hegemonic structure in the region—the fateful colonial water-sharing agreements and their legacies. I point to these historical dimensions without losing track of Tsegaye's lofty style of writing or his thematic preoccupation with the tradition of his greater Ethiopia, greater Africa, greater Nile. To my mind, the "Nile" is an angrier and more outspoken "Abbay," which makes me ask about the rationale of his language choice.

The fact that Tsegaye chose to write this poem in English is telling of his predetermined audience. His determination of readers, as I show a little later, is guided by the content/message and the addressee. To begin with, the "Nile" foregrounds the idea of ancient grand unity whose continuity is gradually being challenged: both the unity of the river system from the source to mouth (due to human involvement that could result in

water scarcity), and the unity and continuity of cultures, civilizations, wisdom, etc. from the origin in the distant past (due to the actors' ill-conceived historico-political choices of relationship in the present moment.)

Like the forgoing poem in Amharic, Tsegaye's "Nile" is also packed with mythological, historical, religious (many biblical) allusions, some more straightforward than others (such as "Ethiopia stretching her hands unto God" from the "Psalm" in the Old Testament). He cannot do otherwise. Mythology, contends Tsegaye, "started from Ethiopia and Egypt. Even the Pope wears a double crown, as the pharaohs did 5,000 years ago."<sup>149</sup>

In the dominant poetic voice of Ethiopia, Tsegaye employs some ancient Egyptian and Ethiopian myths and legends (namely: the Nile as the god of fertility, as cultivator of peace, as bringer of God's harmony, etc.) to explain human-environment relationship and our understanding of prehistoric Nile. Here, unlike in the "Abbay," Tsegaye incorporates the Judeo-Christian traditions in his poetry only to show the continuity of the myths in different forms. He shows that Ethiopia is one of the early subscribers of "new" traditions. One of his primary engagements is to bring out the "African origin" of these modern religions that have returned to Africa with ritual modifications.

O Arabia, how could you so conveniently have forgotten

While your breath still hangs upon the threads of my springs

O Egypt, you prodigal daughter born from my first love

I am your Queen of the endless fresh waters

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<sup>149</sup> Belcher, Wendy. "Ethiopia's Poet Laureate: Tsegaye Gabre-Medhin" *The Ethiopian Review*. October 1998. Interview with Wendy Belcher (<https://wendybelcher.com/african-literature/tsegaye-gebreg-medhin/>)

Who rested my head upon the arms of Narmer Ka Menes  
When we joined in one, our Upper and Lower Lands to create you  
bosom of my being  
How could you so conveniently count down  
In miserable billions of petty cubic yards  
The eternal drops of my life-giving Nile to you  
Beginning long before the earth fell from the eyeball of heaven

This is predominantly the voice of Ethiopia addressing Egypt, even though, at times, the voices get confused. To be specific, “Arabia” in the first line is either referring to the time when Egypt was joined with Syria in the Middle East (called the United Arab Republic), or to the present official name of Egypt (Egypt Arab Republic). In any case, here Tsegaye is deliberately using a formal name in the place of a common name. Egypt reminds us of the Arabian connection in matters that involve the Nile tension.

Unlike many Nile poets and scholars, Tsegaye considers the river’s flow not just as the flow of water, but of history, culture, myth, and identity. In this excerpt, Ethiopia resentfully reminds Egypt of their ancient mother-child connection, as she interrogates her “prodigal daughter” with an accusatory tone about the region’s long standing hydropolitical paradox—downstream nations dividing the water in “billion cubic yards” and dominating their upstream neighbors: *How could you so conveniently count down/ In miserable billions of petty cubic yards<sup>150</sup>/ The eternal drops of my life-giving Nile to you?!* This line is reminiscent of a crucial event and a time in the long history of a relationship. In November 1959, Egypt and the Sudan signed an agreement to apportion

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<sup>150</sup> See Hailu W/Ghiorgis. 2000 EC., pp. 122-124; Petros J. 2010, pp. 22-23

the entire volume of the Nile flow (84 billion m<sup>3</sup>), totally ignoring other riparian states including Ethiopia who provides “the eternal drops of [her] life-giving Nile to [Egypt]” (line 10).

Beyond the immediate resonance with present day politics, the poem exhibits a more fundamental mingling of myth and history. The historical figures Narmer and Menes are said to be the Pharaohs of Predynastic Egypt and the first dynastic Egypt respectively.<sup>151</sup> In line 5 of the poem, the poetic persona – Ethiopia , in an attempt to appeal the emotion of her addressee—Egypt, alludes to the story of Narmer who cooperated with Aso, an Ethiopian queen to create a united Upper and Lower Egypt in the year circa 3100.<sup>152</sup>

The genre and the style here play a crucial role in evoking a particular affect. In other words, “Technical language” like, for instance, a historian or an anthropologist’s language “can never communicate the subjective meaning [of Ethiopia’s pain] because meaning is best expressed in a style that accompanies symbolic resonance.”<sup>153</sup> The symbolic resonance the speaker offered here is facilitated by the mythologized historical reminiscence evoked by the poetry genre Tsegaye employed. In other words, his mythopoetic engagement of making myth out of poetry/making poetry out of myth.

At other moments in the poem, Tsegaye shows the speaker, Ethiopia, as the Nile or Africa: *I am the Source I am the Nile I am the Africa//I rise like the sun from the deepest core of the globe*

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<sup>151</sup> Goodgame, Peter. “The First Pharaoh.” *Part Eight of The Giza Discovery*, <http://www.redmoonrising.com/Giza/AfricOrig8.htm>

<sup>152</sup> Ibid.; Cf. Later versions of Egyptian legend associate Narmer with Osiris—the “youngest of all ancient Egyptian gods—who is said to have Ethiopian origin.

<sup>153</sup> Paris, Ginette. “How is Psychology a Mythology?” *Mythopoetry.com*. 2013. [https://mythopoetry.com/mythopoetics/splash\\_paris13.html](https://mythopoetry.com/mythopoetics/splash_paris13.html)

I am the first Earth Mother of all fertility

I am the Source I am the Nile I am the African I am the beginning

...

I am your Queen of the endless fresh waters

Who rested my head upon the arms of Narmer Ka Menes

When we joined in one our Upper and Lower Lands to create you

...

That I, your first fountain, I your ever Ethiopia

I, your first life still survive for you?

I rise like the sun from the deepest core of the globe

I am the conqueror of scorching pestilences

I am the Ethiopia that "stretch her hands in supplication to God"

I am the mother of the tallest traveler on the longest journey on Earth

The poetic voices are those of Ethiopia addressing Egypt, Ethiopia addressing the Nile, and Africa addressing the Nile. While the polyphony has its own role in the meaning, we are ultimately told that Ethiopia, the Nile, and Africa are one and the same. In the end, the voice becomes that of the poet, and it becomes apparent only in the last line of the poem when the poet clearly addresses all three of them at the same time: "You are the source, you are the Africa, you are the Ethiopia, you are the Nile."

Tsegaye also creates parallels and metaphorizes the Biblical wilderness to describe the vast land of hostile desert that the Nile truncates on its way from source to mouth. He writes about the desert and equates it to the land of Nod as we know it in the Book of Genesis. According to Genesis 4:16, the Land of Nod is a place located "on the east of Eden," where Cain was exiled by God after he had murdered his brother Abel. Who is killing whom? And who is being exiled where?

My name is Africa. I am the mother of the Nile.

O Nile, my prodigal daughter on the wilderness of the desert

Bringing God's harmony to all brothers and sisters

And calming down their noises of brass in their endless nakednesses

O Nile, you are music that restore the rhythm of existence

Into the awkward stampeding of these Middle Eastern blindnesses

You are the irrigator that cultivate peace

From my Ethiopian sacred mountains of the sun

Across to nod on the East of Aden and across Sinai

Beyond Gibraltar into the heights of Mount Moriah

O Nile, my chosen sacrifice for universal peace offering

Upon whose gift the heritages of Meroe and Egypt

Still survive for the benefit of our lone World

The questions invite one to ask further whether the Nile here is being addressed as the confident healer, feeder, thirst-quencher, dependable caregiver, and lifeblood, as she

would be in the Amharic poem “ፀባይ/Abbay.” Indeed, the Nile is entrusted with one or the other of the following tasks: peace offering, sacrifice, restoring rhythm of existence, bringing harmony, cultivating peace. But for whom? Or at whose cost? The poet seems to suggest that the Nile plays the role of both Cain-the killer that was exiled from its birth place to the wild desert , and that of Abel-the martyr or more fittingly the Isaac as we shall see below. But before that, a consideration of one historical phenomenon might facilitate the Biblical exegesis better.

The expression “Middle Eastern blindness” calls to mind Egypt, addressed as Arabia at the beginning of the poem, spearheading the pan-Arabic front, suggesting the “cultivation of peace” in the Middle East (between Egypt and Palestine/Israel). This, however, would be complete with one huge sacrifice. A sacrifice that is lovely, dear, or even shockingly precious. A sacrifice that amounts to something that happened thousands of years ago around those very places—*“Across the Nod... Across Sinnai”/“... into the heights of Mount Moriah.”* “The chosen sacrifice” then was little Isaac whose father, Abraham, was willing to sacrifice at Mount Moriah upon the order of God.<sup>154</sup> The chosen sacrifice here/now is the Nile, which was presented as the “universal peace offering” for the historic Middle East agreement—the Camp David Peace Accords of 1979. As part of this agreement between Egypt and Israel, then President Anwar Sadat had promised “to give 1% of the Nile water to Israel although the idea was ultimately dropped as it was faced with strong challenge from Ethiopia and other upper riparian states.”<sup>155</sup> As El-Salam canal was considered as a unique project that transports the Nile water to the eastern deserts of north Sinai as well as to Gaza and Israel. The structure is still there as

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<sup>154</sup> The Book of Genesis 22

<sup>155</sup> Hailu Wolde-Ghiorghis. *Lə'Abbay Wuha Mugət*. (Addis Ababa: AAU Press), 2001 E.C. p.143.



part of the Toshka Project and the North Sinai Irrigation Project. It is to be noted that the name of the canal designed for the “sacrifice” is El-Salam (Peace) canal.

The Nile has been chosen for sacrifice for the peace in the Middle East, and Tsegaye, in this poem, is equating the Nile to the flesh and blood of little Isaac whose father was willing to sacrifice or following the prefiguration of Christ, he likens the Nile to the blood of Jesus Christ whose father was willing to (and did) sacrifice. And this huge sacrifice for universal peace offering is sent “From the Ethiopian sacred mountains of the Sun”

Considering the amount of water that would be unwisely wasted due to projects like Toshka, on top of the unfair water apportionment treaty, Tsegaye calls Egypt the “prodigal daughter.” His expression "my prodigal daughter" referring to Egypt can be interpreted in two equally sensible manners. On the one hand, "Prodigal daughter" is an allegory that refers to a daughter who imprudently spends resources. On the other hand, it means "one who returns" to one's roots, and Tsegaye, as much as he laments the long-lost tie due to the "daughter's" improvidence, he also hopes for her state of realization and the return to the age-old mother-daughter relationship between Ethiopia and Egypt. The Afrocentrist W.E.B DuBois, in his discussion of the relationship between the ancient civilization of Egypt and its original connection with the “burnt-faced” heartland of Africa, writes:

In Ethiopia the sunrise of human culture took place, spreading down into the Nile Valley. Beyond Ethiopia, in central Africa, lay the gold of Ophir and the rich trade of Punt on which the prosperity of Egypt largely depended. Egypt brought

slaves from black Africa as she did from Europe and Asia. But she also brought citizens and leaders from Africa. When Egypt conquered Asia, she used black soldiers to a wide extent. *When Asia overwhelmed Egypt, Egypt sought refuge in Ethiopia as a child returns to his mother*, and Ethiopia then for centuries dominated Egypt and successfully invaded Asia.<sup>156</sup> (Emphasis added.)

In his mythopoeic engagement of making new myths out of his poetry by bringing in Biblical place names and events where they normally do not belong, Tsegaye does at least two things in those verses. First, by introducing the idea and the location of the wilderness which he calls “the land of Nod,” “Mount Sinai,” “Mount Moriah,” “Gibraltar,” in terms of the Nile, he is making a myth of his own, not merely perpetuating the ancient African myths. And as shown above, he is by no means referring to those names in their space-time limited use. For a more plausible exegesis of the lines that allude to scriptures, I will bring a couple of lines from another poem by Tsegaye himself. In his poem, “The Epic of Aesop, the Black Philosopher,” Tsegaye has the following to say about the Nile where he defies common geography:

Abbay-the Nile flows  
From the Tana mother source,  
Across the Mediterranean mouths,  
Into the Biblos and far beyond  
Across the stormy heads of the Dead Sea,

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<sup>156</sup> DuBois. *The World and Africa*. Oxford University Press. 2007, p. 75. Googlebook.

Beyond the eternal roofs of Africa's  
Glowing Heavens—

For Tsegaye, the Nile is not boundlessly eternal, but it is also spatially limitless as the sea is not its final destination. We are told the Nile has a beginning but not a definite end. It flows beyond its supposed estuary, crosses the Mediterranean Sea, and keeps draining other continents, perhaps metaphorically suggesting the spread of both the human race as well as the fruits of civilization that emanated from the Nile Valley. Reading these lines from “The Epic of Aesop” in conjunction with the ones above from the “Nile,” we learn that part of the Nile flows west “beyond Gibraltar” into Europe, and part of it flows past “Mount Moriah,” and “across the stormy heads of the Dead Sea” into Asia.

Next, Tsegaye is subverting the existing legend of the “Mountains of the Moon” as sources of the Nile somewhere in Africa without a certain location. Instead, he asserts that the “Ethiopian sacred mountains of the Sun” are the true sources of the Nile. He writes:

You [Nile] are the irrigator that cultivate peace  
From my Ethiopian sacred mountains of the Sun

In so doing, he also alludes to the ancient Ethiopian and Egyptian sun-worship before the rise of Christianity and Islam in the region. One important factor that distinguishes this work from Tsegaye's Amharic work, however, is the theme of hydropolitics. Yet again,

in terms of depicting the regional contention, colonial influence and legacy in the water management system of the basin, this poem is unmatched on many levels.

### Conclusion

In a 1998 interview, Tsegaye boldly tells Wendy Belcher about his reverence for what humanity has accomplished over the ages:

The cradle of man is here [Ethiopia], the beginning of man is here, there is no refuting that. Archaeologists, geologists have dug everywhere, and they have come up with the bones to prove that man started here. And that man was not sleeping, from the moment he was created he started creating. The heritage of that man, of the ancestor, is the heritage of the world.

In “Abbay,” the poet offers ample instances of the creative representation of the mythological and historical accounts of the once-unified region, which the poet considers as the precursor of civilization, and which he longs to recreate. As such, he defies the national boundaries as we know them and challenges the colonial as well as post-colonial national identities that evolved along the course of the Nile. In the same spirit, but in a slightly different tone and with the purpose of addressing a more recent and urgent matter, in “Nile”, he argues for a harmonious restoration of that heritage of the world”

Tsegaye's serious engagement of both myth and history as integral parts of his artistic works is akin to the theory that literature emerges from myth,<sup>157</sup> and literature in turn helps in the pervasiveness of myths.<sup>158</sup> There could be a tendency to dismiss easily whatever amount of the prehistoric accounts packed in the poems as mythical. In other words, Tsegaye's mythopoetic reconstruction of the image of the Nile, which in turn evokes the image of "greater Ethiopia" or "greater Africa" may not precisely correspond with recorded history as we know it. Nevertheless, his pain of using the linguistic and cultural diversity in the region only to envisage a trans-national identity through his works is profound.

Myths also have social functions, one of which being "providing a guide for behavior"<sup>159</sup> and to follow the good deeds of the forefathers/foremothers. Thus, as a pure literary work, and a romanticization of the Nile, the narrative is still valid in terms of what Soyinka describes as its "fulfillment of one of the social functions of Literature: the visionary reconstruction of the past for the purpose of social direction."<sup>160</sup> At a time when a sustainable cooperative management of water sources in the Nile basin is more crucial than ever, the social direction suggested by the poems is to look inwards and act accordingly. As Yaacov Shavit notes, "the nature of the Nile Valley and the Nile River's function as a unifying factor for Egypt, Sudan, and the rest of Africa is a major subject in the Afrocentric world view and historiography."<sup>161</sup> To conclude with the words of

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<sup>157</sup> Segal, Robert. *Theorizing About Myth*. 1999. p. 48

<sup>158</sup> Georges A. Robert, and Michael Jones. *Folkloristics*. (Indiana University Press), 1995, p.2.

<sup>159</sup> Carl Jung cited by Segal, Robert. *Theorizing About Myth*. 1999. p. 79.

<sup>160</sup> Soyinka, Wole. *Myth, Literature, and the African World*. p.106.

<sup>161</sup> Shavit, Yaacov. "Up the River or Down the River? An Afrocentrist Dilemma." *The Nile: Histories, Cultures, Myths*, edited by Haggai Erlich and Israel Gershoni, Reinner, 2000, p.94.

Belcher, indeed, “it is no surprise that he [Tsegaye] has spent his life making links between traditions, forging connections where others see only difference.”

# CHAPTER TWO

## AN UPSTREAM MUSE ABBAY IN ETHIOPIAN POETRY AND SONGS

The Nile is central to Ethiopian politics, history, and culture, and is an ever-present concept in the consciousness of Ethiopian societies. For centuries, Ethiopians, about 40 percent of whom live in the drainage basin of the Blue Nile,<sup>162</sup> have given the river a special place in their hearts and have expressed their reverence (and at times, resentment) toward it in various ways. Originating from Ethiopia, Abbay (the Blue Nile) with its over 100 tributaries contribute to more than 85 percent of the waters of the Nile. Paradoxically, Ethiopia is one of the least, if not the least, beneficiaries of this huge resource. As such, many a singer, an artist, a poet, a novelist, etc. has paid tribute to this mighty river in their respective field focusing on history, conflict, hunger, thirst, despair, resentment, and general frustration of the people, on one hand, and hope, gratification, contentment, and cooperation, on the other.

The level of devotion and popular imagination is indicative of the fact that the river is a deep-rooted element in the national culture. Indeed, as the cultural historian Bairu Tafla notes, “the Blue Nile transcends the concept of a river in the country of its origin.”<sup>163</sup> Bairu draws from ancient Ethiopian scriptures the meaning of the river’s Amharic name, Abbay, and writes that “the original appellation seems to have been the

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<sup>162</sup> Nile Basin Initiative. “NBI Member States.” <https://www.nilebasin.org/index.php/83-nbi/member-states?limit=4&start=4> Retrieved 2/10/2023.

<sup>163</sup> Bairu Tafla. “The Father of Rivers: The Nile in Ethiopian Literature.” *The Nile: Histories, Cultures, Myths*, edited by Haggai Erlich & Israel Gershoni, (Boulder/London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2000, p. 166.)

Ge'ez adjective “Abawi” (fatherly) to mean the father of rivers.<sup>164</sup> Other instances of naming the river and its place of origin are also available in Ethiopian folklore and hagiographies. One such instance is the legend of Abune Zereabruk’s astonishment at the river source’s delivery of the monk’s prayer books after seven years of entrustment. All bone-dry! and how the emphatic interjection of the monk, “አባ፣ እይ!”/ “Abba, ay!” (“Father, look!”) evolved into the present name of the river—*ፀባይ*/Abbay. Examining this deep-rooted connection of the people with the river as reflected in the various literary products vis-à-vis the overall relations in the basin—especially the political, historical, and cultural ones—is worthwhile to understand the rationale behind and contribution of each literary work. A close examination of the relationship between Ethiopia’s hydropolitical engagement in the region and the literary production across the ages reveals that Ethiopian artists in different periods used their works on the Nile to act sometimes as proponents, and at other times as critics, of the Nile water management locally as well as regionally.

Temporally, the works examined in this chapter range from the second half of the 1970s through the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, a period which marks key moments in the politics of the Nile development. As discussed in the previous chapter, following Ethiopia’s decision to break the age-old tie with Egypt and to assign its own bishop as head of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church in 1959, and the commencement of the Aswan High Dam (AHD) construction in Egypt the following year, the Nile discourse in Ethiopia is characterized mainly by silence both in the media and the literary realm—a silence that Tsegaye broke with his Amharic poem “ፀባይ”/“Abbay” in 1973.

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<sup>164</sup> (Ibid. 168.)



## The Era of Socialist Derg: From 1974 to 1991

Overthrowing the monarchy in 1974, the Marxist military regime commonly known as the Dergue came to power as a Provisional Military Administration and ruled the country for seventeen years with a similar appetite for censorship, albeit with different mechanisms of control<sup>165</sup>. The mechanism included appropriation of art and aligning it with the “revolutionary struggle.” Accordingly, two changes came into the picture as regards the Nile literature during this era: the shift in hydropolitical rhetoric of the region with the change of governments both in Egypt and in Ethiopia, as well as the Dergue’s general revolutionary artistic policy, banning and condemning artistic works considered anti-revolutionary<sup>166</sup> and non-patriotic. The government demanded popular music play its political role in the country’s development as it was the case in any aspect of cultural life of the time. Tekle-Yohannes, the president of the Ethiopian Music Association during the era of the Socialist rule, describes the order of the day specifically referring to songs as follows: “Lyrics cannot be just romance. They must include the country, its heroes, valleys, mountains, and *rivers*.”<sup>167</sup>

While censorship reigned during this period, quite a number of literary works on the Abbay, mainly poetry and songs, have been produced within those seventeen years. One common characteristic of the Nile literature of this era is bitterness and lament over the loss of resources, underutilization of potential, and predicaments of the country.

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<sup>165</sup> Messeret Checole. *The Quest for Press Freedom: One Hundred Years of History of the Media in Ethiopia*. UPA, 2013, p. 336,

<sup>166</sup> Dagmawi Woubshet. “An Interview with Bekele Mekonnen” *Northeast African Studies*, 2013, vol. 13, No. 1., p. 218.

<sup>167</sup> See the documentary by the BBC titled *Under African Skies*. [Emphasis added.]

“Abbay, Humming Out of Tune”: The Melancholy Song

The song “መባይ-መባይ”/“Abbay-Abbay” by the choir of the Addis Ababa University Cultural Center came out in 1982, and true to the time, is preoccupied with the theme of the hydropolitical arrangement in place—that is, a matter of persistent subordination. The song has lyrics from Tarekegn Bedasso and musical arrangement made by the renowned musician Tesfaye Lemma. It was first recorded on the Ethiopian National Radio in 1982 and offers a legendary lament over the country’s failure to harness the river and the loss of a huge amount of fertile soil and silt due to the torrential river. As such, it is a work that asserts, although indirectly, the under-utilization of the river due to debilitating colonial and post-colonial treaties that excluded Ethiopia and hindered the country from developing significant infrastructures like dams and irrigation systems along the river for a long time.

መባይ መባይ፣ መባይ መባይ

መባይ መባይ፣

መባይ መባይ፣ መባይ መባይ

መባይ መባይ፣

ያገር አድባር፣ ያገር ሲሳይ፣

ያላገሩ ዘምሮ፣ ያለቅኝት ከርከሮ

መባይ ያላሻራ ኖሮ!

Abbay, Abbay!

Guardian spirit of the nation

Blessing of the land

Is singing from the same song sheet *as others*,  
Humming out of its tune,  
And wandering without a trace!

The flow of the river is likened to the sound of a song that is played out of place, out of tune, out of rhythm. The *qəgnit* in Ethiopian music is a melodic system that is roughly equivalent to the scale in the Western sense. In the song, the Amharic expression ያለቅኝት ከርከሮ/“*yaleqəgnit kerkəro*” refers to the way the Abbay’s action calls to mind the playing an out-of-tune *kərar* (an Ethiopian traditional stringed musical instrument.) Thus, the English expression “humming out of tune” might capture the meaning of the unharnessed, torrential, and homeless river’s flight (to the land of “others”). The unwelcome flow of the river is represented with the song or the musical instrument the Abbay plays which never strikes a chord with the Ethiopians. Alas, the “guardian spirit of the nation,” the “blessing of the land [of Ethiopia]” is abandoning its “home” and is “singing from the same song sheet like *others*.” This perception that Abbay’s tune has an audience that is more apt than the “natives” is indicative of the shift in consideration of the river as an ever-homeless wanderer. The song disparages the excessive use of the old Ethiopian adage “Abbay doesn’t have a place to stay, but it wanders carrying a log.” In a Nile narrative regime, which the singers refer to as “a new beginning,”<sup>168</sup> the expression of Abbay’s wandering without an abode is simply a platitude. It doesn’t carry the connotation it once did.

እስከመቼ ድረስ ሲተረጎ ይኖራል፤

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<sup>168</sup> This seems to point to the change in the tone of the Nile discourse following Mengistu and Sadat’s coming to power just three years apart.

ዐባይ ማደሪያ ቢስ ግንድ ይዞ ይዘራል?!

ያገሩ ልጅ ባዳ ባይተዋር ይሆናል፣

ስንስቅ ስንሳለቅ ይኸው ዛሬ ደርሷል።

Abbay was not considered just homeless. Rather, it was rendered ባይተዋር— “stranger” to its own people, and the lines shift the blame from the river to the people and authorities. The Cultural Musical Group asks rhetorically: *For how long are we supposed to live with our proverb/ That “Abbay the homeless wanders carrying a log”?! Abbay’s* song is a tuneless hum for its fellow Ethiopians, but a sweet melody for others, mainly because whoever chooses to build a “home” for the Nile, to keep it calm, and to listen to its tunes must be its right audience. The song advocates for the end of Abbay’s “homelessness,” especially the building of dams. To describe Abbay’s tone of notorious roaring as it swiftly robs all the important silt and minerals and crosses the boundary, the group characterize Abbay as “ናቡቴ” (a swift snatcher) who “blusters” with jubilation. እዩት ናቡቴውን ሄደ እየደነፋ/ወዛችንን ነጥቆ ላገደው ሊተፋ the song continues:

እዩት ናቡቴውን ሄደ እየደነፋ፣

ወዛችንን ጠርጎ ላገደው ሊተፋ፤

ካይናችን ስር ነጥቆ እልም አለ ጠፋ፣

ዐባይ ያገር አድባር፣ ዐባይ ያገር ተስፋ!

Look at that snatcher,

With a boastful blustering it leaves

Robbing us of our resources

To dump them to those who dam it.

Hope of the nation—

Our Guardian Spirit,

Abbay vanished from sight .

This song generally refers to the geographic reality that the Blue Nile, both the mainstream and its tributaries, flows torrentially, quickly cutting through deep, impenetrable gorges, making it difficult to access its waters. The despair expressed both by the melancholic melody and the elegiac lyrics about Ethiopia's perpetual loss of resources runs even deeper. Abbay flows through a series of steeply cascading pools in essentially inaccessible gorges, which are cut in the Ethiopian highlands to a vertical distance of about 1.5 kilometers or close to two miles. Perce Bysshe Shelley fairly imagines the invincibility of the river digging deep into the heart of the earth: "*Month after month the gathered rains descend/ Drenching yon secret Ethiopian dells.*"<sup>169</sup> It would be more accurate to describe the river's action as "wearing away" than 'drenching' the Ethiopian highlands and gorges. That is why Abbay for so long has been allowed to hum without a tune and to leave its native land "without a trace" of development. And unable to change the circumstances, Ethiopians have been—and will probably continue to be—condemned to face the music.

In line with this sense that the Abbay's aimless wandering filling the basin of others while leaving the people around its head waters dying of thirst and debilitating

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<sup>169</sup> Shelley, P. B. "Nile." *John Keats: Selected Poems and Letters. A Longman Cultural Edition*, edited by Susan J. Wolfson, Princeton University Press, 2007. P. 105.

poverty, another Ethiopian artist declared that the Abbay as a river of grandiosity is but a misnomer.

ዐባይ ስም ነው አእንጂ ምን ጠቅሟል ላገሩ፣

ትርፉ ለሌላ ነው ሄዶ መገበሩ

Abbay is too big a name—for nothing good it did for us

But of great value, it is for others

Where it pays its tribute!

As the pioneer of the Amharic lamentations on Abbay and its role in defining the country's development and foreign relations, Yohannes Negatu's 1978 song with the Ethiopian Army Orchestra/የምድር ጦር ኦርኬስትራ used to be frequently aired on Ethiopian Radio from the late 1970s to the downfall of the Dergue in 1991. It did not continue to be heard until the commencement of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam like the choir lamentation above, perhaps, due to the presence of verses that romanticize the ideology of the Dergue. And that would not sit well with the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF.)

ጥቁር ዐባይ/Tiqur Abbay (The Black Nile) (1984)

According to an email from Ayalneh Mulatu, the poem was written in 1967 E.C.<sup>170</sup> i.e., around 1975 G.C. But the poem was published in *Yegitmoch Medbil* by Tsigereda Be'ir

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<sup>170</sup> The complete poem I received is dated as January 7, 1967. This is about five months after the Derg declared the abolishment of the monarchy and two months after the extrajudicial killing of about sixty members of the nobility and the cabinet of Haile Selassie's administration. This could

(The Rose Pen) in 1984.<sup>171</sup> This publication date also marks the worst year of the 1980s drought and famine period in Ethiopia.. The famine was aggravated by the long-standing civil war in the northern part of the country, and it claimed the lives of over 1 million people mainly from that region.<sup>172</sup> Also in 1981 (1974 E.C.), Ayalneh had written a poem entitled “ዐባይ በጉልበቱ/Abbay—A Law Unto Himself”<sup>173</sup> in which he laments that Abbay is too powerful to be harnessed and that it has chosen to make Ethiopia barren and to nourish “ምስር/Egypt and Sudan.” He warns that if it continues like this, and unless something is done about it, “fertile Ethiopia” shall only remain a myth.

While Ayalneh Mulatu’s poem, “Tiqur Abbay,” shares in its criticisms of the Abbay, it is probably the first to personify the river and to tell his crimes of robbery and unfruitfulness straight to his face.<sup>174</sup>

ዓባይ ...! ዓባይ ...! ጥቁር ዓባይ...!

...

ድንጋይ ...! ጠጠር ...! ኢታንካካ

አፈር ግሰህ ኢታሽካካ!

የበላብህ መቼ አነሰ ...!?

ዛር ያንተን ስም እየጠራ::

ካሁን ወዲያ ጠንቋይ የለም

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be the original date of writing the poem. In the poem, there are lines suggesting that Abbay’s crimes “will be examined in the same way/as the former cabinet members/And it will be recreated with a new name, a new history.”

<sup>171</sup> Cited in Bairu Tafla. “The Father of Rivers: The Nile in Ethiopian Literature.” 2000.

<sup>172</sup> Dawit Wolde Giorgis. *Red Tears: War, Famine, and Revolution in Ethiopia*. 1989.

<sup>173</sup> The poem was (re)published in 2013 in ከድጡ ወደ ማጡ/”*Keditu Wede Matu/From the Slippery to the Miry*, one of the two-volume collection of Ayalneh’s poems.

<sup>174</sup> Tsegaye also apostrophizes the river in his 1973 poem “Abbay” to show the river both as a grand entity that culturally and historically unifies the whole Nile region, and as a revered motherly figure in the hearts and minds of the riparian people. (See Chapter One.)

አጉሪም አይኖርም ደብተራ  
 ቃልቻ...! ባለአውሌ...! ፉቅራ  
 የአንተም ...! የእኛም...! እድል ወሳኝ  
 ሥራ ብቻ ሆኗል ሥራ::  
 አፈር ሁነህ...! አፈር ጎርሰህ!  
 የጥቁር አፈር ውሃ ግሰህ..!  
 በበላይህ ግንድ ተጭነህ  
 አፈር ለብሰህ በክረምቱ ...  
 ስንት አይተሀል ...? ስንቱ አይቶሀል ...?  
 ጥቁር አባይ የትላንቱ ...::  
 በጋ ክረምት በማይነጥፈው  
 በውሃህ አዞ ሲደነፉ  
 ባጠገብህ ያለው መሬት  
 በድርቅ አሮ ደም ሲተፋ::

The poet begins his criticism with the name of the river in the title. According to the American lexicographer, Thomas Leiper Kane, ጥቁር ዐባይ/Tiqur Abbay, the “Blue Nile ([as] the color blue is perceived as black).” However, the water of the Abbay is never blue in the first place. “ጥቁር ዐባይ” which literally means the Black Abbay is used by Amharic speaking Ethiopians only when they mean to distinguish it from the other major tributary of the Nile—the White Nile. Therefore, the poet’s choice of that name as the



title of the poem is perhaps alluding to the dark brown color the river maintains as it wrenches away about 1.3 billion tons of fertile soil every year from the country.<sup>175</sup>

In the opening lines of the poem, the poet describes the torrential flow of the river as it digs deep down to the basement rocks of the earth, “carrying all the silt and sediments”/“and roaring with invincibility and triumph.” And it echoes the lament of the generation that the trend resulted in the “frolicking of crocodiles in the perennial river/While the natives dwell in the barren lands/ Perish due to severe drought right around the banks.” The poem is generally an angry declaration of the military government’s plans regarding water development. The Abbay had long been celebrated as an abode for *zar*-spirits or as a deity itself. Having disestablished the Ethiopian Orthodox Church in 1974, the Marxist regime dissociated state and religion all together and became generally hostile to all sorts of religion and worship system. True to the time, the speaker in the poem tells Abbay that any ritual associated with it ought be understood as a superstition, and therefore, banned:

From here on-wards, there is  
No soothsayer or sorcerer,  
No *zar*-spirit, no clerics, nor a shaman!

It is high time that the Abbay got harnessed. Thus, writes the poet, “your fate and our fate/will be decided by work and only work.” There was little materialization of the plans, however.

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<sup>175</sup> A. Amdihun, et al. “Modeling Soil Erosion Dynamics in the Blue Nile (Abbay) Basin: A Landscape Approach.” *Science Alert*. <https://scialert.net/fulltext/?doi=rjes.2014.243.258> Retrieved 4/17/2022.

The lamentation continued.

እናትክን በሉልኝ/Insult Him on My Behalf (1989)

An exemplary poem in the tradition of personifying and scolding Abbay is poet Hailu GabreYohannes's (1935-1998) "*ənnatkən Bälulləgn*," which he translates as "Insult Him on My Behalf."<sup>176</sup> The poet begins expressing his dismay or discontent with a coarse insult--እናትክን/*ənnatkən*. This is the first word of a common phrase used to insult someone by way of their mother. On its own, *ənnatkən* refers to just a direct object ("your mother")--following a verb (action.) In Amharic, when used as an insult, it is understood to be followed by a derogatory term, and it stands as bad alone as with the term that follows. As a poet who lives in exile, Hailu sends along his insult to Abbay with that strong swear phrase as a title—Insult him on my behalf! The disparaging comments follow:

Please get an eye of Abbay!

When it is flowing away.

Let its tears run down!

It flows like a snake in a twist,

When its natives suffer from thirst,

When they utter a cry of agony.

Why then does it not give a response?

Because it is cruel, Abbay is heedless.

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<sup>176</sup> Cited by Bairu Tafla. (2000).

The voice presents the ignored plight of the people to emphasize the cruelty of the indigee. Even the natural meandering movement of the river is likened to that of the snake—an animal often considered a symbol of evil power and chaos. We are told that the water slithers like a snake and runs down fast. What makes the snake-like escape of the river and everything it carries more regrettable is the fact that if used wisely, the water, like the snake, could also be a source of life and healing.

At times, the voice cuts us—the messengers—out and chooses to apostrophize the river. In absentia, the speaker tells Abbay all he needs right in the face. From us, then, he turns his face to the river itself and starts talking to Abbay and interrogates the “blind” and “deaf” river thus:

If you have eyes, you, Abbay-the idle,  
Please see that man, that man for a moment,  
Burnt with thirst, exhausted, such like this,  
For you have deserted him to go to other places.

The river refuses to see or hear and is also accused of being “idle” and “going to *other places*” and “deserting” his people. Where the “other places” are or to whom those adjectives are addressed becomes clearer in later stanzas when he suggests solutions for resource development and mutual growth. The poet’s vision about the wish and will of the people, the country’s national interest which goes in line with the “natural” or “God-given right” is expressed in the following verses:

Fencing by dams to change you into power,  
Distributing by canals to make you fruitful,  
Tapping by pipes to feed mankind,  
Governed by his power, under his control,  
Indeed, he will use you, and  
You will never remain mocking at him.

In the text above, still addressing Abbay, the poetic voice introduces us to an agent who needs to be confronted, albeit indirectly. The lines indicate the actions that would be or needed to be taken to subdue the river, to stop its mockery, and to render it “fruitful” to the people in the times ahead. Concluding the poem with that move is a telling gesture. It was not the river that was being insulted or resented all along. The river is not ultimately imagined as a formidable enemy that defies control and deserves all the insult. Instead, the allegation, the relay of cursing—via a messenger—was aimed at the ones who are believed to have failed to use their “power” to “govern” the resources.

### The Era of Ethnic Federalism

The downfall of the Derg and coming to power of the Ethiopian Peoples’ Revolutionary Democratic Front (hereafter EPRDF) saw an overall proliferation in the literature on the Nile. The relatively open space for expression led to an initial growth in publication, though it declined after the first few years. Some writers continued the tradition of eulogizing the river, while others came out bitter and sharper. Both in the regimes of the

Derg and in the era of ethnic federalism, there are numerous examples of poetry that anthropomorphize the river with similar intention as that of Hailu.

አዩ ሀባይ!/Oh, Abbay!

A malevolent curse comes from another Ethiopian poet who seems to have lost faith in Abbay. In his Amharic poem entitled “Abbay”, Abebaw Melaku (1999 E.C.) would love to pull Abbay down from its “undeserved” pedestal of fame, honor, and historical prominence.

በከንቱ ለተቀበልከው ውዳሴ ድፍን አበሻን ላጃጃልከበት

በእጥፍ ብድራትህን የጅህን ጥፋት አግኝበት

ቀድሞ ካንተ ምን ተገኝቶ ስምህ እንጂ የተረፈን

አእንዳንተ ክፋት ከሆነማ አእንኳን በስምህ ሊዘፈን

ለሞትህ ሙሾ አውርደን ተዝካርህን በልተን ባረፍን

For the undeserved praise you have received in the past,

For your wicked way of fooling the entire “Habesha”,

Get double of the disaster – be cursed!

What have you given us,

Except for your name?

If it were for your shrewdness,

Instead of singing in your name,

And dancing to your rhythm,

We should rather be grieving you.

...

Abbay! Reap your sorrow, reap what you have sown,

As we grieved because of you, may you grieve even more!

Abbay! Reap pain, reap what you've sown,

As we grieved because of you,

May you grieve even more!

Abebaw (1999 E.C.)

Such was the general trend and the language of the time—that is, deep sorrow and grievance accumulated over many years. Akin to the spirit of the leadership's rhetoric, the poets engage the river as a theme more frequently than in the Imperial era, but the engagement is not in line with the politicians who tend to use the art for propaganda. The message of resentment, again, was addressed to the authorities who are believed to have done little or nothing compared to the rhetoric of the day.

After personifying Abbay as such and giving it human attributes of emotion and intention, the poets in later times came up with a better approach – making the river speak back! In which case, the Nile is made to ask, respond, or retort. This kind of technique is also common with the Egyptian poets although their domestic concern is different from that of the Ethiopians. (See Chapter Three for analysis of poems on river pollution and water scarcity.) By allowing the river to talk back to the insults and accusations of former angry poets, young and old, these ones set the tone sharper and their intention clearer.

## Giving a Voice to the River

Perhaps Zena-Markos Endalew (1992 E.C.)<sup>177</sup> is a pioneer in coming up with a voice for the river. His approach is also unique in that the river is allowed to narrate its story from its birth at Gish-Abbay to its destination in the Mediterranean Sea. The Geez language and *quine* expert, Zena-Markos fully anthropomorphised Abbay in that we are made to accept that we are actually listening to an exclusively composed human being— that is named and tasked like a river.<sup>178</sup>

አለ እንደሆን ብዬ የሚጠቀምብኝ  
ደግሜ ደግሜ ኢትዮጵያን ዞርሁኝ  
ማንም አልተገኘ ለጥቅም ያሰበኝ  
ባለሰልጣኖችም ጨርሰው ረሱኝ

Zena-Markos, p. 28

I flowed around Ethiopia,  
Hoping to find someone –just one –  
Who might care for my bounty  
Officials, engineers, journalists, nor scholars  
None whosoever was willing to engage.  
So I got enraged and planned my next move ...

The above is an excerpt from one of his three Nile poems where Abbay narrates its life-history starting from Gish Abbay. The river explains its journey to lake Tana and then to Tisissat Fall, with the task of delineating Gojjam from its neighbors—Gondar, Wollo, Shewa, and Wollega. It then talks about the reason for its exile to Sudan and Egypt: the lack and will of Ethiopian authorities to benefit from it. Getachew Woliyou

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<sup>177</sup> Zena-Markos, Endalew. *Yegitim Effita*. Addis Ababa: Horizon Printers. 1992 E.C. pp. 27-30.

<sup>178</sup> Yewulsew S. *Literature as a Hydropolitical Discourse*. 2013. p.38.

(2002 E.C.)<sup>179</sup> follows Zena with a more adamant voice of retaliation from Abbay. The river stands its ground and affirms that it never flows upwards, never back to its source, but to its estuary.

የዐባይ ምላሽ

“ዐባይ ስም ነው እንጂ ምን ጠቅሟል ላገሩ

ትርፉ ለሌላ ነው ሄዶ መገበሩ”

እርግማኑን ተወው በከንቱ አትውቀሰኝ

ግድብ ሳትገድብ ለመስኖ ሳትጠልፈኝ

...

እኔ አልሆንልህ ያገር ፖሊሲ አውጪ

የወሃ ባለሟል አሊያ ብድር ሰጪ

አለመለስ ኋላ ተፈጥሮዬን ክጄ

መውረድ ልማዴ ነው ልንገርህ ወዳጄ

Please hold your insult, don't curse me for nothing,

Instead, construct a dam, or divert me for use,

Don't expect me to be your policy maker,

Your water engineer or a donor agency

I can't act against the course of nature,

And flow upwards,

But I want you to know that I'm rewarding.

If you are determined to work and develop

I'm ready to respond and to stand by your side.

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<sup>179</sup> Getachew, Wolliyou. *Ye'abbay Guada*. Addis Ababa: Banawi Printers. 2002, pp. 89-90.



The above excerpt indicates that Abbay not only says “enough” to cursing and blaming, but it also advises as to what should be the way forward, such as dam construction, irrigation channeling, It is to be noted that Getachew does not claim to be a professional poet. Nevertheless, as a poetic work contributed by a person who has traveled extensively to especially Sudan and Egypt researching the status and the place of the Nile in the hearts and minds of their inhabitants, this poem has introduced a new way of giving the river a more authoritative voice. Considering the time the poem was written, saying those prescriptive words to the authorities would be taken as looking for trouble. Hence the use of poetry to present the words uttered by an unreasonably ‘insulted’ and ‘cursed’ river back to the poets and by extension, the lay people.

#### ሾተላይ/Shotelay

In the year 2000, poet-playwright Ayalneh Mulatu came up with a one-act poetic drama entitled *Shotelay*. Here, in Scene Five, the Spirit of Abbay and an old woman (representing Ethiopia – the shotelay<sup>180</sup>) are conversing. In this play like in his poem ጥቁር ዓባይ/Tiqur Abbay and those of others that followed his tradition of viewing the Abbay at best as an ordinary river and at worst a heartless robber, Ayalneh shares his frustrations, but he also makes the Abbay defiantly argue and convincingly deny the accusations of the old lady (Ethiopia and Ethiopians.) Here too, Ayalneh offers the pioneering technique of giving the river a chance to respond to accusations and to express *his* feelings and intentions.

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<sup>180</sup> Thomas Leiper Kane defines *Shotelay* as “illness transmitted to a newborn infant by its mother (in popular belief, inflicted by a demon)” ... Also “woman who transmits this illness and whose children die or can’t grow” (1990, v.1:639).

The Old Woman: Now, what do you want of me?

You have ripped me off my treasure,

You have left me bare,

What is that you want from me today?

Abbay (Spirit): I am here to talk with you,

And the truth I shall tell.

Old Woman: Well, I don't want to talk to you.

Abbay: Why not?

Old Woman: Because not my allies are you drawing but my enemy,

Coming out of my womb, you failed to support me.

The argument continues. The old woman tells Abbay that he was a criminal as he takes her property and gives it away to her "enemies"<sup>181</sup>; he kills her children with hunger and thirst, but he feeds and gives water to others who later come to attack her, etc. In his defense, Abbay denies everything and he adamantly tells her that it is all her children's fault. They are not united and strong; they are not attempting to use him.

Old Woman: that is because they are afraid!

Afraid of those, whom you have boosted,

With our soil, with our water.

Abbay: No, they did not try in the first place,

If they did, they wouldn't be afraid.

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<sup>181</sup> The mutual contempt that grew stronger during the Mengistu and Sadat regime is clearly evidenced in some of the works.

What they are apprehensive about is

Their apprehension itself.

Old Woman: Haven't you produced enemies for us?

Didn't we have rivals that had come because of you<sup>182</sup>?

What are all these years of war and calamity?

The death, suffering of yesterday and the days before,

Isn't that because of you, Abbay?

And we have been threatened,

“If you touch a drop of water from Abbay,

Blood will be shed that is equal to the amount of Abbay!”

Abbay: Whatever they say!

There has never been war because you used water from me

And there will never be.

Before his defeat at the battles of 1884 at Gur'a and 1886 at Gundet, Khedive Ismail (1863–1879) had a dream of annexing to Egypt all the basin areas under the motto of the “Unity of the Nile Valley.” To that end the Swiss ethnographer-turned-politician, Werner Munzinger, who served him, had remarked: “Ethiopia with a disciplined administration and army, and a friend of the European powers, is a danger for Egypt. Egypt must either take over Ethiopia and Islamize it, or retain it in anarchy and

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<sup>182</sup> Mother Ethiopia remembers the late 19th century wars against Egypt (1884 at Gur'a and 1886 at Gundet)

misery.”<sup>183</sup> In the excerpt above, the resentful Old Woman (Mother Ethiopia) remembers those late 19th century wars against Egypt. Although *Shotelay* was written during the EPRDF period, the Old Woman in the poetic text directly quotes one of the common war threats from the Derg time: *If you touch a drop of water from Abbay/Blood will be shed that is equal to the amount of Abbay!* And she begs the river spirit to let her stay in peace. It is also worth noting that Ayalneh produced much of his creative works that documented the philosophy of the day under the Socialist government.

Unlike the days of the monarchy when Haile-Selassie chose to handle the Nile case rather quietly and played a different card to win Nasser back to the African sphere, Mengistu was loud and clear about his Nile position, although he did not practically break Egypt’s hydro hegemony of the time. Following Sadat’s verbal threats against any attempt of jeopardizing the Nile flow, Mengistu would retaliate adamantly. Scholars contend that it was Mengistu who “revived the old medieval Nile threat.”<sup>184</sup> Indeed, Sadat had once declared: “any action that would endanger the waters of the Blue Nile will be faced with a firm reaction on the part of Egypt, even if that action should lead to war”<sup>185</sup> to which Mengistu responded: “If Sadat wants to protect the Nile basin because water is life to his people, he must know that the Nile has one of its sources in Ethiopia he wants to destroy... and that it has a head of state who cares for the lives of his people.”<sup>186</sup>

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<sup>183</sup> Rubenson, Sven. *The Survival of Ethiopian Independence*, (London: Heinemann, 1976) p. 200.

<sup>184</sup> Erlich. 2002, p. 167.

<sup>185</sup> Gladman cited in Kinfe Abraham, 2004.

<sup>186</sup> Collins. R. *The Nile*. 2002, 213.

Some say war over water is inevitable, while others say it is just a myth, and cooperation is the only way forward. And this is succinctly pointed out by Abbay in his conversation with the Old Woman. Abbay continues:

Abbay: But if you choose to sit and die of drought and hunger,  
Whose fault is that anyway? Yours? Theirs? Or mine?

(Ayalneh, 1992 E.C.)

They finally agree to collaborate for development by using Abbay's tributaries for a start until it is possible to take out the main, ungovernable Abbay from its deep valleys and precipices.

#### ግድግዳ/Gihon

It may be reasonably easy to dismiss the talk of the Nile war as sheer bluster.<sup>187</sup> But considering the situation of the countries along its banks, it would be a mistake to take hegemonic threats as much ado about nothing. Can one safely assert that war—in the most feasible way possible—is not underway in Ethiopia right now?

Poet-playwright Ayalneh Mulatu also wrote an Amharic musical play called "Gihon" (uncertain date) that focuses on the Egyptian perspective of the Nile and Ethiopia. The following is an excerpt from a scene of the musical drama in which the

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<sup>187</sup> Yakob Arsano, for example, examines the trends of many years of conflict and cooperation in and outside of the basin and determines that "the political actors of the riparian states have no better choice than to cooperatively develop the shared Nile resources in and for the long term (2007: 80)

King, the Queen and the War General are conversing about how to assert their domination over and ownership of the Nile waters.

King: Say, one day, the people

by the headwaters of the Gihon decide to claim the river,

for a power source or agriculture

what would our response be?

(Army) Commander: Why, Certainly, war, Your Majesty! What else!

King: What war are you talking about?

Who, in their right mind would engage in a battle

With an enemy equipped with water?

Commander: How come a powerful army

with a sophisticated military equipment

be frightened of water?!

...

Chorus: War is unbecoming -- It won't get us anywhere.

No one will come out the victor

Because the patriotic fervor we have here,

They, too, have it in abundance!

Bloody zeal and ardor burning in their heart!

...

King: Yes, as it was handed down to us from our forebears,

Wisdom is not to confront the Habash,

But to divide them into warring factions

And to have them do our job!

When it comes to Egypt and Ethiopia, this sense of division has mainly been and will probably continue to be the case, albeit in different forms and degrees of vulnerability. Considering the fact that the play was written earlier than *Shotelay*, a striking similarity between this *Gihon* and a recent media blooper by Egyptian officials shows how prophetic the play was. Unaware they were being live televised, President Morsi and his cabinet members, as well as opposition party members, were caught discussing how to sabotage Ethiopia and the Nile Dam<sup>188</sup> just in the same way as we see in the excerpt from the *Gihon* Scene.

#### Abbay—Nourishment of the Desert (2001)

Whereas the foregoing poems and songs mostly depicted Abbay as an adversary that doesn't live up to its name, Ejigayehu Shibabaw's song "Abbay" conceptualizes a more complex image of the river. The voice, on one hand, marvels Abbay's timelessness and its eternal grace, while on the other, ponders the type and extent of conflict and cooperation in a region of asymmetric power dynamics.

የበረሃው ሲሳይ፣ የበረሃው ሲሳይ!

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<sup>188</sup> *The Middle East Media Research Institute*. June 3, 2013. <https://www.memri.org/tv/egyptian-blooper-politicians-unaware-they-are-live-air-threaten-ethiopia-over-dam-construction>

ብነካህ ተነኩ አንቀጠቀጣቸው  
መሆንህን ሳላውቅ ስጋና ደማቸው

Nourishment of the desert!

My touching you stirred their emotion,

And in anger, they shiver,

Little did I understand this notion –

Their body and soul is the River!

The Nile, as an integral part of the ancient Egyptian creation myth, emanates from Ethiopia, and for GiGi it is a “nourishment of the desert.” Because of its flood, the Sahara gets transformed into a vast sea likened to the primordial ocean, the *Nu*, out of which emerge the Egyptian gods and humans. The black volcanic silt carried by the river, and perennially dumped in that primordial sea, also nourishes all plant life. The cycle of nourishment continues. The poet-singer also alludes to both real and perceived concerns of water scarcity of those who depend entirely on the Nile and declares this important understanding of the needs and concerns of “others.” The voice, on the one hand, is an affirmation that every aspect of life downstream depends on the river; the water for *them*—Egypt in this case—is “their body and soul,” but on the other, it is a reminder that everyone in the basin upstream or downstream should be mindful of their water management and usage.

In line with GiGi’s word choice, the use of both word-for-word and sense translation proves valuable for a better understanding of the essence of the issues in the



poem. Her use of water both as drink and as food in the following verses is illustrative of these varying registers:

የሚበሉት ውሃ -- የሚጠጡት ውሃ

ዐባይ ለጋሲ ነው በዚያ በበርሃ

ዐባይ ወንዛወንዙ

ብዙ ነው መዘዙ!

What they eat is water – what they drink as well,

In that scorching desert, Abbay is bountiful!

O Abbay, in the basin –

There is huge tension!

In the stanza, to create direct concordance between the Amharic and English languages, I have chosen to translate the expression የሚበሉት ውሃ -- የሚጠጡት ውሃ/*yemibelut wuha, yemitetut wuha* (indicating that water from the Nile means everything to the Egyptians—from food to the Pyramids) into *What they eat is water, what they drink as well*. In the same excerpt, I have tried to find equivalent meaning to the Amharic expressions that are rendered in words that I deemed more appropriate in the host language/English. I translate the concept of *hydropolitical tension* in the riparian states, particularly between Egypt and Ethiopia. GiGi realizes what the Nile/Abbay means to the Egyptians and understands the fact that it is a river involving much political friction and apprehension in the basin and says: አባይ ወንዛ ወንዙ/ብዙ ነው መዘዙ/*Abbay wonzawonzu/bizu new mezezu*. The English equivalent for the word *mezez* is *misfortune, ill effects*. Hence, the literal

translation of those lines would produce something like, *Abbay the river has many misfortunes/ill effects*. However, neither *misfortune* nor *ill effects* does carry the extended and nuanced meaning of *mezez*. As a result, I chose to translate those lines as *Abbay, in your basin/ there is huge tension!*<sup>189</sup> to show the reality on the ground—drought, famine, thirst, corruption, backwardness, on one hand; pollution, flooding, and more importantly, water securitization, i.e., ownership of the waters of the Nile, on the other. The voice, lured by the majestic nature of the Abbay, begins by exalting its beauty saying:

የማያረጅ ውበት፣ የማያልቅ ቁንጅና፤  
የማይደርቅ የማይነጥፍ ለዘመን የጸና

The praise for the psychedelic beauty of the river is inspired mainly by the spiritual and historical significance of the river which, inter alia, is associated with the biblical Gihon:

ከጥንት ከጽንሰ ኡዳም ገና ከፍጥረት፣  
የፈሰሰ ውሃ ፈልቆ ከገነት፣  
ግርማ ሞገስያ ገር ጸጋ ያገር ልብስ

It is a recognition that the river with its awe-inspiring grace predates humanity. and a certainty that its beauty will live on for eternity. The lyrical text then starts to address the river directly and confides in him.

ዐባይ ይወቅሱሃል አንተን እንደሰው

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<sup>189</sup> Yewulsew, S. “Literature as a Hydropolitical Discours.” Lap Lambert, 2013.

ተራብን፣ ተጠማን፣ ተቸገርን ብለው  
አንተ ወራጅ ወሃ፣ ቢጠሩህ አትሰማ፣  
ምን አስቀምጠሃል በግብጾች ከተማ?!  
ዐባይ፣ የበረሃው ሲሳይ!

They blame you, o Abbay,  
As they would do to a person  
Starved, thirsty, and troubled we are  
They'd say.

By way of personifying the Abbay, GiGi somehow acts as a messenger/voice for her fellow Ethiopians and tells him what the people would charge and criticize him for. She tells him that her natives lament the fact that they are destined for hunger and thirst as he turns a deaf ear to their wailing. But soon adds her inquiry about Abbay's secret affair with Egypt: *Ever Flowing water/ Heedless of your people's cries/What is that you have in the towns of Egypt?! Abbay, O Nourishment of the desert!*

If GiGi admits the prevalence of tension in the basin, the reader can reasonably sense the tension within herself as a poet when she is divided between praising the river for its eternal beauty, and at the same time, cursing it for its 'irresponsibility.' This is even more apparent when we look at some of the lines that she has excluded from the original album. GiGi did not tell us in her interviews with the *Ethiopian Television*<sup>190</sup> and

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<sup>190</sup> Ethiopian Broadcasting Corporation. “ጂጂ በዓለም የፖፕ ሙድረክ/GiGi on the Global Pop Stage” an *ETV Meznagna* Amhareic documentary on GiGi and her debut album, 2001.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fIpL1uAbBNQ>

*Sheger FM Radio*<sup>191</sup> to which part of the song these lines belong, but they seem to follow the lines where Abbay does not heed the voice of his natives. The poetic voice accuses the river of being a bad role model.

I learned from the Abbay  
This unbecoming kindness  
Of feeding the neighborhood  
While starving my household  
How would I ever be judged?  
What would the people call me?  
Well, I do heed some rebuke,  
Alas! Sorry about the river!

It is a paradox that Abbay indeed is bountiful and truly generous to be able to feed everyone but chooses to abandon his family and feed only the neighbors. This situation is akin to the Amharic saying, “one whose pot is burning stirs that of others’.”

Filiqliq suburbia -- cutie, cutie  
Is the rumor true  
That Abbay is your husband?  
  
How vulnerable you are

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<sup>191</sup> Sheger FM 102.1 Radio “Ejigayehu Shibabaw: Interview With Meaza Birru” *Yechewata Engida*, Part 2, 2003 E.C. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W6Lxot1JKow>

While to the wealthy you're married

Forced to sell your jewelries

To sustain your life

Filiqliq, a small suburban town in Eastern Gojjam Zone, is found in the great Abbay Gorge not very far from the main bridge. I got to know about the poor but kind people of Fiiqliq and their intimate connection with the river during my three-week geological field work in the 90s. Poor but generous! All in all, GiGi's "Abbay," while it is a great example of romancing the river, deep inside, it is an allegorical criticism against the characteristically erroneous resource management and water sharing mechanism in the region throughout the ages.

አብዩ ዐባይ/Abbiye Abbay/ My Father Abbay (2002)

About a decade after the signing of the 1993 agreement between then presidents Meles Zenawi and Hosni Mubarak of Ethiopia and Egypt respectively, Abera Lemma, a poet in exile, expressed his grievance against the state in his poem, "አብዩ ዐባይ"/Abbiye Abbay. In this 2002 poem, emphasizing the hydropolitical tension over the Nile, he apostrophizes the river and writes of his resentment about the mismanagement of the Nile. He is likely frustrated about the signing of the 1993 accord as an act of kneeling to hegemony. Likening the river's unharnessed journey and its unchecked looting of resources from its motherland, the poet asks with alarm, "*You too?! As if ours is not enough?!/You, too, chose to emigrate?!*" Resenting the forced migration of local inhabitants and the loss of resources, he voices his fears that war, bloodshed, and further plight are imminent.

አብዩ ዐባይ ያፍሪካ ቀንድ፣  
የእምዩ ልጅ የታሪክ አምድ  
የእኛ ሳያንስ አንተም ደሞ ልትሰደድ?  
አንተም? አንተም ደሞ እንደሌላ  
ጦር ልታስጭን ጉድ ሊፈላ?

Abbiye Abbay of the Horn,  
Dear brother, pillar of our  
history,  
You too?! As if ours is not  
enough?!  
You too chose to emigrate?!  
To invite more devastation –  
Death to your people –  
War to the nation?!

Addressing the existing water injustice, the narrator in “Abbiye Abbay” seems to echo the irritation of some Ethiopian scholars who believed that the 1993 agreement reaffirms the existing Nile water apportionment which leaves Sudan and Egypt at 100 percent and Ethiopia at zero. One such scholar is an Ethiopian lawyer who analyzes the legal wrangling of the Nile hydropolitics. He writes, “The Nile Accord signed on July 1, 1993, by Meles and Mubarak, for the most part, favors Egypt’s interest,”<sup>192</sup> although the government had reported at the time that Ethiopia had gained a new recognition in that particular agreement.<sup>193</sup> The Egyptian Al-Ahram Weekly also reiterates this notion of maintaining the status quo by Egypt. Ahram reports that Egypt once again won an important concession and kept its Nile water share as “the annual quota [established by the 1929 colonial agreement and reinforced by the 1959 post-independence agreement]

<sup>192</sup> ሀይሉ ወ/ጊዮርጊስ፣ ለዐባይ ወ.ሃ ሙግት፣ አአዩ ፕረስ፣ 2001፣ ገ. 250.

<sup>193</sup> See *Ethiopian Herald*, 3 July 1993 cited by Erlich 2002, p. 213.

was subsequently reaffirmed by [this1993 agreement.]”<sup>194</sup> Indeed, in the agreement, “the two parties agreed not to engage in activities regarding the use of the Nile that might damage the interests of other riparian countries.” This seems an amicable understanding, at least, leading the way to further discussion and agreement, but considering Egypt’s baseline of “damage of interest” that follows from its “historical” hundred percent entitlement, it is taken as an affirmation of the status quo.

Such critiques wouldn’t normally sit well with the Meles Zenawi’s administration. In the following excerpt, the quoted words allude to the infamous rhetorical question of Meles, “what have the Aksum obelisks got to do with the Wolayta people?”<sup>195</sup> which typifies the regime’s ideology that the people of Ethiopia do not have a shared history. If at all they have a shared history, it is not one of a common glorious past, but a situation where Ethiopia and *Eyopiawinet*/the Ethiopian ‘nationality’ are recent inventions imposed by the *North* on the rest of the populace. The poet considers this as the politicians’ parochial understanding of the sphere of influence of the Kingdom of Axum, and as bitter derision of their failure to imagine the Axumite Kingdom beyond its core area. He translates these words by “the powers that be who are the masters of deception” as:

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<sup>194</sup> Morsy, Ahmed. “Remembering the Nile.” *Al Ahram Weekly* May 14, 2014

<sup>195</sup> See Gebremedhin Araya’s critique of Bisrat Amare’s book, *Finote Gadil (2004 E.C)*.

Gebremedhin resents the ahistorical “narrow ethnic view that brings down the Kingdom of Axum to a district level and the erroneous assertion that not even northern Eritrea and southern Tigray are part of the civilization.”

<https://sendkalama.wordpress.com/2013/03/31/%e1%89%b3%e1%88%8b%e1%88%8b%e1%89%85-%e1%8b%a8%e1%89%b3%e1%88%aa%e1%8a%ad-%e1%8a%ad%e1%88%85%e1%8b%b0%e1%89%b6%e1%89%bd-%e1%8a%a8%e1%8d%8d%e1%8a%96%e1%89%b0-%e1%8c%88%e1%8b%b5%e1%88%8d/#more-588>

“ዐባይ ለያእቆብ፣ ዐባይ ለየሱፍ ምኑ ነው?”

የሚል ሃሳዊ መሲህ ፣ በዘመናችን ነግሶ

ቢያበላን ጦርነት ፣ ቢያጠጣንም ከሶ ፣

የዛር ውላጅ ይመስል ፣ ደም ላይ ተጎንብሶ

ይኸው ያምሰናል ፣ ክፉ ቀን ደግሶ

When we have deceptive overlords who say

*“What has Yakob got to do with Abbay?!*

*What about Yousuf!”*

Then who would our defender be,

Who is our advocate?



Yakob and Yousuf are names of two Ethiopian scholars whose voices, the poet believes, were given deaf ears when it comes to handling Nile matters in particular and Ethiopian affairs in general. The poet also dedicated this 2001 poem “ዑብየ አባይ/Abbiye Abbay” to the political scientist Yakob Arsano, who is one of the leading Nile scholars and to Yousuf Yasin – author, political critic, and diplomat – who also lives in exile in Norway.

A good master of the Ethiopian Amharic *qine*-poetry, Abera, also uses the Abbay in “አብየ ዐባይ/Abbiye Abbay” to pass his scathing comment on how the government officials operate with apparent impunity, especially the chronic corruption in the country, and he calls for the people to revolt against all injustices.

መለስ ብለን ሰማን ፣ ዜናዊ ተረት  
ዐባይ ፀሃይ በላው የእምሮን ፍትፍት  
እግዚአብሔር! ሞረሽ በሉ’ .....  
እሪ በሉ! ዘራፍ በሉ! .....

In the first two lines, by way of the traditional *qine*-poetry technique of the Amharic language, dubbed the *wax and gold*, the straightforward meaning (the *wax*) refers to the commonplace story that we hear regarding the exposure of the Abbay to the strong “Sun,” as it flows through the lowlands of Sudan, the Sahara Desert in Egypt, or even through the arid regions of the Abbay valley in Ethiopia.. However, a closer look reveals the hidden meaning (the *gold*): the names of top TPLF leaders whom the speaker presents as spearheading the mega corruption. The then Prime Minister, Meles Zenawi, and a fellow member of his vanguard party, Abbay Tsehaye, whose name is widely associated

with large scale corruption and the general despotism of the regime are mentioned: *So we*  
“Turned around and gave ears to hear a News-like tale/That Abbay—my dear mom’s  
fitfit-dish, her bread and wine – is devoured by the Sun.”

In the two stanzas above, on one hand, Abbay, presented as the epitome of the country’s untapped resources or as a trapped livelihood, by the word ፍትፍት/*fitfit*-dish is being pillaged in broad daylight. On the other hand, the speaker refers to the ahistorical and unreasoned nature of Meles Zenawi’s aphorism regarding the relationship between Ethiopia’s past and present as well as the common fate of its people north and south. The speaker thus parodies that misgiving as the unbecoming relationship between the river and the Ethiopian scholars, thereby calling it a *Zenawi teret*/News-like tale uses the same to satirize the political narrative of the present political establishment. Thus, using the river, the narrator continues to urge his people to rise in unison:

*Appeal to your Gods, Cry, oh people, for help*

*Cry your distress calls, Say “ENOUGH!” (Abera, 2002)*

ሞረሽ/*Moresh* is a call made at night to announce someone has died or been injured, especially common in Gojjam-Amhara.<sup>196</sup> In the spirit of making villagers near and far aware of an emergency that requires their concerted effort, the speaker in the last couplets is making a call to all citizens to stand together and to say “Enough!” to the regime.

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<sup>196</sup> See the entry for *Moresh* in Thomas Leiper Kane’s Amharic-English Dictionary Vol. I. (Harrassowitz Wiesbaden, 1990, p.180.)

### Post-Dam Awakening

The year 2011 is the year Ethiopia started the construction of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) on the Blue Nile. This project practically puts an end to the rhetoric of hegemony over the Nile and pushes back the financial and diplomatic snags resulting from debilitating colonial water treaties, the legacies of which are profound in post-colonial agreements.

An act of counter-hydro hegemonic nature was put in place a year earlier. In May 2010, six upper riparian nations signed the Comprehensive Framework Agreement (CFA). Not surprisingly, Egypt and Sudan refused to be part of it, arguing that their “acquired rights” to the waters of the Nile River would not be protected. They proposed an alternative wording for Article 14(b): “Nile Basin States therefore agree, in a spirit of cooperation: . . . (b) not to significantly affect the water security and *current uses and rights of any other Nile Basin state.*”<sup>197</sup> Many argue that Ethiopia spearheaded the initiative, although then Prime Minister Meles Zenawi disputed the characterization saying that it is a collective decision by all stakeholders. Responding to war threats and indirect destabilization strategies by Egyptian officials, Meles said: “I am not worried that the Egyptians will suddenly invade Ethiopia. [...] Nobody who has tried has lived to tell the story. I don’t think the Egyptians will be any different, and I think they know that.”<sup>198</sup> The commencement of the GERD is an example par excellence that “Every [hegemonic] order is susceptible to being challenged by counter-hegemonic practices that

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<sup>197</sup> (Emphasis added). Kimenyi, Mwangi S. and John Mukum Mbaku. “The limits of the new ‘Nile Agreement’.” *Brookings* April 28, 2015.

<sup>198</sup> Malone, Barry. “Ethiopian PM warns Egypt off Nile war.” *Reuters*. November 23, 2010.

attempt to disarticulate it”<sup>199</sup> as it emanates from the very article of the CFA, Article 14, which explicitly revokes the colonial and post-colonial treaties of 1929 and 1959.

ዐባይ፣ ጭስ አልባው ነዳጅ/Abbay, the Smokeless Fuel (2011)

Following the commencement of the GERD, there are similar productions of songs and poems with indications of confidence and boosted spirit, unlike earlier lamentations.

Here is an example to have the sense of the verses from a 2011 song by Genet Masresha:

ዐባይ፣ ጭስ አልባው ነዳጅ...

ፍሰስበትና በሃገርህ ሜዳ፣

የሚቆጣም ካለ ያበጠው ይፈንዳ!

It is time ... Abbay, the smokeless fuel

Please irrigate the fields of your motherland

If one is angry with it, let come what may

We are up for the challenge!

By apostrophizing Abbay to flood the meadows of its motherland, Genet here is talking about using the river for irrigation, not just hydroelectric power, and she understands what sort of emotions it would trigger in Egypt. She subtly but preemptively declares: *ያበጠው ይፈንዳ* ('yabetew yifenda')/let the swelling burst! This song is another good example to show the permissibility of the Amharic language, the wax and gold tradition,

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<sup>199</sup> Mouffe, Chantal. *Hegemony, Radical Democracy, and the Political*. Routledge, 2013:27.

and the poetic (lyrical) form to point out the ever-swelling hydropolitical tension in the region, especially between Ethiopia and Egypt. The need for the swelling to spurt is associated with subsiding pain and relief of the pained person. With that phrase, we are presented with the analogy between the distribution of a river stream into irrigation channels amidst fierce diplomatic tussles and forcing fluid, such as puss, to ooze out of swelling indicates the anticipated positive result in each case. That being at the "wax" level, deeper we are invited to imagine the inevitability of Egypt's swelling anxiety and anger over Ethiopia's undertaking of such projects on the Nile—her Nile—without permission. In that regard, the expression ያበጠው ይፈገዳ / let come what may! if not an outright invitation for war is an expression of determination to deal with any challenge that might arise, even if it is war.

In the case of the river becoming a barrier or a potential source of conflict, a huge one at that, Genet's declaration in the above excerpt sounds like a literary response to verbal warnings and threats from successive Egyptian leadership. As such, hers is a reflection of the responses from respective leaders from Ethiopia. Around the time the song was released, the then Egyptian president from the Muslim Brotherhood Party, Mohammad Morsi, for one, had declared: "The lives of the Egyptians are connected around it... as one great people. If it diminishes by one drop, then our blood is the alternative."<sup>200</sup>

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<sup>200</sup> BBC News. "Egyptian warning over Ethiopia Nile dam." 10 June 2013. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-22850124>

ከደም የወፈረ/Thicker Than Blood (2011)

Getinet Eniyew, another Ethiopian poet, presents the past and present and clearly shows the future of the Nile hydropolitics. The poem narrates the Nile's life and journey with allusions to various myths from religious sources which I will touch upon along the way. Spatially, the journey of the Nile (Abbay) is narrated from its source in Sekela, Ethiopia to its mouth in the Mediterranean Sea. Temporally, the poet takes us back to the time of creation and follows the river's history all the way to the present day. Through the life story of the river, we are invited to take part in the river's journey spatially from source to sea, and temporally from the deeper past to the present time. Getinet, thusly, follows the footsteps of Tsegaye's association of the flow of transboundary rivers with the movement and relay of generations: "In any culture, the journey of a river, especially that of major ones, is associated with and considered as the representation of the journey of the respective country folks and their successive generations."<sup>201</sup> The narrative moves forward together with the flow of the river.

Indeed, among the many symbolisms of a river in poetry, the river is "a path, which lends itself quite well to be a powerful illustration of a journey a hero must take."<sup>202</sup> However, drawing a parallel between the journey of the personified river and the Hero as discussed by Joseph Campbell in his book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, one could see another symbolism—a close correspondence between the journey of the river and that of the "Hero." Christopher agrees: "The river can not only symbolize a path that one must take but can also highlight the descent into or out of something."<sup>203</sup> Abbay, the

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<sup>201</sup> Tsegaye., *Esat Woy Abeba/Fire or Flower* Poetry Album, 2007.

<sup>202</sup> Christopher, Ian. "Symbols of a River." 2020. <https://medium.com/age-of-awareness/the-many-symbols-of-a-river-8532df3bc0b>

<sup>203</sup> Ibid.

hero, goes through a journey composed of three parts: Separation/Departure, Initiation/Awareness, and Return/Coming back home.

The hero flows down/descends *from its land of promise/Where it erupts with power* to the unknown world, the deserts of Nubia and Sahara.

## **Departure**

Given the release of the poem for the celebration of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, the river's "journey (of the Hero)" can be divided into a before and after Dam. Before the commencement of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), the narrator explains how the river leaves its home in the same way as the Hero departs:

ዐባይ ስመ ብዙ

ዐባይ ስረ ብዙ

ዐባይ ግብረ ብዙ

Its character as it was,

Gihon<sup>204</sup> – the polynymous,

Abbay – the rhizomatic,

Nile the multi-tasker

Flowed for ages –

From its land of promise

Where it erupts with power

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<sup>204</sup> For the Ethiopians, Gihon is the biblical name of the Nile. "And the name of the second river is Gihon: the same is it that compasseth the whole land of Ethiopia" (Genesis 2:13).

Washing fertile black soil away  
Carrying the very land along  
Mingling with rich earth  
Away it flows with wild abandon  
To fill up others' basin  
Being the river of tears  
Causing the nation's deep sorrow  
having us weep our eyes out  
For ages.

The narrator calls the river *ḥz ʿlth* literally to mean *multi-rooted*. For a nuanced meaning of this adjective, however, I prefer to render it *rhizomatic* (following Deleuze and Guattari) to bring to the fore the complex network of tributaries that make up the river and the plethora of long and non-hierarchical or competing myths, stories and histories, as well as the diversity of the ecosystem. Furthering the concept of the rhizome, Edouard Glissant theorizes the multiplicity and complexity of the Creole cultural identities in the Caribbean. Glissant writes: “Rhizomatic thought is the principle behind what I call the Poetics of Relation, in which each and every identity is extended through a relationship with the Other.”<sup>205</sup>

In the same token, the rhizome, being a plant type that spreads sideways underground with roots that grow around other roots, the poetic persona in the excerpt above expresses the complex interconnectedness of the “roots” of the Abbay-Nile with

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<sup>205</sup> Glissant, 1990:11 cited in Charly Verstrael. “Glissant, Edouard.” 2014, <https://scholarblogs.emory.edu/postcolonialstudies/2015/11/04/edouard-glissant/>



the Amharic expression *ሰረ ብዙ/sere bizu/multi rooted* to expose the cultural and linguistic diversity of the inhabitants and the complex relationship of identities in the basin.

As the journey progresses, the challenges become more and more daunting, both for the river and the people at home. For the river, its journey in the desert to rescue the dwellers in the region is more difficult as opposed to the torrential movement and easy flow of the river in its Ethiopian highlands. “Enduring the ordeal” in the hostile desert, however, the Nile, the Hero, “takes possession of his reward” of rescuing Egypt, giving life to that land, and giving birth to one of the greatest civilizations of the world. All the while, the Ethiopians in the Hero’s “land of the known,” so resentful of his departure, have lamented the loss “for ages.”

### **Initiation**

After years of peril, as in “entering into a cave or the belly of Whale,” the Nile “learns” his lessons and finally heeds the plight of his people back “home.” The passionate expression of grief by the Ethiopian people in their songs and poetry for long has made the need for the return even more profound. The poem continues:

Now, Abbay has come of age

Ready to forgo all the wrongs in the past

All the guilt, all foulness, and all the injustice

Discomfited by its dark history

Ashamed of its bad name and

Cleansed with the repentance of time

Better late than never, this self-realization by the Nile while he is in the “magic world,” heralds his symbolic “return”—being harnessed for development.

### **Return**

Upon the commencement of the GERD in 2011, the idea of bringing the river back, keeping it at home, and confining it in a dam, created a huge unity and harmony among the people of Ethiopia regardless of their many differences. The Hero, which is the apostrophized Nile, abandons his nature and returns to rationality which urges the Ethiopian poet to marvel at the magical unifying power of the Nile (Abbay) during the commencement of the construction of the GERD. And goes the narrator:

Going out of its water-character  
Forsaking its river-nature  
Going far and wide as a kind of magic  
Gripping the attention of the entire Nation  
With a unifying fever and  
An amalgamating spirit  
Lashing generations to a stream of ages  
And the wide nation to its rich history  
Bonding everybody with mystic harmony  
More deeply rooted  
More intricately woven

Abbay turned into a Hareg-cordage—

Much thicker than blood!

“Hareg” is a type of twig used as cordage for bonding two or more things. As a strong and versatile tool, it has been used by farmers, home builders, etc., since ancient times. Abbay’s becoming a *Hareg*-cordage describes an action of uniting people like in blood relations. This metaphor of water becoming a “*Hareg*” and becoming “thicker than blood” also plays another folkloric role. On one hand, it subverts the existing universal adage, “blood is thicker than water” to indicate that familial bonds will always be stronger than other relationships. The river is, thus, considered as an element of familial bond among the people of the nation, stronger than blood relationships. On the other hand, it suggests that an always already present expression in some communities<sup>206</sup> along the banks of Abbay—to show the deep attachment between the people and the water—has been adopted by everyone in Ethiopia due to the dammed river.

The Hero’s return, according to Campbell, is the third and last journey where the Hero comes back to the known land, to home. The river’s “return” trip, like that of the hero, is filled with challenges. As the Hero is “pursued on the road back to the ordinary world,” so is the river. Both internal political strife and international diplomatic pressure are so immense that it made getting the dam started a daunting task for a very long time. The poet continues with his explanation of what happens once that ordeal has been overcome:

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<sup>206</sup> According to Yakob Arsano, “‘water is thicker than blood’ is a dictum expressed by the upstream peasant farmers of the Guder valley” around the southern tributary of Abbay (2007: 78).

From here on out,  
Only love and dialogue  
In the Basin shall reign  
No deceit or flattery  
No war-cry or intrigue  
shall trick Abbay into betrayal  
Or derail it from its deal  
The tone and the tune  
The beat and the rhythm  
Flowed in harmony  
With the time and the truth of the generation  
And joined all citizens for a single purpose.

Myth, among other things, is a common poetic device Getinet, like others before him, uses to establish his theme of hydropolitics. Like Tsegaye, for example, he is a mythopoetic artist in that he creatively interprets existing myths and contributes to mythmaking. Furthering the demonstration of the interrelationship between folklore and poetry in the after-dam life of the river, I hasten to go beyond the “return” and examine one other instance of myth re/creation where Getinet suggests the significance of the dam to the “river boy”—his fellow Ethiopian—and to the future of the entire basin.

Behold! Under our very eyes,  
Abbay turned into a Hareg-cordage,

Much thicker than blood!  
Clearer than the truth,  
More solid than solid faith  
...  
River boy!  
From here on out,  
your historic monument  
    the mark of victory of your generation  
Your award of honor  
And the feast of success in a shining light  
Your pride and esteem  
the precious present of Abbay's blessing —  
Is a Flower and a Dove!

Among the prominent symbolic connotations of the bird in different African religions and cultures are fertility and eternity. In addition to presenting “Abbay's eternal blessing” symbolized by the *ergib*-bird, the speaker also associates it with a new beginning, continuity, and thus, eternal cycle of life made possible by the fruit-giving flower akin to the lily flower which is the ancient symbol of the Nile.

In Ethiopia, the dove is commonly interpreted as a messenger of love and peace, and sometimes of victory. The poet seems to be preoccupied with the implications of the dam construction to lower riparian states. Among the lower riparian states, especially Egypt has an ever-present concern over the construction of the dam in Ethiopia regardless

of Ethiopia's repeated assurance that it does heed the concerns of downstream nations and that the hydroelectric power dam will by no means affect the flow of the water negatively. In the end, Getinet's declaration of a new beginning is not only for the Ethiopians but also a pledge and a call for the entire basin to move forward in peace and harmony.

If an olive branch carried back from land by a dove was a symbol of life after the distraction by water in the Judeo-Christian tradition, this poet's flower is a sign of promise that water, as it was in the ancient Egyptian belief, will continue to be a source of life after the dam construction in Ethiopia.

I consider the poet's suggestion of a new beginning by his combination of the commonly known images of "flower" and "dove" as a mythopoetic exercise. He recreates the existing myth of the messenger "dove" in his poem, but at the same time, he substitutes the olive branches in the same myth with his "flower" and, in a way, creates a myth of peace, harmony, and mutual benefit in the basin. This is the "elixir" the "hero" has "returned" with. A folkloric and hydropolitical reading, put forward by this literal translation, would offer to the reader a wider possibility of interpretations of the commonly known images of "flower" and "dove."

### Conclusion

Very few themes take a more central position than the Nile in the history, culture, and especially hydropolitics of the countries where it flows. Thus, the Nile, as a very important river, is a topic of discourse that reflects and promotes an ever-deepening relationship between the river and the Ethiopian people. And this relationship has been,

and will surely continue to be, expressed in poems, songs, novels, and other forms of fictitious works. In sum, the writers in question are both proponents of their respective national interests and critics of the powers that be concerning water resource management across the ages.

The Nile, as an influence on many realms of life, transcends not only geographic boundaries but also the concept of a river in the countries of the basin. The level of devotion and popular imagination the river enjoys indicates that it is a deep-rooted element in the national cultures of the people of the basin.

Changes in the attitude and the national culture of the society are often associated with the change of governments across time and the resulting shift in the region's water politics. Poetry has always been at the forefront of registering these changes, fighting despotism, and speaking in times of adversity. When censorship reigns and stringent artistic policies are put in place, poets always find ways of circumventing the banning and condemnation of their artistic works believed to be anti-revolutionary, anti-government, etc.

Nile poetry produced in Ethiopia in this kind of situation is commonly characterized by concealed and clear resentment, bitterness, and lament over the loss of resources, underutilization of potential, and the plight of people. This chapter examined the direct and indirect connection between the society's resentment which is the foundation of resistance and the region's ever-changing hydropolitical arrangement as depicted in poetry written in different regimes in Ethiopia.

Themes of revolution, ecology, environmental justice, famine, and civil war in the Eastern Nile Basin as reflected in literature are examined. By putting a selection of

twentieth-century Amharic poems in context, the chapter analyzed the entwined relationship between poetics and the politics of the Nile at a national and regional level. I have Nile poetry as a language inspired by various emotions of adversity—both natural and man-made—and explored how poetry in many instances challenges the constraints of cultural and linguistic identity, narrow nationalism, corruption, and the legacies of colonial water treaties.



# CHAPTER THREE

## A DOWNSTREAM MUSE THE NILE IN EGYPTIAN AND SUDANESE POETRY AND SONGS

*The Nile quietly flows...  
seeping through the city's  
silence  
and villages' burnt aches  
Al Saddiq Al-Raddi*

*We, Muslims and Christians, are one nation down the generations  
The Nile is our father, and then came our grandfather Adam.  
Ahmed Shawqi*

### Introduction: The Downstream Nile

Egypt and Sudan are the two lowermost riparian states before the Nile empties into the Mediterranean Sea. The relationship between Egypt and the Nile is so deep that, since the time of Herodotus, Egypt is said to be “an acquired country—the gift of the Nile.” The association of the Nile and Egypt goes back even further than the time of Herodotus—to the moment when Homer identifies the river with the country.<sup>207</sup> El-Kammash interprets the combined naming, Aigyptos, from Homer’s *Odyssey* as “the name of the Nile (masculine) as well as the country of Egypt (feminine) through which it flows.”<sup>208</sup> For centuries, it has been understood that the Nile is Egypt, and Egypt the Nile.

Until as recently as 2011, before South Sudan got its independence, Sudan was the largest country in Africa and ninth in the world in terms of area. Two thirds (about 63

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<sup>207</sup> Macfarquhar. “Early Greek Travelers in Egypt.” *Greece & Rome*. Cambridge University Press on behalf of The Classical Association, Vol. 13, No. 1, Apr., 1966, pp. 108-116.]

<sup>208</sup> El-Kammash, Magdi M. “Nile River.” *Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.*  
<https://www.britannica.com/place/Nile-River> Last Updated: Dec 4, 2022.

percent) of the area of the Nile basin lies within this territory.<sup>209</sup> All the major rivers in the Eastern Nile Basin – the Blue Nile, Atbara, and Sobat whose sources are the lofty Ethiopian plateau – and the White Nile from the Equatorial Nile Basin flow independently before they unite and proceed to Egypt as the Nile proper. For this reason, many would reasonably believe that, without the Nile, the people of Egypt and the greater part of Sudan would not survive for a single day. The poetry and songs from Egypt and Sudan are reflective of these facts. The Nile’s abundance is celebrated, and it is exalted as a majestic, beautiful, life-giving river. Its potential loss is deeply resented.

For the sake of clarity, I have selected poetic texts that reflect the images of the Nile and its function in the hydropolitics of the region. I have organized the chapter into three key sections: (1) Praise and Glorification (2) Two Faces of a Dam (3) Environment and Water Scarcity. Notwithstanding the fact that these categories are not mutually exclusive and that there could be a possible thematic overlap, the texts in the above three categories are entitled (1) The Nile–Muse for Glorification (one text: *Al-Nil Najashi/The Nile is Negus*), (2.1) High Dam, High Politics (two texts: *Tahwil al-Nil/Transforming the Nile* and *The High Dam*) (2.2) Damned by the Dam (two texts: *Poem of the Nile* and *Heirloom*) and (3) The Nile – A Muse for Dissatisfaction (one text: *Joha/Oxymoron*) respectively. It is worth noting that there could be overlap of themes, such as themes of ‘glorification’ in ‘thinking high with the High Dam’ as well as themes of ‘dissatisfaction’ in ‘resenting’ the same dam.

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<sup>209</sup> Nile Basin Initiative, <https://www.nilebasin.org/index.php/sudan>. Also, 90 percent of South Sudan falls in the Nile basin and 20 percent of the Nile basin falls in South Sudan (Salman, 2011) leaving about 42.2 percent of the Nile basin in Sudan.

### Downstream Muse

The Nile is a central concept in Egyptian literature largely on account of the dependence the country has on the river. Ancient Egyptian and Sudanese people composed tunes to the flooding of the Nile to which they rightly owe their existence. Pre-nineteenth century Ethiopian oral traditions and sources recognize that Egypt is the only other country linked to Ethiopia by the Nile and that “Sudan was regarded to be more or less under the Ethiopian sphere of influence.”<sup>210</sup> Stele inscriptions in Geez and Greek found in Axum Town-in Ethiopia and Meore-in Sudan during the reign of Ezana (320s – c. 360 AD) indicate such influences and regnal claims. On runs as follows:

Ezana, King of Axum and Himyar and of Raydan and of Ethiopia and of Saba and of Salhen and of Tseyamo and of Bega and of Kasu, the King of Kings, the son of the invincible god, Ares.<sup>211</sup>

The influence as indicated in the names of the places goes beyond the Red Sea to the east and beyond the present-day Ethio-Sudan boundary to the west. The name Ethiopia as mentioned in the inscription likely refers to all the territory west of Ethiopia including Meroe.<sup>212</sup> The Nile association is also captured by works of art, such as poetry and songs. A recent Sudanese song both in Arabic and in Amharic about the long-standing Ethio-Sudanese relationship begins as:

አቤት አዲስ አበባ!  
እንደካርቱም አፍቅሬሽ  
In the same way as I love Khartoum,  
Oh, I also love you, Addis!  
United with love

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<sup>210</sup> Bairu. “The Nile in Ethiopian Literature.” (2000.)

<sup>211</sup> Quoted in Yonas Admasu. *Narrating Ethiopia*. 1995, p. 104.

<sup>212</sup> Ibid. Note 10, p. 125.

Sudan and Ethiopia  
We have a rich history  
Sealed with the covenant of Abbay  
In mutual love and respect  
We've coexisted for ages!  
A relation that heralds peace  
Between the children of Abbay!<sup>213</sup>

In terms of the present-day hydropolitical arrangement, however, one cannot explain Sudan's positioning without its alliance with Egypt too. As such, the Nile in Sudanese literature serves as a bridge between the Ethiopian cry of agony and lamentation and the Egyptian calls of praise and deification. In this chapter, I will consider poetry from Egypt and Sudan to show both the glorification of the river that brings life upstream and the eulogization of ancestral lands destroyed by the Nasser/Nubian Lake created by the Aswan High Dam downstream.

#### The Nile– Muse of Glorification

The poet-laureate Ahmad Shawqi (1869-1932) is a pioneering a figure in modern Egyptian literature and helped to forge an entire trajectory in modern Arabic poetics. The school of which he is part has “no specific theoretical foundations,” and as a poet, Shawqi is considered the “spokesman of his nation, the enlargement of his tribe, which was a function long lost.”<sup>214</sup> Exiled to Spain in 1914 on account of his opposition to the British occupation of Egypt, Shawqi continued his contributions to modern Arabic

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<sup>213</sup> Huda Arabi, 2020, <https://m.youtube.com/watch?feature=youtu.be&v=DjRI8iSdxIM>

<sup>214</sup> Badawi cited in *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*. Fourth Edition, Roland Greene et al Eds.: Princeton University Press, 2012, Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt2tt8jz.13>

literature and “reflected his deep nostalgia for Egypt.”<sup>215</sup> Researchers of Shawqi’s life and works note that his exile to Spain was due to his sharp criticism of British<sup>216</sup> as well as his pivotal role in the anti-colonial movement. His work bespoke a fascination poetically recording the ancient history and kings of Egypt.<sup>217</sup> For his contribution to the revival of contemporary Arabic poetry, “many Arab poets called Shawqi ‘the Prince of Poets.’”<sup>218</sup>

Among numerous Egyptian monuments and landmarks of reverence, the Nile was one of the most important muses for Shawqi. I begin the chapter with two of his poems focused on the Nile: “Al Nil Najashi” and “The Nile of Paradise”

#### Al-Nil Najashi/The Nile is Negus

During the reign of King Armah,<sup>219</sup> around 615, a remarkable event took place—an event known as The First Hijra. The first followers of the Islamic prophet Muhammad fled from Arabia due to their persecution by the Quraysh and found refuge at the court of Axum where they were favorably received by the king. Prophet Muhammad said to them: “If you were to go to Abyssinia (it would be better for you) for the king will not tolerate injustice and it is a friendly country, until such time as Allah shall relieve you from your distress.”<sup>220</sup> When the chiefs of the Quraysh asked that the fugitives be handed back to

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<sup>215</sup> *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*. Fourth Edition, Roland Greene et al Eds.: Princeton University Press, 2012, p.392. Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt2tt8jz.13>

<sup>216</sup> Ibid.

<sup>217</sup> Sayeed, Shaymaa. “Exile as the Agency in Patriotic Verse, With Particular Reference to Shawqi’s Poetry Before and After Exile.” *Journal of the Faculty of Arts- B.S.U*, Issue 50, Jan.–March 2019, p 55.

<sup>218</sup> The Levant. <https://thelevantnews.com/en/article/ahmed-shawqi...the-prince-of-poetsjuly-25,-2022,-10:11-pm>. Retrieved 2/22/2022.

<sup>219</sup> M. Elfasi, Ivan Hrbek. *Africa from the Seventh to the Eleventh Century*. UNESCO, 1988, p. 560. Cf. C. Rossini (1928) suggests it could more probably be during the time of Armah’s father, Ella Tsaham.

<sup>220</sup> Ibn Ishāq - *Sīratu Rasūlillāh (The Life of Muhammad)*. Tr. A. Guillaume. Oxford University Press, 2004, p. 146.

them, the King Armah refused to surrender them. He considered the religion of his guests to resemble his Christian faith and replied that his refugees would receive proper hospitality while under his protection.<sup>221</sup>

This political situation serves as background to Shawqi's 1932 poem, "Al-Nil Najashi"/*The Nile is Negus*. In this work, he compares the Nile River to the hospitable and kind Ethiopian Negus/King, who is said to have given shelter to the Muslim emigrants (known as the Sahabas):

The Nile is Negus<sup>222</sup>

النيل نجاشي

The Nile is Negus, nice and brownish

النيل نجاشي حلوة أسمر

Its color is a wonder, gold and marble.

عجب للونه ذهب ومرمر

The word *Najashi*, translated here as ንጉሥ/*Nigus*, in Amharic and other Ethiopian semitic languages, including Geez, is a title given to the sovereign of Ethiopia, equivalent to the word for king or monarch. In the poem, *Nigus* or *Najashi* could be a reference to the one particular king who is said to have changed his faith to Islam according to some Islamic sources.<sup>223</sup> The poet extols the source of goodness of the Nile – that it is nice and “brownish.” The reference to the color brown echoes the color of the river. In Ethiopia, the Nile is habitually called *Tiqur Abbay/Black Nile* on account of the fertile silt it carries from the highlands. In Sudan, by contrast, the river is called *Bahr al-Azraq/the Blue Nile*

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<sup>221</sup> Ibid. p. 151.

<sup>222</sup> Translated by Fadil, 2006, cited in Al-Rifai, N. Y. “Lyrics in the Poetry of Ahmad Shawqi.” *Advances in Social Sciences Research Journal*, 2018, 5(6) pp. 147-158. See also Haggai Erlich’s *The Cross and the River*. Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2002, p 108.

<sup>223</sup> Ibn Ishāq - *Sīratu Rasūlillāh (The Life of Muhammad)*. p. 148. There is a place named Negash in the present-day Tigray, the region from which the *Nigus* ruled, and it is believed to be the first Islamic settlement in Africa.

to distinguish it from its Equatorial counterpart, the White Nile/Baḥr al-Abyaḍ. A closer examination of Shawqi’s admiration of the river’s dark color juxtaposed with the metaphor of the Nile being the Negus reveals that the “darkness” is about more than an appearance. It seems to relate to the quality of taste, which is a perception more subjective than an observable color. This unique expression, associated with the river’s movement and directionality, invites one to look beyond the horizons toward the source of the river and to recognize that it emanates from Ethiopia, the “mother of Kush,”<sup>224</sup> the land of the Blue Nile and of the benevolent Negus.

Its org within its hand, lauding its lord,

أرغولها في إيدته يسبح لسيده

The life of our country, O God, increases it.

حياة بلادنا يارب زيده

The personified Nile eternally prays for the life of the Egyptians while playing the *org* (also translated as *arghul*),<sup>225</sup> a traditional wind instrument more or less common to both Egypt and Ethiopia. Shawqi is a patron of modern Arabic poetry preoccupied with the glorious history of Ancient Egypt and Islam. He is a patron who, upon his return from exile, continued to defy colonial subjugation and “refused to be the mouthpiece of the court.”<sup>226</sup> Shawqi shares with the Ancient Egyptians a reverence for the Nile, except that he reveres it as a wonderful creation of God, rather than as a god.

Beyond echoing Ancient Egyptian hymns to the Nile and Christian-Muslim relations in early seventh-century Ethiopia, Shawqi’s poem bespeaks a positive image of

<sup>224</sup> See Tsegaye’s “Abbay” in Chapter 1 where he claims the entire land of the Nile Basin originally shared blackness as an identity.

<sup>225</sup> Erlich, *The Cross and the River*. 2002, p. 108..

<sup>226</sup> *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*. p. 392

Ethiopia that was widely shared among Egyptians in the early twentieth century. This favorable image is mainly understood in terms of the Nile and the shared Coptic-Tewahedo relations. These various bonds emerged as a manifestation of Egyptian “nationalistic self-redefinition”<sup>227</sup> transcending the British control over much of the Nile basin, including the Nile apportionment agreement of 1929.

Shawqi wrote this poem at a time when a “liberal faction of Egyptians captured the leadership in the 1920s,” just prior to the birth of “modern, revolutionary, Arab nationalism in the mid-1930s.”<sup>228</sup> His work artistically exemplifies an understanding of Ethiopia as an equal. This mutual perception has also been instilled by writings such as *Voyage to Ethiopia* by Sadiq al-‘Azm published in 1908. This book was seen to have “radiated the spirit of Islamic openness and advocated recognition of Christian Ethiopia as a respected neighbor.”<sup>229</sup> Recognizing that the “life-giving” river was sent from the Ethiopian Negus to Egypt, Shawqi prays for the eternal *increment* of the Nile, the river that keeps *lauding its Lord*. The poet’s prayer and good wish is thus extended to the source—Ethiopia.

In 1933, Shawqi’s monumental poem, *Al-Nil Najashi*, was transformed into a popular song by one of the greatest Egyptian composers Muhammad Abd El-Wahab. The song features in the Egyptian film, *The White Rose*, which many scholars agree immortalized the Nile, the Negus.<sup>230</sup>

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<sup>227</sup> Erlich, *The Cross and the River*. 2002, p. 84.

<sup>228</sup> Ibid. p. 5.

<sup>229</sup> Ibid, p. 107.

<sup>230</sup> Ibid, p. 108.; Al-Rifai, N. Y. “Lyrics in the Poetry of Ahmad Shawqi.” p. 151.



## Damming the Nile: Two Faces of

### High Dam, High Politics

Shawqi's two Nile poems deal with the imagination and reverence of the river, and decades later, there is a key shift in register for poets dealing with the Aswan dam. In what follows, I will be focusing on four poems that share in a more critical approach to the transformation of the river with the damming project.

### "Transforming the Nile"—Transforming Genre

It is not uncommon for musicians to popularize poetic works through music. Unlike the case upstream where poetry and songs were produced as separate but complementary genres (see chapter 1 and 2), poetry and songs were often closely intermingled further downstream with one genre transforming into another. When it comes to Egypt, Shawqi is said to be the poet of the singer Muhammad Abd El-Wahab.<sup>231</sup> Such was the case as well with the esteemed singer Umm Kulthum, who also sang some of Shawqi's great poetry. She is known to have sung "Al-Nil"/"The Nile," which is a long praise poem for the River Nile, and "Oh Night of Eid," which is a song about togetherness and joy, containing a last stanza, which is not strictly related to the rest of the poem and contains a quatrain praising the Nile.

The song "Tahwil al-Nil"/"Transforming the Nile" is Abd El-Wahab's tribute to the Aswan High Dam. He composed the lyrics of this patriotic song lauding the construction of the High Dam to be sung by Umm Kulthum. "Transforming the Nile" is

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<sup>231</sup> Ibid.

about the fate of the intertwined connection between the river and the life of the Egyptian people, and it focuses on the intervention of the Aswan High Dam.

“Tahwil al-Nil”/”Transforming the Nile”<sup>232</sup>

We had changed the stream of the Nile

I salute this change;

which may be a token of the change in our life

and not only of the Nile River

The proud voice heralds, “We had changed the stream of the Nile/I salute this change,” and the Aswan High Dam had indeed changed the flood pattern of the Nile. When completed in 1971, it was celebrated as an extraordinary fete of engineering, one that dwarfed all the dams ever built on the Nile. The dam controlled the flow of the Nile with a reservoir capacity of 132km<sup>3</sup>. For those downstream, it meant accumulating water for around 33,600km<sup>2</sup>, making it available for irrigation in both Egypt and Sudan, controlling flooding, generating power, and improving navigation across the Nile.<sup>233</sup> No wonder the poetic voice, with the spirit of fulfillment shared by many Egyptians, salutes that change. The dam was believed to grant Egypt a means to effectively challenge the geographical power of upstream countries and to maintain its hydro-hegemony. As I discussed in the introductory chapter, of the four forms of power used to evaluate hydro-

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<sup>232</sup> Umm Kulthum, n.d., cited in Meital, Yoram. “The Aswan High Dam and Revolutionary Symbolism in Egypt.” Lynne Rienner Publishers. 2000, p. 224.

<sup>233</sup> Waterbury, John. *Hydropolitics of the Nile Valley*. Syracuse University Press, 1979, p. 116.; Collins, Robert O. *The Nile*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press. 2002, pp 4, 9; *Water Technology*. “Aswan High Dam, River Nile, Sudan, Egypt.” <https://www.water-technology.net/projects/aswan-high-dam-nile-sudan-egypt/>

hegemonic situations in the Nile Basin, Egypt is disadvantaged geographically as the last recipient of the flow of the river. By contrast, Ethiopia, as the source country, benefits the most from geographical power, but, according to the poet, only until the construction of the High Dam at Aswan.

Nile historians argue that, following the construction of the Aswan High Dam, “the Nile ends at Aswan.” The decision in the early 1950s by Gamal Abdel Nasser and his Council to construct the Aswan Dam was an effort to overturn the geographical power imbalance in the basin, and to “solidify their political power [nationally] by building, in effect, a Great Pyramid.”<sup>234</sup> In the new arrangement, the Nile ends at Lake Nasser, which becomes, in effect, the source of the river that flows upstream. The dam is believed to guarantee the banishment of Egypt’s geographic vulnerability. The patriotic song speaks to the high politics of Nasser’s High Dam :

Who, who would have believed  
That the river which has run for millions of years,  
Its direction left and right  
We would change at our own will,  
And even install adjustments in it.  
the Dam is no more a fantasy  
but an unprecedented fact.

The High Dam becomes “an unprecedented fact.” The same Abd El-Wahab, who popularized Shawqi’s *Al-Nil Najashi* from 1933, joins with Umm Kulthum to

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<sup>234</sup> Collins, *The Nile*. p. 177.

triumphantly popularize the monumental project to change at will the amount and direction of flow of the Nile. The lyrics promise a brighter future in the desert:

I gaze with overwhelming joy  
at an all-enlightening future  
with flourishing factories,  
and the color of green covering the arid land.  
Life of tranquility in abundance for all people  
and a pleasant journey to the top.

Construction of the high dam was such an enormous national project that every Egyptian was said to have contributed. Nevertheless, except for one line toward the end (“Life of tranquility in abundance for all people”), the song is predominantly patriotic and suspiciously inward looking. Unlike his adaptation of Shawqi’s poem, Abd El-Wahab’s gaze here is toward the electrification, industrialization, and agricultural production of just “the arid land” as well as “the journey to the top” of Egypt.

Scholarly evaluations of the dam and detriments to nature and to humans in the basin abound, but my goal is not a detailed analysis of these discussions. Instead, I emphasize the dynamic interplay between historical and political moments that reemerge in poetry, and I focus on the cultural and literary relationships to the Nile at that time. To this effect, I consider the extent of mutual relevance of the two countries, Ethiopia and Egypt, with regard to the Nile, drawing a contrast with Shawqi’s poem that Abd El-Wahab popularized three decades before..

Although the song is not dated, it came out around the time the Dam was completed in 1971. The poetic voice celebrates, “the Dam is no more a fantasy/but an unprecedented fact.” And the song is itself attuned to the shifts in the rhetoric of the Nile/Abbay in the 1950s and 1960s. The conception of the Aswan High Dam around 1952 and its birth in 1960 aligned with a moment when the Church relations between Ethiopia and Egypt were finally severed. The Ethiopian Orthodox Church became ecclesiastically independent in June 1959. This was also the year when Egypt and Sudan signed an agreement to apportion the Nile waters, implicitly declaring Ethiopia irrelevant to the Nile/Abbay. Taking all of these various factors into account, the proclamation in “The Transformation of the Nile” that “the Nile belongs to Najashi” no longer holds water. The High Dam does!

Considering this shift in relations between Egypt and Ethiopia, what is apparent in the poem/song is not the hospitality of the righteous king of the seventh-century (with which this chapter began), but the intimidation by medieval autocrats.<sup>235</sup> The song reflects the hydropolitical atmosphere of the time—a moment when the Aswan dam was considered fundamental for Egypt’s security. It would no longer be held hostage by upstream nations, and the dam would be leverage to maintain a newly acquired right to monitor the Nile flow in the upstream countries. With its resonant lines, the song suggests that the dam will help neutralize the threat of the Ethiopian medieval kings and their successors.

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<sup>235</sup> See Pankhurst, 2000, pp.25-35; Bairu, 2000, p ; Collins, 2002, pp. 23 for the myths and history of medieval Ethiopian kings’ threats of blocking or diverting the Nile and Erlich, 2002, pp 133, 145-177; Collins, 2002, pp. 213-215; Tilahun, 1979, p. 30 for arguments and verbal invectives on ‘who owns the Nile.’

### Al Sadd al-‘Ali/The High Dam

The theme of high dam and its high politics emerges prominently in the work of other Egyptian poets and musicians. In 1960, ‘Abd al-Halim Hafiz released his hit song patronizing the High Dam and the Nasser regime. The song titled “Al Sadd al-‘Ali/The High Dam,”<sup>236</sup> recounts how Nasser’s 1952 revolution and the Egyptian people’s hard work redeemed the nation from colonialism.

We said we will build, and indeed we built, the High Dam.

O Colonialism, we built the High Dam with our hands.

We said we will build, and indeed we built, the High Dam.

O Colonialism, we built the High Dam with our hands.

With our money, with our workers’ hands.

Soviet funding and engineering were crucial to High Dam’s construction, and the opening lyrics from the song speak to the dignity of the Egyptians for not abandoning their dream. The song alludes to the “broken promise” of 1956, when the United States withheld funding, and the eventual pride in the Egypto-Soviet alliance that helped to save the project.<sup>237</sup> This arrangement meant Egypt “was now free of the condition upon which Great Britain and the USA had insisted that she must first seek a settlement on the Nile waters with the Sudan,”<sup>238</sup> and Dwight D. Eisenhower also warned the Egyptians that American support for the Aswan dam had to be conditioned on a recognition of the rights

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<sup>236</sup> The English translation of the poem has been retrieved from: <https://sweetslyrics.com/abdel-halim-hafez/the-high-dam-lyrics> 1 April, 2023.

<sup>237</sup> Waterbury. *Hydropolitics of the Nile Valley*. 1979, pp. 113, 129.

<sup>238</sup> Collins. R.O. *The Waters of the Nile*. Oxford University Press. 1999, p. 267.

of the upstream riparian states.”<sup>239</sup> The signing the Soviet-Egyptian Friendship Treaty took place in 1971, and in his inaugural speech, Nikolai Podgorny, President of the USSR, explained:

For each of America’s broken promises—O my brethern—there is a Soviet promise fulfilled or on its way to fulfillment; in every sphere of hope and work... For the Soviet Union is confident that its stance is one of defense of liberty and defense of peace.<sup>240</sup>

In the song, the repetition of the verses, “We built the High Dam with our hands/O colonialism we built it with our money,” recalls the war between Egypt and Britain, following Nasser’s nationalization of the Suez Canal in 1956. This nationalization campaign was aimed to self-finance the construction of the dam.<sup>241</sup> As the song continues, it expands the symbolism, taking the High Dam to be the true culmination of the anti-colonial struggle against the British occupation of Egypt (1882–1952):

This isn’t a story about the Dam;  
It’s a story about the struggle behind the Dam.  
It’s our story, the story of  
a people who, for the sacred march, rose and revolted  
...  
It’s the story of a war  
Between us and colonialism

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<sup>239</sup> Collins. R.O. *The Nile*. Yale University Press, 2002, p. 170.

<sup>240</sup> Cited in Waterbury, *Hydropolitics of the Nile Valley*. Syracuse University Press, 1979, p. 113.

<sup>241</sup> *Supra* note 32, pp. 179-180.

Do you remember when the people became Westernized  
Inside their country?  
Yes, we remember!  
And the forceful occupier enjoyed himself  
In it him alone?  
We haven't forgotten!  
And the gallows were for whoever was coming and going;  
And the blood of the free who passed away in Denshawai.

The singer takes the High Dam as a monument to remember the colonial injustices and to commemorate the martyrs of the struggle. The Denshawai incident is the name given to a clash which occurred in 1906 between British Army officers and locals in Denshawai village in the Western Delta area of the Nile River. The British aimed to set an example by harshly punishing the villagers, and that “sparked an outcry among many Egyptians and helped galvanize Egyptian nationalist sentiment against British occupation.”<sup>242</sup> According to the song, the result of this polarization is Nasser’s revolution and the building of the High Dam.

Similar to Ayalneh’s “Tiqur Abbay,” which can be understood as legitimate documentation of Mengistu’s plans for the Blue Nile, Hafez’s songs bespeak Nasser’s underlying vision of the Nile, the Egyptian revolution, and the Suez Canal. Indeed, critics observe that “Abdel Halim knew at the beginning of the revolution that Abdel Nasser

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<sup>242</sup> Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopaedia. "Dinshaway Incident". *Encyclopedia Britannica*, n.d., <https://www.britannica.com/event/Dinshaway-Incident>. Accessed 4 May 2023.



would be the future leader – and Abdel Nasser knew that Abdel Halim would be the voice to transfer his ideas to the people.”<sup>243</sup>

Nasser died in 1970 and did not see the eventual completion of the High Dam. The song remains emblematic of the sort of work that popularized Nasser’s nationalist narrative beyond policy and speeches.<sup>244</sup>

### Damned By the Dam

Not all of those living in Egypt saw the dam in such favorable terms. The Nubian people, for example, were displaced by the flooding of their lands, and cultural production from this era gives voice to their resistance to the High Dam construction. No longer the celebration of a miracle of engineering, these poets and musicians offer a different, less utopian, understanding of the transformation of the Nile.

### Poem of the Nile

The Sudanese and Nubian poet Al-Saddiq Al-Raddi gives voice to those whose ancestors vanished under Lake Nasser (which is called Lake Nubia in Sudan) in his “Poem of the Nile.”

### Poem of the Nile

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<sup>243</sup> Nima, Kareem Husain. “Abdel Halim Hafez’s music lives on, 41 years after his death.” *Al Jazeera Media Network*, 30 Mar 2018.

<sup>244</sup> Historians agree on the use of media and literature predominantly for shaping public opinion during Nasser’s time and that “it would seem as though all the pent-up ideas censored by the Nasser regime poured out during subsequent years to quench the country’s intellectual thirst” (Marsot, Afaf Lutfi Al-Sayyid. “Survey of Egyptian Works of History.” *The American Historical Review*, Oxford University Press, Vol. 96, No. 1991, p. 1422).

Prelude

Walls climb up the ivies

And Khartoum poised on one foot

singing

Will the (river) Nile ever sleep?!

We were two amorous lovers creating children

- What's my Name?

- I name you the Presence of earth

So come closer

- What will be the taste of grief?

- .....

And we parted!

These opening lines raise the ancient relationship between the Nile and the Nubian people and their present sorrowful condition. Khartoum/Nubia names her old lover, the Nile, “the Presence of the earth,” and asks him what he would name her grieving self as she is faces an existential threat. Here, “Khartoum” is presented both as an epitome of the ancient land of Nubia and the displaced Nubians. Now that the cities have been submerged by the artificial lake and that the once vibrant city is deserted, “the Nile quietly flows.../seeping through the city’s silence.”

The Nile quietly flows...

seeping through the city's silence

and villages' burnt aches

friends will not exchange (their) morning greetings now

nor recognize each other's (faces)

Everywhere the(se) prophets of poverty

Drink (sip) their teas and sip their griefs (tears)

and say nothing

They hide death in their (tattered) clothes

Even though the city is now devoid of its inhabitants, the burning sorrows of the nostalgic Nubians remain suspended in their villages. They live in the desert with utter destitution, quietly “sipping their griefs and hiding death in their tattered clothes.” Their destitution, which is the result of their eviction from the Nile banks and their livelihood, is so severe that they have nothing to provide for their children:

and offer children: patience

They merge with the trees on earth

kill themselves at night

and borrow the reasoning of a bottle of drink

fake wars on women

say no prayers

and vanish

The displacement for the Nubians is not a mere change of place, but a more fundamental unsettling. There is nothing they can give their children other than what they had been

promised when they were moved to the new place—stay *patient* until the project is completed and you will be resettled. Until then, they feel eternally uprooted from their values and traditions including their *prayers* and normal religious routines, their vivacious social life, their communal and domestic responsibilities of being sober at all times and keeping their family and themselves safe. The poetic voice resents that the Nubian children are, “borrow[ing] the reasoning of a bottle of drink,” declaring “fake wars on women,” or “kill[ing] themselves at night.” The death of each individual is ultimately the death of the village. A fellow downstream Nubian poet tacitly puts the death and burial of the village under the heap of concrete dam heralding the birth of “modernity” as such: “Your village was hung by the noose of modernity/Drowned her ancestral dust/To birth concrete & artificial light.”<sup>245</sup> In “Poem of the Nile,” the daily experience of intoxication and death of desperate Nubians is the fate of the Nile itself.

The Nile dries up the desert's tavern  
Gets drunk on waste (i.e. intoxicates itself on waste) (1)  
And be content with (living in) the city and breaking at night  
rising up through the times  
and never sleeps

Whereas the villagers’ way of life was polluted by desperation, the Nile succumbs to environmental degradation as it “dries up the desert's tavern/intoxicates itself on waste.”

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<sup>245</sup> Matthew Shenoda, *Damming the Nile: A Poet’s Ecology*, 2016, <https://prairieschooner.unl.edu/excerpt/damming-nile-poet%E2%80%99s-ecology> Retrieved 1/2/2017.

Once considered to be “one of the earliest cradles in which humans coped with nature, a space in which experiences were organized and translated into ideas, practices, beliefs, and orientations,”<sup>246</sup> the region has now been disrupted and deteriorated by the pollution of the river, which results from the buildup of industrial waste in the artificial lake. The poetic voice muses about the paradox of “modernizing” the Nile at the expense of the environment, the destruction of lives, land, and heritage.

Let the maps explode. How can the land be lost  
When the future belongs to the Nile?  
The Nile knows of the disgrace of cities.  
That have vanished.  
Knows of the old times  
Yet never speaks.  
It is the Nile...  
Generations will pass, and there will always be children.  
Lingering on its banks,  
Waiting for it all to end.

The question remains: what is the rationale behind damming the Nile? Of what value is it to light the future of the basin, while indefinitely dimming the future for displaced inhabitants? The poetic text pauses at the rhetorical question: “Let the maps explode. How can the land be lost/When the future belongs to the Nile?”

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<sup>246</sup> Erlich and Gershoni, 2000, p. 1.

While there was an overwhelming and predominant sense of joy with the dam as a national project, Nubians in particular sacrificed heavily, “including 45 Nubian villages lying on 300 square kilometers of land and one million palm trees.” Nubians believe that they “were moved from a paradise on the banks of the Nile” and thrown into the ferocious desert.<sup>247</sup> Temples, fortresses and ancient cities like Faras at Wad Halfa (border between Egypt and Sudan), have now “vanished” under Lake Nasser as a result of the Aswan High Dam. At least 100,000 Nubians were displaced<sup>248</sup> and cast out into the desert with the promise that they would be re-settled. Historical accounts estimate more than 55,000 Nubians were expelled by the “bitter occurrence” and that many others refused to leave their ancestral homes and memories, instead choosing to die in the flood.<sup>249</sup>

As Al-Raddi’s poem suggests, an entire civilization was buried under water, and the Nile testifies to the loss of livelihoods and to the “disgrace of cities.” Over half a century ago, the children of their “children [are] lingering on its banks,” hoping the promises get fulfilled, and the hydro-poetic activism continues with the generations to come.

### Heirloom

Since its initial conceptualization, Nasser depicted the High Dam as “a bold technological initiative to bring Egypt irrevocably out of colonial underdevelopment and into industrial

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<sup>247</sup> El wardani, Lina. “Old Nubia, Paradise Lost.” *Egypt Independent*. 2010.

<https://www.egyptindependent.com/old-nubia-paradise-lost/>

<sup>248</sup> Scudder T. Aswan High Dam Resettlement of Egyptian Nubians. Springer, 2016. p1.

<sup>249</sup> El-Akkad, Farah. “52 Years After Displacement, Scars Of Loss Remain For Nubians.” *Egypt Today*. 2016, <https://www.egypttoday.com/Article/10/3182/52-Years-After-Displacement-Scars-Of-Loss-Remain-For-Nubians>

modernity.”<sup>250</sup> The High Dam was a deliberate break not only with Egypt’s upstream neighbors, but with its past. For the Nubians, too, the dam was a break with the past, albeit in quite the opposite way. It was a break with the river, the heritage of the inhabitants, and the memory of their ancestors.

“Heirloom,” much like Al-Raddi’s poem, gives voice to the Nubian exodus from Aswan into the desert. K. Eltinaé’s revelatory voice echoes Al-Raddi’s prophecy regarding “the children lingering on the river’s banks/Waiting for it all to end.” Heirloom is a heritage, an inheritance, or a legacy from the past. Unfortunately, this poem is not about a legacy of the Nile’s glory. Rather it is a legacy of uprootedness, exodus, pain.

Ninety thousand men, women and children

dragged their dust to rivers,

dams were never built for.

Under six cataracts

lie the bones of my ancestors.

Under my bed is the cane

they mapped the miles with,

slaves because the sun charred their skin

and made raisins of their hearts.

Together we part the waters,

Weep with mermaids

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<sup>250</sup> Reynolds, Nancy Y. “Building the Past: Rockscapes and the Aswan High Dam in Egypt” *Water on Sand Environmental Histories of the Middle East and North Africa*. Alan Mikhail Eds. Oxford University Press, 2013. pp. 181- 206.

who playback voices  
of those we left behind.

This poem is a sorrowful lamentation for the lives lost in the hostile desert during the dam construction. The eco-cosmology of the area shapes the thinking of the poet and his memory. The sense of loss seems alive through the various reminders of the day the exodus started. Descriptions of objects, such as “the cane they mapped the miles with,” attest to the painful measure of how far from the banks they should be thrown.

#### Environment and Water Scarcity

There are two faces to the Aswan high dam: one, the symbol of patriotism and pride in Egypt, and the second, the source of loss of ancestral memories and the phenomenon of human suffering in Nubia (Northern Sudan and Southern Egypt). Building from Shawqi’s celebratory nationalist poetry and the contrasting sorrows of Nubian poetry, the poem “Joha” deals with grievances on pollution that extend the images of the Nile beyond its grace to point to the sinister effects of the High Dam.

Much like the Ethiopian poets and singers’ resentful imagination of the Nile in the 1980s and 90s, some Egyptian poets and singers employ a personified Nile as a means of communicating their concerns and desires. If the concerns in the Ethiopian case are associated with inability to use the waters of the Nile, in the Egyptian case the concerns are with the misuse or abuse of its waters—mainly through pollution and environmental degradation. Egyptian poets attribute human nature to the river as a means to question power. Scholars have examined the connection between the image of the Nile in Egyptian



literature and its relation to ecological changes in different regimes.<sup>251</sup> In this final section of my chapter, I focus on the impacts of environmental degradation and water pollution on real and perceived water scarcity. These realities affect Egypt's hydropolitical engagement in the basin.

Joha (جحا)/ Oxymoron?

I am the one who grows gold in your land,

Yet, the manure you feed me by your hand.

I had no happiness, no luxury, nothing but disgust.

My dignity, my bit of bread are objects for insult.

The lines cited above are drawn from “جحا”/”Joha,” a poem by the young Egyptian poet, Al-Jakh. He begins his poetic text by making the river speak. The speech it offers voices resentment about a favor that was negligently reciprocated. The Nile feels nothing but “unhappiness” and “disgust” due to its loss of dignity and purity. These turns of phrase offer an artistic way of resisting environmental degradation, but more importantly, they offer a cautious but piercing critique against the people responsible for the pollution, mainly industrialists. Farmers complain both regarding the capitalists' irresponsibility as well as the government's negligence to the increased toxicity of the Nile water. A farmer called Hamdy laments that everyday “we feel the pollution through the water coming from the main canal nearby, which is contaminated by chemically treated sewage

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<sup>251</sup> See for example Hala Eweidat's work on the Nile's Ecology and Culture in Modern Arabic Poetry 2015, where she examines three major revolutions in Egypt: the 1919 Revolution, 1952 Revolution, and the 2011 Revolution.

disposal. He continues, “ And that kills our crops. *The government does not care. They throw chemical waste into the Nile everywhere*” [Emphasis added.]<sup>252</sup> The frustration in the poetic text extends beyond those farmers who are forced to use artificial fertilizers ultimately “feeding the manure” to the Nile.

Egypt’s severe pollution is also related to the Aswan High Dam. Ray-Shamroukh shows this causal association saying, “Usage of pesticides and fertilizers also pollutes the river, as agricultural practices near the river use a high quantity of fertilizers and pesticides to cope with the changes in irrigation caused by the building of the dam itself.”<sup>253</sup> The fact that the poem accuses the polluters of “the manure you feed me by your hand” is indicative of just one specific case of the downside of the dam on the environment. With regard to a prudent way of dealing with the environment, a critic writes: “we must learn to use wisely the water we have, and not think we can go to some other country... and bring in new supplies while we already waste enormous amount of water.”<sup>254</sup>

The poetic text further confuses the voice of the Nile with that of the poet (narrator) deliberately:

You hate us! Why weren't you sterile?

What does it mean Egypt is the “gift of the Nile”,

If every day I can't find water to drink within a mile.

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<sup>252</sup> Rashad, Jonathan. “The World’s Longest River is in Trouble.” *The Washington Post*. *The WorldPost*, 22 March 2018. Web. Accessed 1 May 2019. *Washington Post* [emphasis added]

<sup>253</sup> Ewaidat, Hala. “Ecology and Culture in Modern Arabic Poetry.” 2015, p. *International Journal of Research in Humanities and Social Studies*. Volume.2, Issue 5, 2015, p. 90).

<sup>254</sup> Stewart Udall quoted in *Waterbury*, 1979, p. 116.

With these lines, the narrator becomes a citizen addressing the authorities directly. This sort of transitioning from addressing the river to addressing state power, or alternating poetic voices altogether finds expression in the Ethiopian poets' lamentations (see, for example, my discussion of Hailu's "*ənatken bälulləgn*" in chapter two). Poets often shift address for emphasis, but also for safety against persecution. It is, after all, not uncommon to see artists who dared to address the issue directly considered criminals and subjected to detention in the presence of stringent censorship of art forms and themes considered "against societal moral" including concerns of the Nile pollution. Sherine Abdul Wahab, one of the Egypt's most famous singers is a well known for her song "Have you drunk from the Nile water?"—a patriotic hit connecting love of the notorious river with love of the Egyptian nation. However, in a 2017 concert she held in the United Arab Emirates, when she was asked by an audience to sing that old song, she answered jokingly "it is better to drink bottled water" suggesting that the Nile is no longer drinkable due to its filth and pollution. Following the circulation of that video, the Al Sisi government sentenced Sherine to six-months imprisonment for "deliberately broadcasting information or 'false or tenacious rumors' seen as liable to 'disturb public security, spread horror among the people or cause harm and damage to the public interest'."<sup>255</sup> The disparity in water availability and mis/management determines the hydropolitical situation because "one part of the world, sustains a designer bottled water market that generates no tangible health benefits, another part suffers acute public health risks because people have to drink water from drains or from lakes and rivers."<sup>256</sup>

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<sup>255</sup> Michaelson, Ruth. "Egyptian singer Sherine Abdel Wahab to face trial over Nile comments." *The Guardian*, Wed 15 Nov 2017.

<sup>256</sup> The United Nations Development Program 2006 Report.

The hydropolitical contention that usage is based on the natural rights of “equitable share” of upstream states and the “historical right” of those downstream is further exacerbated by water scarcity. This scarcity results not only from shortage of rain (which leads to a natural reduction of flooding from the sources upstream), but also due to water pollution (mainly in Egypt). Thus, aside from the direct effects on the people of the respective poor population, understanding the condition of environmental degradation in these particular areas amounts to understanding the impacts on the lives of the 430 million inhabitants who live in 11 riparian states (i.e., in an area of almost a tenth of the African continent).<sup>257</sup> It is also important to remember that environmental changes that take place in this part of the world trace their cause back to colonialism that gave way to capitalism and regional hegemony through treaties. As Kyle Whyte notes, “Anthropogenic (human-caused) climate change is an intensification of environmental change imposed on Indigenous peoples by colonialism”<sup>258</sup>

The Nile and the Aswan High Dam in the downstream nations are reflected through various frames. There are the competing dynamics of glorification and resentment poetry from Egypt and Sudan respectively, as well as the more recent poetry lamenting environmental degradation. While the dam is an immortal national monument for the Egyptians, it is but “the most recent (and surely not the last) manifestation of Egypt’s struggle to dominate rather than coexist with the Nile Valley.”<sup>259</sup> Both Al-Raddi

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<sup>257</sup> This is according to data from State of the Nile Basin 2012. Obviously, the population of the region has grown significantly over the past seven years. (For example, the Ethiopian population was 86.6 million at the time. Now it is estimated to be around 100 million.)

<sup>258</sup> Whyte, Kyle. 153.

<sup>259</sup> Waterbury, John. *Hydropolitics of the Nile Valley*, 1997, p. 30.

and Eltein's bitter lamentations demonstrate how the dam is a curse to the Nubians. There are of course other attitudes toward the Nile in Sudan, especially those praising its grandiosity, but the interplay between glorification and resentment informs the poetic responses to the river upstream and downstream..

## CONCLUSION

Because river systems are “structures that exemplify the complicated and complex dynamics of human-nature entanglements,”<sup>260</sup> I take the popular imagination to be an integral part of grasping the full context of human relations involving complex social-cultural, historical, legal, and political entanglements in the Eastern Nile Basin. The Nile has proven to be one of the most significant features of the longstanding relationship among three of the Eastern Nile Basin countries: Ethiopia, Sudan, and Egypt. Over the preceding three chapters, I have aimed to demonstrate national and regional contexts for hydropolitical struggle as they manifest in poetry and songs. I have aimed to entwine policy and poetry as discourses interlinked in figuring the Nile, aligning it with national interests, and influencing regional policies.

The study has shown that with poetic voices come concepts of ecological identity. This identity is based on knowledge of the environment and how humans relate to the world around them. It is inseparable from a vision of green states that is based not on political boundaries, but human needs. Poetic voices suggest ways of resolving the hydropolitical crisis in the region. They grant the Nile agency and thereby forge a new type of hegemony, one based on the Nile itself rather than any specific riparian state. Whether Shawqi’s conjoining of the Nile and the Nejashi, Tsegaye’s Amharic and English transnational engagement, Getinet’s post-GERD envisioning of the region, Gigi’s association of beauty and justice, or the Nubians’ ways of recreating their childhood

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<sup>260</sup> Kelly, Jason M. et. al. *Rivers of the Anthropocene*. University of California Press. 2018. p. xvi.

memories that were awashed by Lake Nasser, each of these poetic voices defies the nationalist appropriation of water by putting the Nile itself at the center of literary works.

In the first part of my dissertation, I have focused on Ethiopian poetry, songs, and politics dealing explicitly with the Nile: in Tsegaye Gebre-Medhin's poems in chapter one, nine other Ethiopians' poems and songs in chapter two. In Tsegaye's Amharic poem, “ዐባይ”/Abbay, the river functions as an open book in which knowledge about the ancient African past has been recorded, examined, and rediscovered. The river defies national boundaries in the basin, and Tsegaye imagines the river eternally connecting a multicultural and multilingual region. He employs the shared symbols of ‘life-blood’ that sustain the lives of ancient gods and mortals alike; ‘milk’ that flows from the bosom of Mother Cush to feed those in the land of the gods; a ‘fountain of wisdom’ that, since time immemorial, offers erudition to the pioneers of civilization both East and West. This transnational account of the Abbay, which silenced the voices of individual national political interests and asserted the centrality of the river (and hence the region and the continent) on the global stage, arose at an especially tumultuous time in Ethiopia—in 1973, just a year before the deposition of the monarchy. More importantly, the poem emerged during a period in Ethiopian history when its downstream neighbor, Egypt, and its allies in the Arab League, made a claim for the river. Under pressure, the Ethiopian government decided to be as discreet as possible.

“The Nile”, Tsegaye's poem in English, likewise, is steeped in history, myths, and legends that testify to the river's being the site of early beginnings, as well as its permanent presence in the task of universal peace offering. Unlike the Amharic poem, this English-language poem has more biblical allusions than ancient Egyptian, Greek, and

Roman mythologies. Moreover, the poem distinctly refers to Ethiopia, Egypt ('Arabia'), Africa, and places in the Middle East to highlight the despicable hydropolitical arrangement. It speculates as to what a deep understanding of the rich Nile history and culture would offer to the realization of this injustice. This might explain the choice of language. Although the text is polyphonic (in that there are multiple interchangeable poetic voices), Ethiopia's accusatory voice is dominant.

Ethiopia, like *Cush* in the Amharic poem, has grand primacy regardless of the difference in the imagined geographical extent of the "Ethiopias" in the two poems. The message is mainly addressed to Egypt—Ethiopia's 'prodigal daughter'—but also to the Middle East and the 'West,' which, in the English poem, are directly or indirectly involved in the establishment of hydro-hegemony, the disruption of "God's harmony," and the 'rhythm of existence.'" This poem shares some concerns with the other texts in Amharic analyzed in chapter two, but no other poem (upstream or downstream) specifically points out the legal wrangling in the basin. These wranglings were due to the colonial and post-colonial water apportionment treaties that excluded Ethiopia and other upper riparian states. Ethiopia's voice repeatedly asks how Egypt so easily relegates the gift of its "eternal spring" to a petty billion cubic meters. The poet is referring to the 1929 and 1959 agreements between (Britain's) Sudan and Egypt, and he subtly connects the repercussions of those agreements with subsequent Peace Accord in the Middle East between Egypt and Israel symbolizing the Nile as sacrificial lamb.

One more striking consistency in Tsegaye's poetry is the reference to the Nile as a female figure. This gendering of the river is unique to his framework for the Nile or Abbay, which he commonly presents as a pioneer-mother figure perennially feeding and



carrying the people and deities of the basin. This image stands in sharp contrast to how most of the other Nile poets in Ethiopia and downstream, almost all of whom gender the river as male. In fact, Tsegaye's unique positioning seems to emanate from his belief that we are all children of the goddess አድባር/*Adbar*,<sup>261</sup> who had brought about the Ancient African and Ethiopian "matriarchal system."<sup>262</sup> Both Ethiopia and Africa follow the motherhood of Adbar and are known as Motherlands. So does the Nile.

In chapter two, I have focused on additional Amharic poetry and songs, but texts that respond to different moments in Ethiopian history. I selected poetry that addressed hydropolitical concerns either from the point of view of ecology (that is, the relation of the people and water), legal access to the use of water, as well as critical figurations of the Nile to speak back against state power. I presented and analyzed these poems and songs in their chronological order to highlight their resonance with policies of the respective moments. The chapter has categorized the various eras into Dergue-time (1974-1991) and ethnic federalism (from 1991 onwards). Given the shifting severity of censorship and artistic policies, these writers and musicians often employed techniques to adhere to the law, but also to say what needed to be said. Through various literary devices and rhetorical modes, they found various ways to highlight general pitfalls of the respective regimes and their mis/management of the river resources.

One of the techniques to circumvent censors was to use the traditional Amharic ቅኔ/*quine*-poetry as a means of evoking—rather than outright stating—their critique. Quine, which draws from the classical Geez, is generally a short poem that has an

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<sup>261</sup> One of Tsegaye's folk etymologies is the connection between the Mother *Adbar* and the river *Atbara* (The Sudanese name of the Tekeze river in Ethiopia)

<sup>262</sup> Kibret Mekonnen. "Interview with the legendary Poet Laureate Tsegaye Gabre-Medhin." [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LOcA\\_pnoTzY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LOcA_pnoTzY)

obvious direct meaning (ሰጾ/the wax) and a more important crypted message (ወርቅ/the gold). Some poets accomplish this fete by using words or phrases that contain both the *wax* and the *gold* in selected core-verses of their poetry. In the case of Tsegaye, the core phrases (with two or more meanings) are created by folk etymologizing existing names which otherwise are opaque (with no particular meaning). In this way, he often juxtaposes unrelated places in the basin to establish a broader transnational identity for the region.

Because many concrete ideas and culture-specific concepts carried by the *quine* style in the Amharic poems simply do not have readily available English equivalents, I have focused my translation on transposition of terms and concepts that are linguistically and culturally untranslatable.. Understanding the social-political context in which the poems were created is crucial to evoking often obscure meanings. It is nowhere clearer than in Abera Lemma's poem “አብዬ ዐባይ/”My Father Abbay,” where the poet masterfully uses the wax and gold technique to pass his scornful comment on the way the country is ruled. Abera engages a certain agreement reached between Ethiopia and Egypt and explains how it is not beneficial to the country. Then he passes to criticize the ways in which the corrupt and divisive system functions and how government officials operate with apparent impunity. He finally calls for the people from all sides to revolt against all the injustice and potential instability/war due to unwise handling of Nile matters.

The ill-fate of people languishing in hunger and poverty are also major themes spearheaded by Ayalneh Mulatu. He eulogizes the age-old apprehension of water wars and the misuse of resources such as the loss of water and fertile soil. As far as I have seen, no other Ethiopian poet has written more Nile poems than Ayalneh. Apart from the

poem “ጥቁር ዐባይ”/Tiqur Abbay/”The Black Nile” and two dramatic texts—*Shotelay* and *Gihon*—he has published two other poems on Abbay. Given his official position in the cultural sector during the Dergue regime and his socialist background, it is quite understandable that his poetry adopts a didactic tone. The texts analyzed seem to offer legitimate documentation of Ethiopia’s views on the Abbay/Nile. In “Tiqur Abbay.” He accuses the Abbay of robbery and unfruitfulness and tells ‘him’ directly. Following Tsegaye’s poems in which the Nile is glorified to the level of worshiping, the black Nile in this poem is personified for an opposite effect—that is, to deny the deification of the river and declare the triumph of humanity over nature. In a political circumstance where any kind of religious belief system is discouraged or even prohibited, Ayalneh proclaims, “From here on wards, there is / No soothsayer or sorcerer,/No zar-spirit, no clerics, nor a shaman,” and that Abbay will be controlled, harnessed, dammed, channeled, and turned to use.

Other Ethiopian poets share in apostrophizing the river and directly telling ‘his guilts’ to air the hydropolitical challenges. They also lend the Abbay occasionally gentle and at other times angry voices with which to speak back to the poets, to the people, and of course, to the authorities. The poetic texts engaged in this chapter reveal the major preoccupations of the Ethiopian poets and lyricists: the grievances, regrets, anger, and loss of hope derived from failure to address the Abbay for the country’s development. The various poems reflect accusations/counteraccusations, claims/counterclaims, blames/denials, frustrations, and cursing, and they highlight the contention between the river, on the one hand, and the poets and the people, on the other.

One major divide among the poetic texts selected for this chapter is the year 2011—the commencement of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam. I have analyzed two texts from this period alongside one another: the first, a poem by Getinet Eniyew, and the second, a song by Genet Masresha. Unlike the diametrically opposed views of Egyptian and Sudanese/Nubian poets on the Aswan High Dam, the poetic texts produced in Ethiopia following the GERD are all optimistic, and they impart a positive sense of gratification, glorification of the river, triumph, and the hope of mutual development.

The poems I analyzed showed how the centrality of the river is figured in the imagination of the poems from the three countries, and they showed that translation and interpretation of the poems is facilitated, among other things, by a solid understanding of the region's hydropolitics. The Ethiopian poets of this chapter present the Abbay as a revered father figure or as a heedless indictée, as a dependable provider or as a reckless snatcher, as a universal unifier or as a formidable barrier, all depending on the politico-historical conditions in which they were writing. They either stand in agreement with or in opposition to the water management policies of successive regimes.

In chapter three, I have observed the Nile as a muse for the downstream poets and artists throughout the ages. The Nile was either a spiritual force to reckon with among the ancients; a source of patriotism, love, and shared identity during the nationalist moment; or a motif for political and environmental concern. The Aswan High Dam in the poetry of Egypt and Nubia/Sudan has two faces: a symbol of triumph and greatness in Egypt on the one hand, and that of the Nubian sentiment of defeat, loss of identity, and memories of displacement on the other. In the Ethiopian Nile imaginary, however, the Grand

Ethiopian Renaissance Dam is almost always a positive achievement, a beacon of hope, and a unifying factor in a deeply divisive ethnic politics.

I have categorized the downstream poems into those that embrace the glorification of the Nile, those that bespeak the two faces of the Aswan High Dam, and those that engage the environment and water scarcity. As for the glorification of the Nile, the Egyptian poet Ahmed Shawqi comes to the fore. In a spirit similar to Tsegaye of Ethiopia, Shawqi uses the Nile to establish an understanding of the “other” as significant. In his poem, *Al-Nil Najashi*, Shawqi equates the 7<sup>th</sup>-century Ethiopian benevolent king who provided refuge to the first Muslim Sahabas (followers of Prophet Mohammed) to rescue them from their persecutors, and he also considers dark Ethiopia as the eternal provider of the Egyptian lifeline, the Nile.

In the section that follows, I analyzed mid-20<sup>th</sup> century poems and songs from Egypt and Sudan that respond to the socio-environmental impact of the Aswan High Dam. “Transforming the Nile” by Abd El-Wahab and “The High Dam” by Hafiz both hail the Aswan Dam as an engineering marvel, celebrate its symbolic significance, and proclaim the triumphant voice of the Egyptian people. These poems were written at the beginning of the construction of the dam, they therefore echoing the hydropolitical narratives from the 1952 revolution.<sup>263</sup> While Hafez’s song symbolizes the dam especially as monument for the anti-colonial revolution, Abd El-Wahab’s emphasizes the triumph over nature and Egypt’s redemption from the age-old threat from upstream states. These threats were often attributed to the Ethiopian emperors’ control of Nile

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<sup>263</sup> I borrow the term from Alia Mussallem who interviews people who worked on the Aswan High Dam project. Mussallem argues that the Dam “as a project may have been attributed to Nasser’s person, but the Dam as a cause, became its builders” (2015)

during the Solomonic period of 1270-1527, which corresponds to Egypt's "golden age" under the Mamluk rule.<sup>264</sup> In contrast to Shawqi's recognition of the Nile as belonging to the the Ethiopian Negus, Abd El-Wahab's song heralds triumph suggesting the end of the "alleged control" of the Blue Nile and the fears that Ethiopia could block or divert its rout.

In a final section devoted to contemporary Egyptian poets, I analyzed the poem "Joha" by Al-Jakh. This poem offers a frustrated Egyptian voice resenting the scarcity of the Nile, which it attributes to heavy industrial pollution from the forced use of artificial fertilizers following the deteriorated quality of the soil after the Aswan High Dam. The poet anthropomorphizes the river and, much like the Ethiopian poets from the earlier chapters, questions what he considers an oxymoron—he asks what it means to not be able to have drinking water, but to boast about Egypt being the gift of the Nile. Like other Nile poets from years prior, Al-Jakh's "Joha" demonstrates that both anthropogenic pollution and dam building, did—and will always—proliferate competing discourses among poets of the two downstream countries.

Across the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Nile poems and songs reveal the richly complex sentiments of the people of the three major riparian states of the Eastern Nile Basin—Ethiopia, Sudan, and Egypt. I have traced across three chapters the engagements the peoples along its banks have always had for the river, and I have suggested that hydro-poetics rather than hydro-politics help to explain the multilayered images of the Nile River.

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<sup>264</sup> Pankhurst, Richard. "Ethiopia's Alleged Control of the Nile," 2000.

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