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Hassan Ragy  
*Vassar College*

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**Our Dam, Our Water: Re-imagining Egyptian and Ethiopian Relationships with  
the Blue Nile in the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam Conflict**

Hassan Ragy  
May 2021

Senior Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the Bachelor of Arts degree in Geography

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Adviser, Professor Yu Zhou

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## **Abstract**

The Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) has been the topic of tensions between Egypt and Ethiopia since its announcement in 2011. Discussion about the dam in both academic and media circles has perpetuated divisions between the two countries as well as the nature/culture division between the river and societies along the Nile. In this thesis I integrate the frameworks of socionature – the inseparable coproduction of nature and human society – and ontological security – a secure sense of collective self – of Egyptians and Ethiopians. For Egypt I reframe the historic rights argument by exploring how Tarab music articulates a sense of space and time that is enmeshed with the Nile. I then examine how the river is embedded into the Ethiopian imagined future through the invocation of anti-colonial legacies in popular discourse. I argue that solutions to transboundary water conflicts cannot be found by treating the river as a resource but must also find ways to integrate heterogenous socionatural ontologies to build stable solutions.

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## I. Introduction

“Unimaginable instability”. This is what Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi promises if anyone takes even “a drop from Egypt’s water”.<sup>1</sup> Though he does not explicitly state who will be the recipient of this unimaginable stability, or why, the statement comes after years of failing tri-state negotiations and threats of military escalation. Tensions remain high between the Nile states of Egypt, Ethiopia, and Sudan even over ten years after the announcement of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) in 2011. Ethiopians maintain that this dam, the largest hydropower dam in Africa and Ethiopia’s first along the Blue Nile, is necessary for development and uplift. Meanwhile, Egyptians express concerns over the loss of control over the Nile as a critical resource.

The Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam is the most visible touchpoint of a larger conversation about the Nile river. The Blue Nile originates in Ethiopia, where almost 85% of the total water that reaches the mouth of the river in Alexandria, Egypt originates.<sup>2</sup> The main source of the river is Lake Tana, located in the northwest region of Ethiopia. The river’s yearly cycle begins during Ethiopia’s summer rainy season (June-August) when heavy rains carry surface soils off the mountainsides into Lake Tana before continuing downstream.<sup>3</sup> The Nile’s heavily silt-laden waters provides fertilization along the riverbanks in flatter areas upstream, throughout Sudan and Egypt. Moreover,

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1 Al Jazeera, “Egypt’s Sisi Warns Ethiopia Dam Risks ‘Unimaginable Instability’”, 30 Mar 2021.

2 Wossenu Abteu and Shimelis Behailu Dessu, *The Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam on the Blue Nile* (Springer Geography, 2019), 2.

3 Abteu and Dessu, *Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam*, 49.

these downstream countries rely almost entirely on the Nile as a source of water; Egypt gets 97% of its water from the river.



**Figure 1 - Blue Nile Reference Map**  
source: author



The GERD project has therefore been controversial since its announcement. The dam sits about 15km from the border with Sudan in a gorge between two mountains. The main dam will stand 145m tall and at completion will create a 74 billion cubic meter reservoir.<sup>4</sup> Engineers expect the dam to generate an average of 6 Megawatt hours of electricity, about 140% of the current installed electric generation capacity.<sup>5</sup> Ethiopia completed the first phase of construction as of the summer of 2020, during which heavy rain also unexpectedly completed the first phase of reservoir filling.

Downstream states on the Nile voiced concerns over water rights and access to the Nile's resources. Egypt has been particularly militant in its opposition to the project, calling the dam an "existential threat".<sup>6</sup> The Ethiopian government argued that there will be minimal impact to irrigation, siltation, or water access for downstream nations, and that the site was chosen specifically for hydropower generation and not for water draw.<sup>7</sup> Negotiations between The Egyptian, Ethiopian, and Sudanese governments ongoing for years, now through the African Union. They have resolved most key issues relating to technical specifics, filling, and construction. However several points are still under discussion namely: how will control over the operation of the dam be allocated, and how will future disputes be settled.<sup>8</sup>

Academic works on the GERD fall broadly within two categories. One group which tends to be more scientific, projecting the impacts the dam may have on water flow

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4 Solan Kifle Horo, "G.E.R.D", *Ketema Journal*, 2020.

5 USAID, "Ethiopia Power Africa Factsheet" (2020) <https://www.usaid.gov/powerafrica/ethiopia>

6 Antoaneta Roussi, "Row over Africa's Largest Dam in Danger of Escalating, Warn Scientists," *Nature* 583, no. 7817 (2020), pg.

<sup>7</sup> Abteu and Dessu, *Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam*, 67

<sup>8</sup> Mac Sherkawy, "What's behind the dispute over Africa's largest dam project?" *Al Jazeera English Inside Story*, YouTube, June 28, 2020

rates, agriculture, downstream dams, and water use.<sup>9</sup> The other group focuses on the geopolitics of the dam and the relationship between the Egyptian, Ethiopian and Sudanese states.<sup>10</sup> The dam has also received a lot of attention from media outlets, both in the Nile basin and internationally. The media conversation focuses heavily on the conflict aspect of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam conflict, and tends to lean on the positive or negative aspects of the dam based on the positionality of the writer.<sup>11</sup> The What these all have in common is their understanding of the Nile river as a resource, rather than an active member of the river basin. While they do emphasize the river's importance, it is for its material value rather than for its social, cultural and ontological relevance. As I will demonstrate, both Egypt and Ethiopia believe the Nile is their own, not just as a resource but as a fundamental part of their identities. Therefore understanding the GERD conflict requires understanding how the river and individual people together produce

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<sup>9</sup> Stefan Liersch, Hagen Koch and Fred Fokko Hattermann, "Management Scenarios of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam and Their Impacts under Recent and Future Climates", *Water* (2017), DOI:10.3390/w9100728; Youssef M. Hamada, *The Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, its Impact on Egyptian Agriculture and the Potential for Alleviating Water Scarcity* (Springer International Publishing, 2017); Asegdew G. Mulat and Semu A. Moges, "Assessment of the Impact of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam on the Performance of the High Aswan Dam", *Journal of Water Resource and Protection* 6 (2014). DOI: 10.4236/jwarp.2014.66057

<sup>10</sup> Peter Schwartzstein, "Why the Nile Constitutes a New Kind of Water Dispute – and Why That's Dangerous", *The Center for Climate and Security*, <https://climateandsecurity.org/2020/07/why-the-nile-constitutes-a-new-kind-of-water-dispute-and-why-thats-dangerous/>; Zeray Yihdego, Alistair Rieu-Clarke, and Ana Elisa Cascão, *The Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam and the Nile Basin: Implications for Transboundary Water Cooperation* (Routledge, 2018); Ana Elisa Cascão and Alan Nicol, "GERD: new norms of cooperation in the Nile Basin?" *Water International* 41, no. 4 (2016). DOI: 10.1080/02508060.2016.1180763; Dalia Abdelhady, Karin Aggestam, Dan-Erik Andersson, Olof Beckman, \*Ronny Berndtsson, Karin Broberg Palmgren, Kaveh Madani, Umut Ozkirimli, Kenneth M. Persson, and Petter Pilesjö, "The Nile and the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam: Is There a Meeting Point between Nationalism and Hydrosolidarity?", *Universities Council On Water Resources Journal Of Contemporary Water Research & Education* 155 (2015): 73-82.

<sup>11</sup> Declan Walsh and Somini Sengupta, "For Thousands of Years, Egypt Controlled the Nile. A New Dam Threatens That", *The New York Times* (February 9, 2020), <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/02/09/world/africa/nile-river-dam.html>; Meron Moges-Gerbi, "Tensions over Nile River dam project as heavy rain sows confusion", *CNN* (August 13, 2020), <https://www.cnn.com/2020/07/21/africa/ethiopia-nile-river-dam-afi-intl/index.html>; Roussi, "Row over Dam"; Kathryn Salam, "The Blue Nile is Dammed", *Foreignpolicy.com* (July 24, 2020), <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/07/24/the-blue-nile-is-dammed/>

cultural and emotional relationships and self-conceptions. In this thesis I examine the ways in which the GERD produces and reproduces socionatural relationships between the Nile and Nile societies, and how these relationships can change our understanding of transboundary water conflicts.

### *Building the River Network*

Socionature is the idea that nature and society not only impact each other, but that they are inseparable.<sup>12</sup> Both what we define as society and what we define as nature developed as part of one another. Society is nature and nature is society. A dam is a very visible example of socionature, where human society shapes the river by changing its patterns of flow, fish migration cycles, etc. Likewise, the river shapes human behavior, increasing population due to access to water and electricity, or where and how often people can fish. The society we imagined is one with a dammed river, and the river we imagine is one providing for the society around it. Thus, neither the river nor the people living with it are independent, but mutually constitutive.

It is through this co-constitution that we conceptualize socionature as a hybrid. Latour understands hybrids as a “reflexive co-production” meaning that each is integral to the creation of the other, and therefore the creation of themselves.<sup>13</sup> The concept of a hybrid pushes beyond the meeting of two heterogenous elements and instead denotes the produced combination. However, hybrids are not singular objects, but embodiments of a process of co-production.<sup>14</sup> This understanding of socionature as a process is critical;

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12 Erik Swyngedouw, “Modernity and Hybridity: Nature, Regeneracionismo, and the Production of the Spanish Waterscape, 1890-1930”, *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 89 no. 3 (1999).

13 Bruno Latour, *Pandora’s Hope: Essays on the Reality of Science Studies*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 274.

14 Sarah Whatmore, *Hybrid Geographies: Spaces, Politics, Ecologies* (London: Sage Publications, 2002), 1-5.

ongoing interactions create hybrids which are continually re-created with each new interaction. Conceptualizing co-production as a process is critical as it emphasizes the importance of situating work in geographical and historic context. As opposed to an object, a process is continually in motion and builds upon what came before. Likewise, the GERD did not appear out of thin air, but rather stands as the latest element within the historical process of damming, defining, and engaging the Nile.

To situate the GERD within larger historical, geographical, and political processes, this thesis draws from the field of political ecology, an analytical framework which investigates the relationship between so-called nature and systems of power. Political ecology centers the idea that “all socio-political projects are ecological projects and vice versa”.<sup>15</sup> Political ecology analysis operates along chains of causation which can be understood in three parts.<sup>16</sup> First, that impacts of environmental changes are distributed unequally. Second, that those inequalities reflect and reinforce existing inequalities. Third, those inequalities alter relationships of power between actors.<sup>17</sup> Using the framework of political ecology allows us to situate the GERD project within larger contexts of political, economic, and ecological power across time.

Political ecology however rarely delves into the emotional and personal intricacies of socio-political and ecological projects, and instead often focuses on political and economic systems. While political and economic power is important to fully understand the GERD conflict, much work already exists in this area I argue that

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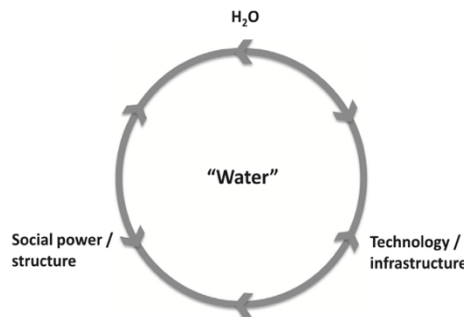
15 Juanita Sundberg, “Diabolic *Caminos* in the Desert and Cat Fights on the Río: A Posthumanist Political Ecology of Boundary Enforcement in the United States–Mexico Borderlands,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 101, no. 2 (March 16, 2011), 321.

16 Bryant and Bailey, *Third world political ecology* (London: Routledge, 1997).

17 Paul Robbins, *Political Ecology: A Critical Introduction* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2004).

understanding the forces in motion in the Blue Nile network also requires exploring emotional engagement and attachment. A critical approach to understanding the sociocultural entanglement of Egyptians, Ethiopians, and the Nile is through individual and collective self-imagination.

For water specifically the process is illustrated through the hydrosocial cycle, which is defined by Linton and Budds as “a socio-natural process by which water and society make and remake each other over space and time”.<sup>18</sup> Each element in the cycle is an integral part of its production. H<sub>2</sub>O represents the material aspect of water, what one traditionally thinks of when talking about water: rainfall, flow patterns, fish and silt, etc. However, technology and social power are also inseparable parts of the cycle. For example, in the case of a river dam, a social entity such as a state will introduce a technological implement which then changes the material processes of the river.



**Figure 2 - the Hydrosocial Cycle**  
source: Linton and Budds, “Hydrosocial Cycle”, 176

The hydrosocial cycle has no end, no beginning, and the cycle can flow in any direction. Say the same river above experiences heavy rain and the newly built dam breaks. The river floods downstream but certain communities are hit harder than others,

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<sup>18</sup> Linton and Budds, “Hydrosocial Cycle,” 170.

exacerbating already existing social inequalities. The cycle is not intended to be a comprehensive explanation for these scenarios, but rather to provide a representational model for an expanded understanding of water systems.

The representational model of the Nile in response to the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam I work with in this thesis is based on that of the organic machine.<sup>19</sup> Richard White builds an understanding of the Columbia river as an energy system, one which is at once natural, social, and technological. Each of the dams introduced onto the river becomes a “part of the river itself”, and once integrated into the network produces a new river with its own physical and social characteristics.<sup>20</sup> The organic machine framework provides a concrete example of the hydrosocial cycle in practical application. The water created in the center of the circle is particular to the technology in place and fundamentally, though not entirely, new. However, it is important to note that the organic machine, “although modified by human interventions, maintains its natural, its “unmade” qualities”.<sup>21</sup> Though the GERD produces a Nile that has different social interactions than the Nile without the GERD, the river is still connected to its historical legacy. I work with a Nile that is both particular to the present moment, its technologies, and its social dynamics, while retaining an eternal ‘Nile-ness’.

Both the particularity of the eternity of the Nile are important in informing people’s sense of self who live in partnership with it. I work with the constructivist sociological definition of the self – or one’s understanding of who they are – as both a social product and a social force.<sup>22</sup> This means that one’s individual self is something

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19 Richard White, *The Organic Machine* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2006).

20 Richard White, *The Organic Machine*, 109

21 Richard White, *The Organic Machine*, ix

22 Peter Callero, “The Sociology of the Self”, *Annual Review of Sociology* 29 (2003).

bounded and shaped in response to their political, cultural and – I argue – socionatural context. However, the self is also an active part of the construction of a larger collective sense of self. The process of social interaction and cultural production produces the collective self. Routines, rituals, and performances reinforce self-conceptions both individually and collectively, serving as public indicators of an internal state.<sup>23</sup> Just as one can never have a static definition of an actor within a network, it is important to clarify that I am methodologically incapable of studying or qualifying internal self-conceptions. What I do in this thesis is analyze the role and impacts of external expressions of internal self-conception.

Gebresenbet and Wondemagegnehu examine the GERD conflict through the framework of ontological security, or a secure sense of self.<sup>24</sup> Ontological security is a crucial framework for understanding the Nile river network. In Egypt and Ethiopia specifically, biographical continuity and connection to the past is embedded into cultural identity. The authors argue an ontological security framework not only reframes the rhetoric of the Egyptian and Ethiopian states in a more holistic light but also provides common ground for a more stable future. They argue that water security is not just about the share of material water one receives but must also include ontological security-seeking.

While the ontological security framework is central to my understanding of the Blue Nile and the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, there are several ways my work diverges from Gebresenbet and Wondemagegnehu. First, that the authors analyze

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23 Fana Gebresenbet and Dawit Yohannes Wondemagegnehu, “New Dimensions in the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam Negotiations: Ontological Security in Egypt and Ethiopia”, *African Security* (2021); Callero, “Sociology of the Self”.

24 Gebresenbet and Wondemagegnehu, “New Dimensions”.

ontological security at the level of the state and use this analysis to understand the actions of states in power relationships and negotiations. However, I work more at the scale of individual or the imagined community. While states are important geopolitical actors, understanding emotional processes of ontological security and co-production requires a finer scale of analysis. Second, that ontological security cannot be fully understood out of network with the river itself. I use the term network when applied to the Nile river to mean the collection of interactions between human and non-human actors including the water itself, technological implements such as the GERD, individuals, and social groups, who all engage with other actors in the network. Furthermore, through their mutual engagement these actors internalize and express change within the network. Actors are not static, but are themselves embodiments of the network, they are actor-networks.

Socionature shows that the river is embedded within society and inextricable from society. Therefore, the river is also embedded into the biographical continuity of those societies. What I illuminate in this work are the ways in which the river is enfolded into the ontological security of both Egypt and Ethiopia, and how those relationships present in popular discourse around the GERD.

### *Chapter Narrative*

In the second chapter I provide a brief history of the Nile river network. It is important to note that the Nile and peoples living with it have complex and ancient histories that are far beyond the scope of this work to detail. This chapter situates the GERD within its broader historical context. Just as one does not jump onto a moving train straight from the platform, this chapter gives us a running start. I outline major dams



and political agreements pertaining to the river over the last century, and provide further context on the progression of the GERD construction and negotiations.

In chapter 3, I unpack the Egyptian response to the GERD by reframing the “historic rights” argument through relationship with river instead of solely resource dependence. I find that cultural products, specifically Tarab music, articulate emotional relationships with the river. Drawing on work in Blues geography, I build a theory of a Tarab ontology where the music is expressive of understandings of space, the self and the imagined collective. Building on this, I work with the song *Al Nahr el Khaled* to elucidate of the merging of the Egyptian self with the Nile. With this understanding, historic rights becomes more than a legal resource argument but a ontological cry based in socionatural entanglement with the river.

Conversely, in chapter 4 I explore how the GERD operates as a reflection point in Ethiopian ontological security. I examine first how collective financing mechanisms such as bonds relate individuals to the dam and the river. I then explore the role of these financing mechanisms and the GERD project generally to anti-colonial narratives. I argue that the invocation of these narratives embeds the river within Ethiopian ontology and center the river in the Ethiopian imagined future.

To conclude I explore several projects attempting to address tensions in the Nile Basin: the Nile Basin Initiative’s Cooperative Framework Agreement, and the Nile Project. Both work towards fostering an equitable, holistic, and heterogenous Nile basin. I seek to integrate these two projects into each other in order to align them with the work I have done in this thesis, and provide a vision for the practical application of ontological security and socionatural entanglement on the Nile.

### *Positionality*

I became interested in this project because I am Egyptian. The Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam has become increasingly more present in popular Egyptian conversations since its announcement in 2011. While my own background has informed my interest in this topic it was important to me not to fall into the trap of nationalist divisions. I knew there must be more to the GERD than the one-sided stories I saw in popular media from Egyptians, Ethiopians, and the international community. I intentionally approach this work without a “side”, a decision as to who is right or who is wrong, or whether the dam should or shouldn’t be built. This is not however to say that I am free of implicit bias or differentiated access to certain sources or methods that made this work possible.

For one, that I am a native Arabic speaker but cannot understand Amharic or any other Ethiopian language. This gave me access to Egyptian materials for a variety of audiences while relying on translation or original English content from Ethiopian sources, which may lack context of tone or audience that a native speaker would be able to glean. Moreover, my cultural background in Egypt helped guide me to certain sources or cultural expressions for which I did not have the context for Ethiopia. However, in both cases being in the United States (especially during a pandemic) removed me from day-to-day life and ruled out certain methods such as personal interviews or ethnography which may have provided additional insight into this work. On the other hand, the pandemic’s moving of many events and conversation into virtual space gave me access to material that may not have been otherwise available from a distance. Given my own background

and the resources I was able to use, I try my best in this work to lend equal weight to every voice, to hear each actor in their own terms, and to relate those voices genuinely and considerately. The future of the Nile requires creating space to listen each other's ontologies fully, a project not without stumbling blocks but without which we risk our future, present and past.

## II. Making and Re-Making the Blue Nile

Recent geological research estimates that the Nile formed 30 million years ago through the joining of two tectonic plates, which created a high-altitude mountainous region in modern day Ethiopia and a consistently decreasing slope northwards to the Mediterranean Sea.<sup>25</sup> For most of recorded human settlement, and certainly for the timescale of this project, the Sahara Desert is a defining feature of the Nile river valley and its social conditions. Beyond just gaining historical context, understanding the temporal depth of the interaction with the Nile is crucial to grasping the dynamics at play in the river network. As the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) conflict demonstrates, historical grounding is part of communities' articulation of their self-identification. The Nile is a connector that roots them not only to each other, but also to the past and future.

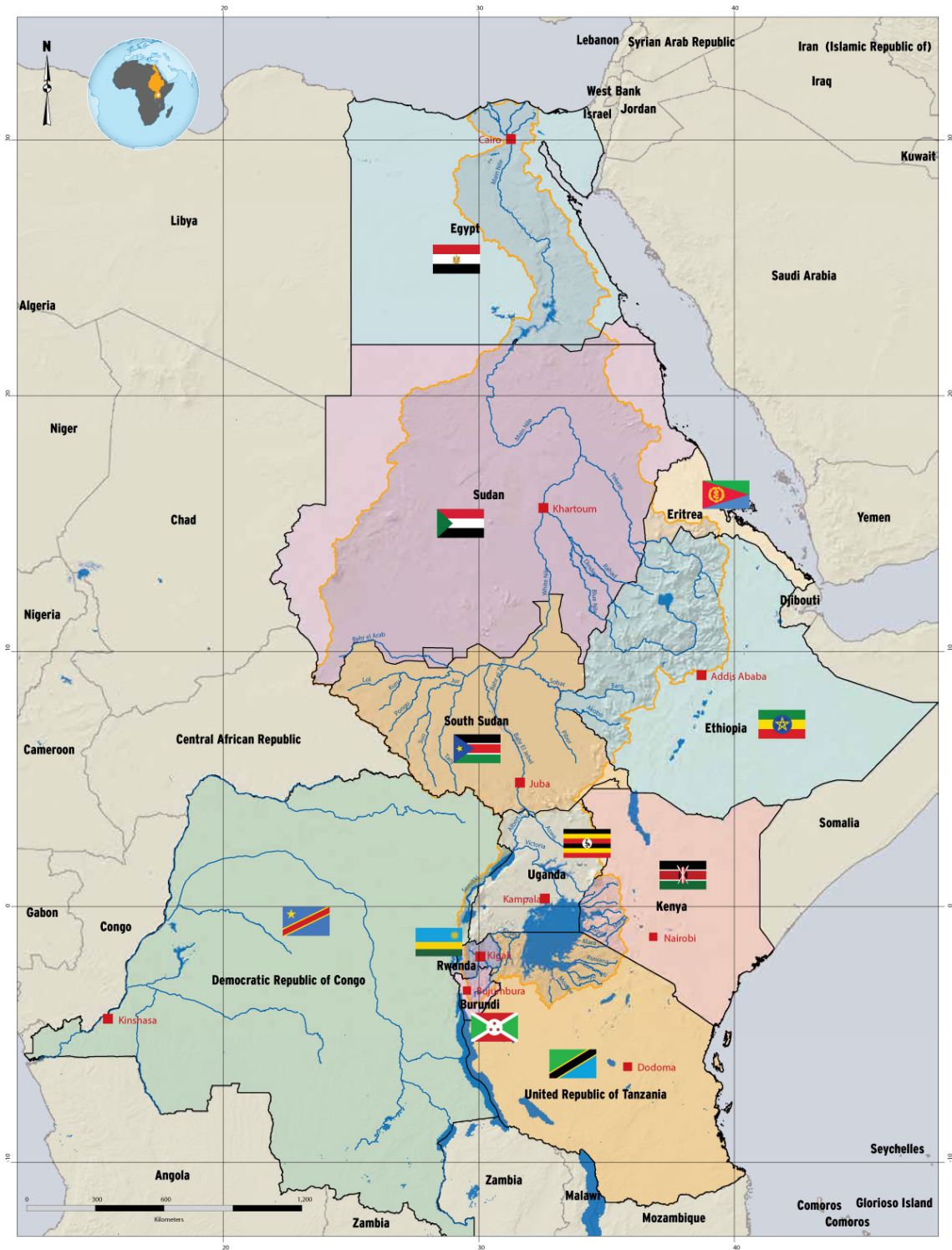
Three branches flow into the Nile from Ethiopia and provide roughly 85% of the water which reaches the delta: the Sobat river which flows from western Ethiopia to the White Nile branch, the Atbara river which flows from northeastern Ethiopia directly to the Nile after the meeting of the two branches in Khartoum, and the Blue Nile or Abbay. Though 85% of the water originates in Ethiopia, less than 50% comes from the Blue Nile branch.<sup>26</sup> About 40% of the population of Ethiopia lives within the boundaries of the Nile watershed, whereas in Egypt, population density is highly concentrated along the Nile.<sup>27</sup>

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25 Faccenna, Glišović, Forte, Becker, Garzanti, Sembroni and Gvirtzman. "Role of dynamic topography in sustaining the Nile River over 30 million years" *Nature Geoscience* 12 (2019): 1012–1017. DOI: 10.1038/s41561-019-0472-x

26 Abteu and Dessu, *Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam*, 54.

27 Nile Basin Initiative, "Demography", *Nile Basin Water Resources Atlas*, <http://atlas.nilebasin.org/treatise/population-distribution-in-nile-basin-countries/>



THIS MAP IS NOT AN AUTHORITY ON INTERNATIONAL BOUNDARIES  
 Data Source: The Global Administrative Unit Layers (GUAUL) dataset, FAO - 2014  
 The designations employed and the presentation of material in the maps do not imply the expression of any opinion whatsoever on the part of FAO and NBI concerning the legal or constitutional status of any country, territory or sea area, or concerning the delimitation of frontiers

**Figure 3 - Nile Basin Map**  
 source: Nile Basin Initiative, Nile Basin Water Resources Atlas

The Blue Nile travels through the Amhara, Oromia, and Benishangul-Gumuz ethnic regions in Ethiopia. The Nile, or *Abbay*, in these areas is characterized by high mountains and huge gorges, inhibiting rather than connecting communities.<sup>28</sup> Nevertheless local communities had long-standing relationships with the river, visible in proverbs and poems. People also attributed the river with spirits and deities, which would help or hinder passage and existence along its banks.<sup>29</sup> However, throughout most history Ethiopian relationships with the Blue Nile varied greatly based on geography and these personal connections were visible more in regional cultures than across the whole of Ethiopia.

For communities in the Sahara desert, the Nile is often the only consistent source of water, and the downstream agriculture was also highly dependent on the flood season before the introduction of dams on the river. The floodwater began in Ethiopia in May, reaching Khartoum by June, and Cairo by August.<sup>30</sup> The Nile would flood people's land on the banks of the river, necessitating the harvest of certain crops before, during, and after the water came. Variation in flood levels in any given year meant the difference between starvation, bountiful harvest, or inundation. Communities organized agriculture around the yearly cycle of the river due to inconsistent water availability and the flood "by its natural cyclical rhythms and its ever imposing presence...embodied continuity and harmony" to people downstream.<sup>31</sup>

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28 Bairu Tafla, "The Father of Rivers: The Nile in Ethiopian Literature", in *The Nile: Histories, Cultures, Myths*, eds. Erlich, Haggai and Gershoni, Israel (London: Rienner Publishers, 2000), 156.

29 Bairu Tafla, "The Father of Rivers: The Nile in Ethiopian Literature", in *The Nile: Histories, Cultures, Myths*, eds. Erlich, Haggai and Gershoni, Israel (London: Rienner Publishers, 2000), 158.

30 Abteu and Dessu, *The Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam on the Blue Nile*

<sup>31</sup> Erlich and Gershoni, *The Nile*, 2

Beginning in AD 333, a mutual dependency between the upstream and downstream societies remained stable.<sup>32</sup> The *abun*, head of the Ethiopian Christian Church, was selected by the Coptic Church in Egypt. The *abun* provided legitimacy for whomever was in power and played a central role in the unification of disparate groups in Ethiopia. Therefore, Egypt depended “on Ethiopia for its material existence, and Ethiopia was dependent on Egypt for its spiritual existence”.<sup>33</sup> The Nile solidified Ethiopia as part of the Middle East through its downstream connection.

Downstream, there was a long-held belief that Ethiopia had the power to stop the Nile’s flow and prevent silt and water from reaching Egypt. Many stories survive from throughout the Middle ages wherein Ethiopian rulers stopped the Nile’s floods, or diverted the river to the Red Sea by, often in retaliation for the persecution of Christians in Egypt. One tale reported by al-Makin states that:

... the flood failed to reach Egypt, and the sultan accordingly sent Patriarch Michael of Alexandria to Ethiopia with a request that the Ethiopians restore the stream, which they did. The Ethiopian monarch ... ordered a mound to be broken, whereupon the water in Egypt rose three cubits in one night.<sup>34</sup>

No evidence exists to suggest the ability of any Ethiopian ruler to block, divert or restore the flow of the Nile. While over the course of history these narratives shifted into the background or foreground depending on the strength of Ethiopian-Egyptian relations at the time, the idea of Ethiopian power to control the river remains visible in the GERD conflict.

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32 Haggai Erlich, *The Cross and the River: Ethiopia, Egypt and the Nile* (London: Rienner Publishers, 2022), 17.

33 Richard Pankhurst, “Ethiopia’s Alleged Control of the Nile” in *Nile: Histories, Cultures, Myths* edited by Haggai Erlich and Israel Gershoni, (Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2000), 25.

34 Pankhurst, “Ethiopia’s Alleged Control of the Nile”, 26.

## *Dams and Agreements*

As people began incorporating dams into the river system the river changed and so did their relationships to it. Though the first known dam on the Nile dates to 2650 BCE I focus on the modern-day Nile from the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century onwards.<sup>35</sup> The first major dam built along the river was the Aswan Low Dam, built between 1898 and 1902. The British authorities in Egypt intended the dam for flood control to boost agricultural capacity, especially for the export of cotton.<sup>36</sup> Colonial powers and later independent Egypt tightly controlled developments on the river as they believed it key to downstream autonomy.

The British interest in maintaining cotton production in colonial Egypt and Sudan spurred the 1902 agreement between Emperor Menelik II of Ethiopia. This agreement is often referred to by both Egypt and Ethiopia as justification for their own stance regarding the dam. The English version of the document states ““Emperor Menelik II, king of kings of Ethiopia, has agreed not do work across the Blue Nile river, Lake Tana and Sobat river, that could block flow to the White Nile or allow others to do work without prior agreement with the English government”, however the Amharic translation can also be translated to read “flow from the three water bodies may not be completely stopped” but does not prohibit any and all development on the river.<sup>37</sup> This difference in understanding has been the source of disagreement between the countries even over a century later. Egypt claims that this treaty Emperor Menelik II feely entered into the

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35 Abteu and Dessu, *The Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam on the Blue Nile*, 18

36 Tvedt, Terje, *The River Nile in the Age of the British: Political Ecology and the Quest for Economic Power*, (I.B. Tauris, 2004)

37 Abteu and Dessu, *The Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam on the Blue Nile*, 16



treaty and it therefore still carries weight in negotiations over upstream developments on the Nile, such as the GERD.<sup>38</sup>

In the decades after the 1902 agreement several dams were built in Sudan. The first of which being the Sennar Dam, built between 1915 and 1925.<sup>39</sup> The British and Egyptians controlled Sudan at this time, and the dam was part of the British aim to increase agricultural capacity along the Nile. Part of this larger project includes what is referred to as the 1929 agreement, an exchange of notes between British and Egyptian officials regarding water use and water rights of the Nile.<sup>40</sup> The messages detail water usage throughout the year in Sudan and Egypt, depending on the flow rate of the river throughout the flood season. They then grant full rights of the Nile water to Egypt and Anglo-Egyptian Sudan and veto rights over any upstream development projects on the river.<sup>41</sup> There is no consideration for water use of any upstream nations. While not a binding legal agreement, the 1929 agreement lays the groundwork for the historic rights argument invoked by Sudan and Egypt.

The historic rights argument is also largely formed from the 1959 Nile Waters Treaty also referred to as the Nile Waters Agreement or the Nile Treaty.<sup>42</sup> Independent Egypt (1952) and Sudan (1956) signed the 1959 agreement which updates the allocations of the 1929 agreement to Egypt's share of 55.5 bcm and Sudan's 18.5 bcm.<sup>43</sup> Ethiopia,

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38 Sherkawy, "Dispute over Africa's largest dam project".

39 Abteu and Dessu, *The Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam on the Blue Nile*, 18

40 "Exchange of Notes between Her Majesty's Government in the United Kingdom and the Egyptian Government on the Use of Waters of the Nile for Irrigation", signed Cairo, May 7, 1929. [https://www.internationalwaterlaw.org/documents/regionaldocs/Egypt\\_UK\\_Nile\\_Agreement-1929.html](https://www.internationalwaterlaw.org/documents/regionaldocs/Egypt_UK_Nile_Agreement-1929.html).

41 Communications between British Government and Khedive of Egypt, 1929

42 "Agreement Between the United Arab Republic and the Republic of Sudan for the Full Utilization of the Nile Waters", Signed Cairo, November 8, 1959. [https://www.internationalwaterlaw.org/documents/regionaldocs/UAR\\_Sudan1959\\_and\\_Protocol1960.pdf](https://www.internationalwaterlaw.org/documents/regionaldocs/UAR_Sudan1959_and_Protocol1960.pdf)

43 Abteu and Dessu, *The Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam on the Blue Nile*, 19.

along with other upstream states on the White Nile, reject both these agreements because they were not included either in the allocations or in the discussions leading up to their determination.

The post-colonial era also saw the construction of several dams along the Blue Nile in Egypt and Sudan. The Roseires Dam in Sudan – about 100 kilometers away from the site of GERD – was completed in 1966 for irrigation and hydropower.<sup>44</sup> However, the mostly widely known and influential dam along the Nile before GERD was the Aswan High Dam.<sup>45</sup> Construction began in 1960 and finished in 1970 under President Gamal Abdel Nasser. The Aswan Dam provides enough hydropower to electrify all of Egypt, and acts as drought and flood protection from the 132 billion cubic meter reservoir known as Lake Nasser.<sup>46</sup>

The Aswan Dam served as a major nationalizing force in post-colonial Egypt and contributed to changing social and political dynamics along the Blue Nile basin.<sup>47</sup> Electrification and drought protection helped Nasser to shift Egyptian's focus connection upstream through dependence on the Nile, to Egypt as a modern Arab state focused on unity with other Arab countries. This shift, along with complications between the Egyptian Coptic Church and the Ethiopian Church, increased tensions between the Ethiopian and Egyptian states.<sup>48</sup>

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44 Abteu and Dessu, *Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam*, 23.

45 Since the HAD only one major dam has been built along the Nile, in Merowe, Sudan. The Merowe dam was completed in 2009 for irrigation and was also the source of significant public opposition due to displacement that would be caused by its construction.

46 Benedick, Richard Elliot. "The High Dam and the Transformation of the Nile." *Middle East Journal* 33, no. 2 (1979): 119–44.

47 Tvedt, *River Nile in Age of British*

48 Erlich, *Cross and River*, 145.

Partially in response to Nasser's shift in focus away from the Nile basin, Emperor Haile Selassie shifted his focus towards internal modernization of Ethiopia. Between 1956 and 1964 the United States Bureau of Reclamation completed a study of potential hydropower projects along the Blue Nile in Ethiopia. Of the four sites recommended, the Border site eventually became the location of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam though the project did not actualize for several decades.<sup>49</sup> The successive dams on the Nile and treaties for its allotment were all part of the process of continual transformation with the Nile, changing material patterns and social meanings.

### *The Nile Basin Initiative*

The Nile Basin Initiative (NBI) was founded in 1999 as a partnership between the governments of Nile Basin states. Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Egypt, Ethiopia, Kenya, Rwanda, South Sudan, The Sudan, Tanzania and Uganda are participating countries and Eritrea as an observer. The Initiative's stated objectives are:

- To develop the Nile Basin water resources in a sustainable and equitable way to ensure prosperity, security, and peace for all its peoples
- To ensure efficient water management and the optimal use of the resources
- To ensure cooperation and joint action between the riparian countries, seeking win-win gains
- To target poverty eradication and promote economic integration
- To ensure that the program results in a move from planning to action<sup>50</sup>

The NBI contributed significantly in uplifting the access of upstream states to the Nile after. The initiative works on environmental research and development projects along the

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<sup>49</sup> Abteu and Dessu, *The Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam on the Blue Nile*, 131  
<sup>50</sup> Nile Basin Initiative, "Who we are", <https://nilebasin.org/index.php/nbi/who-we-are>

river, while also providing a platform for communication and cooperation between diverging and/or converging state interests.

The Nile Basin Initiative introduced the Cooperative Framework Agreement (CFA) in 2010 which is not intended to provide specific allocations for use but rather to “establish a framework to promote integrated management, sustainable development, and harmonious utilization of the water resources of the Basin, as well as their conservation and protection for the benefit of present and future generations”.<sup>51</sup> The CFA was drafted to replace the 1959 Nile Waters Agreement which allocated the two countries 85% of the Nile water and create a framework for more equitable use of the resource. In 2010, after years of negotiation, Burundi, Ethiopia, Kenya, Rwanda, Tanzania and Uganda signed the treaty. Though involved throughout the negotiation process, both Egypt and Sudan rejected signing the CFA, citing that the new agreement would violate their historic rights to the river established in the 1959 agreement.<sup>52</sup>

The CFA and the NBI as a whole both work to re-frame the Nile as a collectively shared resource. They lend access back to upstream states rather than to exclusively Egypt and Sudan, thus changing how people across the basin relate with the Nile.

### *The Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam*

In April of 2011, the Ethiopian government unilaterally announced the GERD project. The project actually consist of two dams: one main gravity dam which produces power by building pressure before allowing water to pass to the rest of the river, and one

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<sup>51</sup> Nile Basin Initiative, “Agreement on the Nile River Basin Cooperative Framework”

<sup>52</sup> Michael Wakabi, Fred Oluch and Peter Nyanje, “Egypt, Sudan Part Ways Over Boycott of Nile Treaty”, *The East African* (June 21, 2014). <https://www.theeastafrican.co.ke/tea/news/east-africa/egypt-sudan-part-ways-over-boycott-of-the-nile-treaty--1325598>

saddle dam to maintain the reservoir height.<sup>53</sup> The hydropower dam expected to generate 6 megawatt hours of electricity/power, which would more than double the country's current electric generation capacity<sup>54</sup>. This electricity will be enough to not only electrify all of Ethiopia, but also to export electricity to neighboring countries such as Sudan. The dam will also create a reservoir which is 1700 square meters when full, half the size of lake Tana.<sup>55</sup>

The filling of the dam presented a particular challenge during trilateral discussions on the project. Variations in how quickly or slowly Ethiopia filled the reservoir would greatly impact the water levels downstream during that period. Some researchers project a decrease of water levels in Egypt during the filling period at 25%.<sup>56</sup> The three states agreed on a filling period of 7

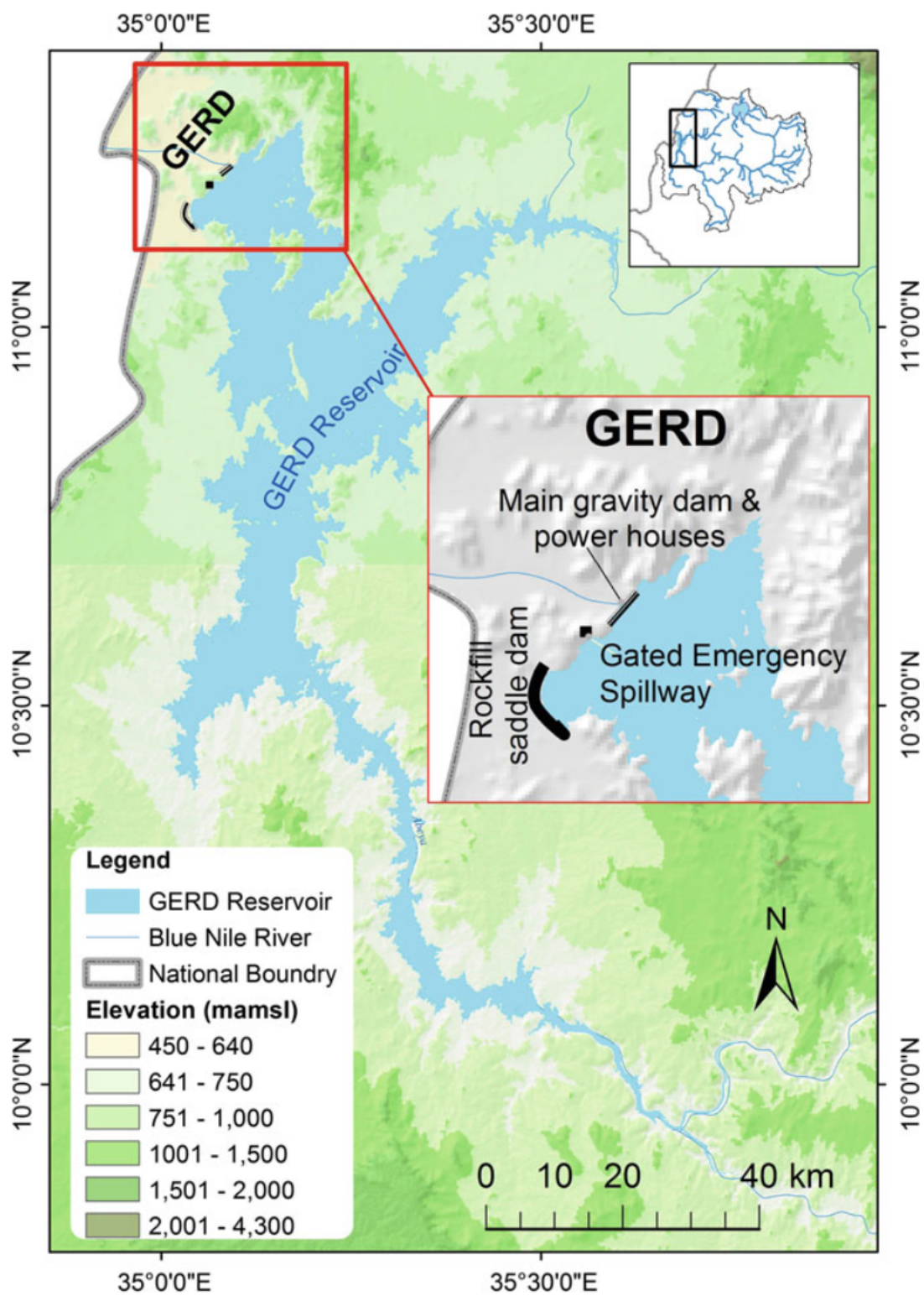
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53 Abteu and Dessu, *Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam*, 85.

54 USAID, "Ethiopia Power Africa Factsheet", Power Africa, 2020. <https://www.usaid.gov/powerafrica/ethiopia>

55 Abteu and Dessu, *Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam*, 88.

56 Michael Asiedu, "The construction of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) and geopolitical tension between Egypt and Ethiopia with Sudan in the mix", *Global Political Trends Center* no. 50 (2018).



**Figure 4 - Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam Reservoir**  
 source: Abtew and Dessu, *Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam*, 91

years and the disagreements have now resolved all but two major points: First who will manage the dam and second, what mechanism will resolve future disputes.<sup>57</sup> The governments reached four major agreements over the course of the GERD talks: 1) the formation of the International Panel of Experts, 2) the signing of the Declaration of Principles by the three heads of state, 3) the meeting of water and irrigation experts on implementing the recommendations of the IPoE, and 4) a water resource modelling study by international consultants.<sup>58</sup> The international panel of experts, consisting of two members from each country and three foreign experts, is still active and issuing recommendations on the project.

The Declaration of Principles (DoP) is a good faith agreement signed by Egyptian President Abdel Fattah El Sisi, former Sudanese President Omar el Bashir and former Ethiopian Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn.<sup>59</sup> The DoP outlines intentions of no-harm, cooperation, reasonable and equitable utilization exchange of information, sovereignty and dam safety. While in principle the DoP is a positive step forward in fostering cooperation along the Blue Nile, the declaration has little to no enforcement provision. For example, the section on settling disputes merely states that “the Three Countries will settle disputes, arising out of the interpretation or implementation of this agreement, amicably through consultation or negotiation in accordance with the principle of good faith” and that if disputes are not settled they may request mediation.<sup>60</sup>

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57 Al Jazeera. “What’s behind the Dispute over Africa’s Largest Dam Project?” Inside Story. YouTube: Al Jazeera English, June 28, 2020. [https://youtu.be/LYrG\\_cOljd4](https://youtu.be/LYrG_cOljd4)

58 Abteu and Dessu, *The Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam on the Blue Nile*, 131.

59 “Agreement on the Declaration of Principles Between Egypt, Ethiopia and Sudan on the GERDP”, Signed Khartoum, March 23, 2015. <https://www.sis.gov.eg/Story/121609/Agreement-on-Declaration-of-Principles-between-Egypt%2C-Ethiopia-and-Sudan-on-the-GERDP?lang=en-us#:~:text=X%20-%20Principle%20of%20Peaceful%20Settlement%20of%20Disputes&text=This%20agreement%20on%20Declaration%20of,and%20the%20Republic%20of%20Sudan>

an.

60 “Agreement Between the United Arab Republic and the Republic

The question of mediation has caused significant disagreement throughout the course of negotiations. The United States was involved in the negotiations beginning in October of 2019 through the Spring of 2020.<sup>61</sup> The US government and the World Bank were both present only as observers, and the Egyptian, Sudanese and Ethiopian states agreed on several points during this time specifically concerning the construction and filling of the dam. However, disagreement came up when the United States invited Egypt, Sudan, and Ethiopia to sign as US-drafted agreement. While Egypt and Sudan supported the agreement, Ethiopia argued that the agreement undermines its sovereign rights and favors Egyptian interests. Now, the African Union, currently chaired by South African President Cyril Ramaphosa, mediates dam negotiations. Without an agreement yet in place, the summer of 2020 saw a particularly rainy season in Ethiopia which resulted in the completion of the first phase of dam filling ahead of schedule.<sup>62</sup> Tensions are high as it is unclear if this filling was exclusively the result of heavy rains or if Ethiopia began the filling of the dam before negotiations were completed.<sup>63</sup>

The arguments made in GERD project and the negotiations which surround it are all historically rooted, and build upon the dam's historical and geographic context. But the GERD also brings to light emotional and ontological connections that Egyptian and

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of Sudan for the Full Utilization of the Nile Waters”, Signed Cairo, November 8, 1959. [https://www.internationalwaterlaw.org/documents/regionaldocs/UAR\\_Sudan1959\\_and\\_Protocol1960.pdf](https://www.internationalwaterlaw.org/documents/regionaldocs/UAR_Sudan1959_and_Protocol1960.pdf)

61 Zeray Yihdego, “International Law Connotations of US ‘mediated’ Nile dam negotiations and outcomes: equitable or arbitrary and coercive reservoir filling? Part II”, *Global Water Forum* (April 22, 2020). <https://globalwaterforum.org/2020/04/22/international-law-connotations-of-us-mediated-nile-dam-negotiations-and-outcomes-equitable-or-arbitrary-and-coercive-reservoir-filling-part-ii/>

62 EgyptToday. “Ethiopia to Start Generating Power from GERD in June 2021 despite Egypt, Sudan’s Rejection,” November 27, 2020. <https://www.egypttoday.com/Article/1/94708/Ethiopia-to-start-generating-power-from-GERD-in-June-2021>

63 Egypt Independent, “Sudan announces sudden decline of Nile waters despite Ethiopia’s denial of dam filling”, *Egypt Independent*, (July 20, 2020).



Ethiopian people have with the Nile. The GERD conflict is therefore one of “broken eye contact”<sup>64</sup> between these ontologies.

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<sup>64</sup> Erlich, Cross and River, 3.

### III. Egypt: Historic Rights

According to the Egyptian government, Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) is an existential threat.<sup>65</sup> The Egyptian state's language around the GERD project is very heated, fluctuating between thinly veiled threats of violence and cries for cooperation between the countries. The idea of resource dependence features heavily in the conversation around the dam, particularly in Egypt.

The water is a physical need for survival, but the Nile exists beyond the borders of its physical banks. It exists in the art, music, and literature—and as these works demonstrate—and is embedded within the Egyptian collective self. One particular style of music, Tarab, articulates these connections and their importance in Egyptian self-understanding. Drawing from work on reading cultural production as theory, I establish a Tarab theory of spatial understanding and use this to illustrate the entanglement of the Nile with Egyptian ontology.<sup>66</sup> By situating the Egyptian relationship with the river as a project of routine retemporalization, I re-contextualize the historic rights argument voiced in the GERD conflict.

#### *Tarab Ontology*

In *Sittin' On Top of the World*, Clyde Woods conceptualizes the blues as more than solely a musical tradition, but also as “a knowledge system indigenous to the United States that is expressed through an ever-expanding variety of cultural, economic,

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65 Roussi, “Row over Dam”, pg.

66 Wright, Willie Jamaal. “As Above, So Below: Anti-Black Violence as Environmental Racism.” *Antipode*, September 24, 2018. <https://doi.org/10.1111/anti.12425>; Clyde Woods, “‘Sittin’ on Top of the World’: The Challenges of Blues and Hip Hop Geography,” in *Black Geographies and the Politics of Place*, ed. Clyde Woods and Katherine McKittrick (South End Press, 2007), 46-81.

political, and social traditions”.<sup>67</sup> He examines the ways that the blues articulated an epistemology and a geography of Black American life. In demonstrating the ways that the Blues conceptualized space, place, time, and belonging Woods lines a path for investigation and interpretation of ways of knowing space that are invisibilized within the western academy. Though the musical style of Tarab and the Blues have their own distinct context and characteristics, I argue that both Tarab and the Blues perform the role of articulating a knowledge system of space and society. I demonstrate how Tarab embodies a comparable explanatory force of the “particular optic through which they viewed and understood the world”, in this case Egyptians and the Nile river.<sup>68</sup>

The word tarab<sup>69</sup> (طرب) has multiple definitions. The term in Arabic refers to a heightened emotional state which has no direct English translation but is most commonly translated as rapture or ecstasy<sup>70</sup> As one Aleppine vocalist put it, "tarab is the feeling you get when you listen to music, and it just makes you want to say aah!"<sup>71</sup> Though an internally experienced emotion, tarab is often externally expressed through such vocalizations or other physical gestures. While the term refers to the emotion it is generally induced by some cultural product. Tarab can be experienced through art or literature but in the majority of cases is induced by music. It is “a state of rapturous enchantment, where time and self dissolve in the music”.<sup>72</sup>

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67 Woods, *Sittin on Top of the World*, 49.

68 Wright, “As Above, So Below”, 9

69 I use ‘tarab’ to indicate the emotion and ‘Tarab’ to indicate the musical style

70 Shannon, Johnathan, H. “Performance and Temporality in Arab Music: Reflections on Tarab” *Cultural Anthropology*, Vol. 18, No. 1 (Feb., 2003), p. 74; Ali Jihad Racy, *Making Music in the Arab World: The Culture and Artistry of Tarab* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 6.

71 Shannon, “Performance and Temporality in Arab Music”, 74

72 Tom Faber. “‘She exists out of time’: Umm Kulthum, Arab music's eternal star”, *The Guardian*, Feb 28, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2020/feb/28/she-exists-out-of-time-umm-kulthum-arab-musics-eternal-star>

Thus, Tarab also refers to a particular style of Arabic music for which the inducement of the tarab emotion played an integral role. This style was most prevalent in urban centers across North Africa and the Levant beginning from the 19<sup>th</sup> century, with roots in ecstatic musical extending back centuries beforehand.<sup>73</sup> Though less frequently performed in the present day, Tarab music has by no means waned in its significance and is still regularly consumed through older recorded works.<sup>74</sup> As the great-grand-niece of renowned singer Umm Kulthum put it “the songs are old, but the music always feels new. It exists outside of time”.<sup>75</sup>

Ali Jihad Racy analyzes Tarab as “sung poetry”, where both elements are critical to unlocking the importance of Tarab.<sup>76</sup> However, Tarab is more than the combination of these two aspects and is the tarab experience created through the interaction of lyrics, music, performance, and audience. Tarab exists neither in the music itself, nor the performer nor the audience, but rather as “the experiential “we” established during music making”.<sup>77</sup> Tarab performances are highly participative, where “There is a sense that listeners cannot help themselves – they are moved to shout, sigh, and wave their arms about”.<sup>78</sup> Tarab performances are built around an ecstatic-feedback model between the performer and the audience, which by reflecting the emotion of tarab back to each other creates a collectively ecstatic experience.<sup>79</sup> Individuals’ external expressions of Tarab within the collective ecstasy of the performance environment “confirm individual claims to cultural authenticity...and operates as a frame for the enactment of conceptions of the

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<sup>73</sup> Racy, *Making Music*, 6

<sup>74</sup> Shannon, “Emotion, Performance and Temporality”,

<sup>75</sup> Faber, “Umm Kulthum”

<sup>76</sup> Racy, *Making Music*, 147

<sup>77</sup> Shannon, “Performance and Temporality in Arab Music”, 80

<sup>78</sup> Shannon, “Performance and Temporality in Arab Music”, 74

<sup>79</sup> Shannon, “Performance and Temporality in Arab Music”, 75

self”.<sup>80</sup> It is important to note that though Tarab is more commonly consumed through recordings and not in the performance environment, individuals still perform external responses to the music through which cultural authenticity is confirmed even outside of the performance setting.

Ali Jihad Racy analyzes this cultural ecology of Tarab music. The poetry of Tarab is highly literary and formalized and can seem removed from daily experience. Unlike the Blues, Tarab is not primarily a working-class musical expression and the performance culture existed more in middle and upper class circles. However, while the content of the song is part of the inducement of ecstasy, the emotional translation of the material through the performer to the audience confirms its emotional legitimacy even if literary nuance is lost.<sup>81</sup> The ecstatic feedback model of Tarab performance is what lends legitimacy to the emotional effectiveness of the music and the poetry; the listener – regardless of their literary dexterity – is confirming the resonance of the emotional content through their performance of physical or auditory ecstatic responses.

The most ecstatic and most common overarching type of Tarab music is amorous. Racy explains that “The love lyrics tend to resonate with the amorous experiences of the listeners. Given the generic mode of depiction ... the lyrics are versatile enough to fit a variety of actual amorous situations. It is said that individuals hear their own love stories in Umm Kulthum’s song lyrics”.<sup>82</sup> Therefore, despite being highly literary, Racy argues that Tarab texts are “emotionally effective not despite, but because of their tendency to

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80 Shannon, “Performance and Temporality in Arab Music”, 74

81 Racy, *Making Music*, 215

82 Racy, *Making Music*, 171

generalize, abstract and stereotype” as it allows for the inclusion a broader range of audience in the Tarab network.<sup>83</sup>

The center of amorous Tarab music is the relationship between the lover and the beloved. The role of the lover is enacted by the performer and by the audience through their ecstatic confirmation. I argue that understanding the effectiveness of the amorous Tarab tradition is useful for conceptualizing Egyptians’ relationship with the Nile for two reasons. First, because depictions of the Nile in Egyptian Tarab follow directly in the amorous tradition of Tarab poetry. Second, because the model of abstraction and evocation to a widely-held emotional experience in the amorous tradition legitimizes Tarab depictions of the Nile as widely-held emotional experiences. It is with this understanding of Tarab as a framework for cultural self-understanding that I analyze Al Nahr Al Khaled *The Eternal River* by Mohamed Abd El Wahab as a conceptual framework for Egyptians’ relationship with the Nile.

### *The Nile, The Eternal River*

Though the poem Al Nahr el Khaled or the *Eternal River* was written by Mahmoud Hassan Ismail, the song is generally attributed to the most well-known performer Mohamed Abd el Wahab.<sup>84</sup> *The Eternal River* begins with an activation of the Nile,<sup>85</sup>

The Nile is a traveler full of wonder, magic,  
scents and shades

مُسافِرٌ زاده الخيالِ والسحرِ والعطرِ والظلالِ

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83 Racy, *Making Music*, 172

84 Intisar Mahmoud Hassan Salem, “Graphic photography in the poetry of Mahmoud Hassan Ismail”, (in Arabic) *مجلة كلية اللغة العربية ببيتاي البارود* 33, no. 10 (2020).

85 Mahmoud Hassan Ismail, *النهر الخالد*, trans. Dr. Mootacem B. Mhiri, Vassar College Africana Studies (2021).

Thirsty while holding in his palms love, art, and beauty	ظمآن والكأس في يديه والحب والفن والجمال
Time grows old and the mountains squander a lifetime	شابت على أرضه الليالي وضيعت عمرها الجبال
While the Nile is still heading home by night and day	ولم يزل ينشدُ الديارَ ويسأل الليل والنهارا
In his love beguiled people wander along his wide banks <sup>86</sup>	والناس في حبه سكارى هاموا على شطه الرحيب

The use of the Nile as a personified subject is a consistent theme throughout Egyptian references to the river. This language evades the human-nature dichotomy, attributing actions and characteristics to the river that are not corporeally consistent but retain metaphysical continuity. A river cannot be thirsty, nor does it have hands, but the image of a thirsty traveler who carries with them water is readily comprehensible to the audience.

This consolidation goes beyond simple natural imagery, but to the incorporation of your emotional self with the river through ecstasy. To be a wave in a body of water, the performer is expressing that indistinguishability between their own heartache and the night water, or between the wind and a metaphysical guide for the disoriented. These lines emphasize the perspective of the performer not as an observer of the Nile, but a companion to it. It is both the river and the Egyptian who can hear what the enlivened wind confides to the palm trees within the Nile setting.

A frequent motif in Tarab is the place where the lover and the beloved meet and assume their respective roles. The amorous setting is a parallel for the performance setting where the audience becomes the lover. This setting is often depicted as idyllic natural settings, a frequent one being a party in a lush garden.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Translation by Dr. Mootacem B. Mhiri, Vassar College, 2021

<sup>87</sup> Racy, *Making Music*, 177

Oh you who bestows eternal life upon time  
and inspires love and song  
Come hither and serve me a drink and let me  
fly merrily like a bird in the Garden

يا واهب الخلد للزمان يا ساقى الحب والأغاني  
هات اسقني واسقني ودعني أهيم كالطير في  
الجنان

In this case the river occupies the role of both the beloved admired at the setting and the amorous setting itself. Music-making and the inducement of tarab are also integrated into the relationship between the lover and the beloved within the song itself.

In his love beguiled people wander along his  
wide banks

والناس في حبه سكارى هاموا على شطه الرحيب

And

Indeed, are those branches or young virgins  
tipsy toed on the wine of sunset  
And that boat gliding, perhaps, with yearning  
or maybe the innocent games of virgins

وأغصن تلك أم صبايا شرين من خمرة الأصيل؟  
وزورق بالحنين سارا أم هذه فرحة العذارى؟

The motif of alcoholic drink is repeated in depictions of the beloved as a *saqi* or wine-server. As Racy describes how “intoxication appears as an adjunct to the amorous condition” and therefore the beloved is serving the state of amorous ecstasy to the performer and the audience.<sup>88</sup> In this instance the Nile is the beloved who provides emotional enchantment through drink, love and song and eternity

Oh you who bestows eternal life upon time  
and inspires love and song

يا واهب الخلد للزمان يا ساقى الحب والأغاني

For the Egyptian audience, the unique temporality of the river is an important part of its presence. As in referenced in the end of the first stanza, the river’s continuity takes on a sense of the incomplete. The river is both aged and eternal, and in a state of constant

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88 Racy, *Making Music*, 149



motion. The juxtaposition of the river's sense of time with the stability of the mountains, the cycle of the night and day, and the brevity of human life lends the Nile particularity and emphasizes its importance.

This sense of cyclical yet eternal time is echoed in the performance of the 'chorus'. The plaintive exclamation "ahhin" is repeated six times before continuing on to the rest of the line.<sup>89</sup>

Oh! How mighty your mystery is, and how  
colossal your wandering enigmatic waves are  
Oh Nile! Oh Mystical magician!

أه على سرك الرهيب وموجك التانه الغريب  
يانيل يا ساحر الغيوب

Ragy describes how the use of repetition in Tarab performance is an act of de-temporalization, where the "experience of the repetition of a musical phrase is never the same but rather cumulative and anticipatory".<sup>90</sup> As the audience loses their own perception of time, they become immersed within a seemingly eternal cyclical musical phrase, situating themselves within the movement of the river. These "processes of repetition and variation and the play between infinity and finitude, openness and closure, unity and diversity, circle and line" just as the river does.<sup>91</sup>

The closing of a repeated phrase, or the qafila, provides the audience's return from an altered temporal experience or the "beyond"<sup>92</sup> back into everyday linear time. The qafila is a particular moment in inducing tarab because of the "double disjuncture in time"<sup>93</sup> where the audience experiences both joining with the river in eternity and then the

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89 Mohamed Abd el Wahab, "El Nahr El Khaled", *Mazzika Group*, 1976.  
<https://open.spotify.com/track/2QbjwBWxe1h3bAM3uFficE?si=96b4cf2078c040e5>

90 Shannon, "Performance and Temporality in Arab Music", 86

91 Shannon, "Performance and Temporality in Arab Music", 86

92 Shannon, "Performance and Temporality in Arab Music", 87

93 Shannon, "Performance and Temporality in Arab Music", 87

loss of that eternity through the passage of time itself. In the case of *The Eternal River*, the audience flows from the endless exclamation into veneration of the river: How mighty your mystery is, and how colossal your wandering enigmatic waves are. Oh Nile! Oh Mystical magician!

### *The New Nile and the Egyptian Self*

The eternality of the river connection in Egyptian ontology is visible in the ‘Historic rights’ argument which the Egyptian government and Egyptian people articulate. Essentially this is the idea that Egypt has always had rights to the water of the Nile, they right now have rights to the water of the Nile, and therefore they should continue to have those same rights in perpetuity. Anything less than what is already allotted to them is theft, and any attempts to control what is their water is a threat. The historic rights argument is critiqued for being based on the 1929 and 1959 agreements as I discuss in Chapter 2, and for perpetuating Egypt’s hegemonic attempts to exert complete and exclusive control of the Nile and its water. The purpose of this is not to evaluate whether Egypt’s historic rights argument is correct or if the state’s actions are just, but rather to contextualise this argument within an understanding of Egyptian societies and individuals’ sense of self and social belonging.

While the state’s legal argument of historic rights is based off the negotiations of the last century, I argue that historic rights for the Egyptian individual and collective extends beyond those agreement both emotionally and temporally. Historic rights signify a project of routine retemporalization, where Egyptians’ connection to the river extends into an indefinite past, present and future. As articulated through Tarab, Egyptians exhibit

a sense of self that exists outside the bounds of contemporary time. As one social media user says “Defend the Nile Egypt. Defend your past, present and future”, placing the dam within a continuous flow of history.<sup>94</sup> Likewise, another use states that “the coming days and weeks are an interval in the history of the dam and also a comma in the life and future of the Egyptian people”.<sup>95</sup> The sense of continuity is embedded within the continuity of the Nile, Egyptians have never experienced a reality without the river. In this way Egyptian ontology is de-temporalized, operating on a fluid timescale.<sup>96</sup> However Egyptian temporality cannot simply be understood as a byproduct of some static Egyptian cultural truth. This de-temporalization, the eternality of the Nile-Egypt relationship, is constantly rearticulated through the historic rights narrative. Each invocation of historic rights is an act of re-temporalizing Egyptian society, constructing and fixing Egyptian ontology to the river.

Gebresenbet and Wondemagegnehu reframe the Egyptian state’s responses to the GERD from “security as survival” to “security as being”.<sup>97</sup> They argue that states, like individuals, seek a sense of self-identity and biographical continuity, not just material or resource security. The authors describe the historic rights invocation as an “identity-stabilizing routine” that secures Egyptian-ness as relational to the Nile before, now and forever.

This argument applies beyond the state to Egyptian individuals as well. To the Egyptian individual, the Nile exists as a part of the collective self. The river takes

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<sup>94</sup> TaRek (@tareq\_a25), “Defend the Nile Egypt,” Tweet, April 30, 2021

<sup>95</sup> Khaled Mahmoud (@khaledmahmoued1), “The Coming Days and Weeks”, Tweet, April 26, 2021

<sup>96</sup> For more information on Egyptian temporality On Time: Technology and Temporality in Modern Egypt by On Barak

<sup>97</sup> Gebresenbet and Wondemagegnehu, “New Dimensions”, 2

corporeal form as a traveler or a wine-server. The individual takes natural form as wave or wind. Together they transcend time and simultaneously experience it as linear and as cyclically eternal. Historic rights then are not just rights to the water in the river because forebears negotiated a treaty that dictates such; historic rights signify the right to continue to experience an Egyptian self that exists beyond the contemporary moment. In an article in the largest Egyptian newspaper Al-Ahram titled “From Umm Kulthum and Abd el Wahab to Mounir and Shereen ... Egyptians chant the great river in their songs”, Said Mahmoud Salam writes that: “The Renaissance Dam crisis has revealed the extent to which Egyptians are so attached and connected to [the Nile] as a lifeline that they have sung so much that they see it not only as a river that flows well, but as a state of conscience, to which people go to enjoy its banks, and at which lovers sit”.<sup>98</sup>

Tarab music articulates the way that the Nile river is nested within Egyptian sense of self. The performance of tarab connects individuals’ emotional responses to a wider-emotional experience, thus building an Egyptian ontology of relational emotionality. The river is not only present within these emotional relationships, but itself provides the means for that emotional connection. The Nile thus exists within Egyptians’ individual and collective ontology. The GERD’s re-producing of the river thus creates a sense of ontological *In*-security, which is resisted through security-seeking routines like historic rights. But while producing ontological insecurity in some, the is also a grounding-site for new ontologies in others.

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98 Said Mahmoud Salam, “من أم كلثوم وعبدالوهاب حتى منير وشيرين.. أنشودة حب غناها المصريون للنهر العظيم”, *Al Ahram* (June 13, 2013). <https://gate.ahram.org.eg/News/358857.aspx> (in Arabic)

#### IV. Ethiopia: Renaissance

I argue that the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam anchors the Nile into the idea of an Ethiopian Renaissance. My focus is not on evaluating the necessity or likelihood of this so-called rebirth. Instead, I examine the ways that Ethiopians produce the idea of the Renaissance and the role of the dam-river system in that co-production. Where the GERD is an interruption point in Egyptian ontological security around the Nile, the dam as “an anchor to Ethiopia’s changing ontological security” (1). To understand this I will examine ways in which popular discourse produces Ethiopia’s ontological shift: 1) how buying bonds incorporates the dam connects the dam to individual Ethiopians 2) how collective financing roots the dam in resistance narratives and 3) how invoking the past establishes the river as part of the Ethiopian ontological future.

Between the commissioning of the US Bureau of Reclamation to report on potential hydropower developments on the Nile from 1954 to 1964 and the actualization of the dam was a difficult period in Ethiopian history. For several decades Ethiopia now has had a reputation as one of the poorest countries in the world, with a poverty rate of 24% in 2016.<sup>99</sup> Recurrent El-Niño induced droughts over the several decades have caused high rates of crop failure and even famine in regions of the country, most notably in 1983-85, 1991-93, 1997-98, and 2015-2018.<sup>100</sup> Civil war lasting from 1974 to 1991 between the Ethiopian state and Ethiopian separatist groups culminated in the creation of an independent Eritrean state. This time also saw the transition through multiple state

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99 The World Bank, “Ethiopia Poverty Assessment: Poverty Rate Declines, Despite Challenges” (April 16, 2020). <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/ethiopia/publication/ethiopia-poverty-assessment-poverty-rate-declines-despite-challenges>

100 Getachew Alem Mera, “Drought and its impacts in Ethiopia”, *Weather and Climate Extremes* 22 (2018), 2.

formations, from Ethiopian empire to a Marxist-Leninist regime lasting from 1974 to 1991, and then the formation of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia in 1994.<sup>101</sup>

While these hardships obstructed progress and prosperity, Ethiopia has a rich past, and present. Ethiopians take great pride in the ancient roots of their history, and in their long-standing independence. Aside from a brief occupation (1936-1941) by fascist Italy during World War II, Ethiopia was never colonized by Europeans and was a symbol throughout the continent of a free African nation. I argue that the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam is part of Ethiopians' reclamation of their own narrative by reaching beyond the present. As one social media user states: "we Ethiopians should focus on 'how can we ensure the sovereignty and prosperity of Ethiopia?' instead of the 'the country is about to collapse!'"<sup>102</sup> I explore the ways that Ethiopians use the dam to reach into the past and nest the river into the collective future.

### *My Dam*

A point of pride for Ethiopians is that the GERD has been financed entirely by Ethiopia and Ethiopians. Ethiopian banks, the Ethiopian government, and public financing programs such as bonds sales and lotteries have so far been able to finance the 4.8-billion-dollar project.<sup>103</sup> The Development Bank of Ethiopia distributed bonds which

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101 Edmund Keller. "Making and Remaking State and Nation in Ethiopia" in *Borders, Nationalism and the African State* ed. René Larémont, 87-134. Rienner Publishers, 2005; As of the spring of 2021, ethnic conflict between the Ethiopian military and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) has escalated dramatically with widespread violence and displacement in the region. As it is still unfolding, It is still unclear what impacts the situation in Tigray may have on the GERD project. Relationships and tensions between ethnic groups in Ethiopia historically and in the modern day is a complex issue which and I am unable to include within the scope of this thesis

<sup>102</sup> Seyoum Teshome, "The collapse of Ethiopia", Facebook post, April 27, 2021.

<sup>103</sup> Wossenu Abtew and Dessu, *The Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam on the Blue Nile*, 164

are available in denominations of 25 up to 1 million Ethiopian Birr<sup>104</sup> (0.58 USD to 23,364 USD) for citizens within the country and foreigners of Ethiopian origin. The vast majority of bond sales were to individual citizens, as shown in the table. The availability of dam bonds to individuals of a wide range of incomes has enabled even those with very little social power to feel ownership over the project and a personal investment in the outcome. As the Ethiopian Foreign Minister states in a letter to the UN Security Council “GERD is a national project for which Ethiopians from all walks of life have put their meagre resources with the dream that it will help them overcome abject poverty”.<sup>105</sup>

In addition to bond sales, the government undertook several fundraising campaigns such as advertising partnerships with private and state-owned companies, on mobile credit cards and billboards, and a national lottery. As part of an effort to reach Ethiopians across different areas of the country, the GERD cup or trophy made its way to different regions where parades and musical performances collect funds for the project.<sup>106</sup> The act of paying money for the dam project creates a direct connection between the GERD and Ethiopian people. One social media user puts it that ” ...As an Ethiopian, I will see money from my childhood to my employer’s money from Shirafi’s coins. So the dam is “mine” with full heart.”<sup>107</sup> This sentiment is further exemplified by the #ItIsMyDam campaigns on social media in February and March of 2020, with the hashtag still widely in use into 2021.<sup>108</sup>

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104 Wossenu Abtew and Dessu, *The Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam on the Blue Nile*, 165

105 Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, Ministry of Foreign Affairs letter to the President of the United Nations Security Council, May 14, 2020

106 Abtew and Dessu, *Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam*, 165

107 Ayelew B. Dejen, “Thousands of world countries”, Facebook post in Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (#GERD) ታላቁ የኢትዮጵያ ሕዳሴ ግድብ 🇪🇹🇲🇵🇳🇪🇵🇲🇵🇳🇪🇵, May 6, 2021.

108 Gebresenbet and Wondemagegnehu, “New Dimensions”, 12

The sense of ownership between individual Ethiopians articulate about the dam connects the Ethiopian individual to the Ethiopian collective self. #ItIsMyDam is a powerful because of its nature as a publicly shared statement which allows one to participate in an wider



Figure 5 - Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam Bond  
source: Zelalem Girma, "Tread to Finalize GERD"

Table 11.1 GERD bond sell by category (Tesfaye 2016; original source GERD Council, April 2016)

Source category	Bond purchase (\$ US, 2017)	Percent
Public and private employees	144,000,000	47
Businesses	57,600,000	19
Diaspora	21,600,000	7
Farmers	28,800,000	9
Others	54,000,000	18
Total	306,000,000	100

Figure 6 - GERD Bond Sales by Category  
source: Abteu and Dessu, Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, 166



articulation of cultural ontology. Both the public statement and the act of purchasing a bond or contributing funds to the GERD project are acts of confirmation of the connection between Ethiopian people, the dam and the river.

“The whole Ethiopia people can contribute in supporting the dam starting from 50- birr bond buying. This means the dam is the project of the whole Ethiopia community. Therefore, it is the home of all Ethiopians. For instance, if you ask me who deserves the grand Ethiopia renaissance dam or who is the owner of the dam...it is the property of the Ethiopia people...its ours. Therefore, from all directions of the country the people contribute for the dam. Abbay<sup>109</sup> is our common home. We live in the same roof”<sup>110</sup>

Buying bonds creates a direct link between people and the river, and creates a new Ethiopian ontology which merges the river with existing parts of that collective self, namely resistance to external oppression.

### *Financing Resistance*

The collective financing structure for the GERD was not the initial plan, but a response to the Egyptian state’s consistent efforts to block infrastructure projects upstream. Egypt’s lobbying in the United Nations and seeking support from the World Bank and IMF left the Ethiopian state with no other choice than to source funds from within the Ethiopian community.<sup>111</sup> The resultant choice to build the dam through collective financing mechanism served not only to connect individual Ethiopians to the

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109 Abbay is the Amharic name for the Nile river

<sup>110</sup> Shalemu Seyoum, “Does Dam Development Brings Inter-Community Linkage?: Grand Renaissance Dam of Ethiopia as a Case in Point”, *Abyssinia Journal of Business and Sciences* 3, no. 1 (2018).

<sup>111</sup> Gebresenbet and Wondemagegnehu, “New Dimensions”, 11

dam and then to the river, but also as a recall to anti-colonial resistance narratives. Most major infrastructure projects in Africa have been financed by Western institutions such as the World Bank or the IMF, or increasingly by China, leaving governments highly indebted to foreign entities.<sup>112</sup> In Ethiopia's case, the IMF classified the risk of overall debt distress in 2019 to be High with a government debt of 59% of the gross domestic product (GDP) in 2020.<sup>113</sup>

Achille Mbembe argues that the Western debt-financing structures undermine state sovereignty, specifically in the African context. He describes structural adjustment programs – where foreign organizations lend money to governments under certain conditions, generally the deregulation of government institutions, services and markets – as a relationship of “fractionated sovereignty”.<sup>114</sup> This structure undermines the legitimacy of the indebted state by transferring power to external and hidden actors, namely the crediting institutions. Not only is the state no longer able to make decisions about governance, but the actual decision-makers (banks or foreign governments) are not accountable to the people. Mbembe emphasizes that this is not simply a state of re-colonization, but that there are characteristics in common namely the weakening of internal institutions and the transfer of power to external actors.<sup>115</sup>

In Ethiopia specifically this relationship of fractionated sovereignty is clearly stated. A report from the World Bank on Aid and Reform in Ethiopia says: “Foreign aid has recently played a critical role in implementing first-generation reforms, and in

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<sup>112</sup> Barclay Ballard, “Bridging Africa’s Infrastructure Gap”, *World Finance*, (April 20, 2018).  
<https://www.worldfinance.com/infrastructure-investment/project-finance/bridging-africas-infrastructure-gap>

<sup>113</sup> International Monetary Fund, “The Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia: Staff Report for Article IV Consultation and Requests for a Three-Year Arrangement Under the Extended Credit Facility and an Arrangement Under the Extended Fund Facility— Debt Sustainability Analysis” (December 11, 2019), 2.

<sup>114</sup> Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 74

<sup>115</sup> Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 74

nudging the Government to undertake deeper reforms regarding parastatals, finance and trade than it was initially willing to contemplate”.<sup>116</sup> This undermining of sovereignty in Ethiopia is felt not only by the state, but is echoed by Ethiopian citizens. “All the westerners say and do is to create a government that is their missionary servant in Ethiopia and to govern us. Therefore, what every Ethiopian should do is to take a consistent stand on the sovereignty and prosperity of Ethiopia”.<sup>117</sup>

Ethiopians articulate the GERD as that stand on sovereignty and prosperity. After being left out of treaties throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century and blocked by the Egyptian state from development along the river, even the act of using of the Nile water is another embodiment of Ethiopian resistance narratives. As the Ethiopian Foreign Minister writes, historically “Ethiopia was expected to simply generate and deliver the water, but never to touch it”<sup>118</sup>. Collective participation in this resistance at the level of the individual is performed both through the purchase of bonds and the use of statements of reclamation such as #ItIsMyDam which serve to connect Ethiopians to the river and the river to Ethiopian resistance. Moreover, by connecting the river to the histories of resistance, Ethiopians embed the Nile into the idea of the Ethiopian Renaissance.

### *The New Adwa*

Ethiopia is the only African nation aside from Liberia that Europeans were never able to colonize. Resistance to subjugation is therefore embedded within Ethiopian

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116 Berhanu Abegaz, “Aid and Reform in Ethiopia”, *Aid and Reform in Africa Project of the World Bank* 35725 (1999)

117 Teshome, Seyoum. “The collapse of Ethiopia”, Facebook post, April 27, 2021.

118 Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, Ministry of Foreign Affairs letter to the President of the United Nations Security Council, May 14, 2020

collective memory and identity. Maimire Mennasemay defines collective memory as “the past living in and informing ... common and inter-subjective meanings. It is embedded in customs, myths, beliefs, institutions, and social practices; it is expressed in stories of struggles, of victories and defeats; it narrates the people’s hopes and aspirations and the unfulfilled promises of the past.....[It] is an essential element of ...individual or collective identity”.<sup>119</sup> He argues that the battle of Adwa is a symbol of that collective memory of resistance. The battle of Adwa is a repeated motif in Ethiopian popular discourse about the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam.

At the height of European colonization of the African continent, Italy was in the process of trying to exert control over Ethiopia. The Treaty of Wichale in May of 1889 was an agreement between Emperor Menelik II and Italy which gave Italy control over the region of Eritrea and provided Ethiopia with a much-needed loan from the Italian government.<sup>120</sup> However, the treaty also included an article which stated that Ethiopia could consult with Italy in conducting international affairs; the Italian translation of this line read that Ethiopia *must* consult with Italy in conducting international affairs, thereby establishing Ethiopia a protectorate of the Italian empire without their consent. After Menelik’s abrogation of the article in 1890 and the entire treaty in 1893 both sides began preparing for military confrontation.<sup>121</sup>

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119 Maimire Mennasemay, “Ethiopian History and Critical Theory: The Case of Adwa” in *The Battle of Adwa: Reflections on Ethiopia’s Historic Victory Against European Colonialism* ed. Paulos Milkias and Getachew Metaferia. (Algora, 2005), 260-61

<sup>120</sup> Theodore M. Vestal, “Reflections on the Battle of Adwa and Its Significance for Today” in *The Battle of Adwa: Reflections on Ethiopia’s Historic Victory Against European Colonialism* ed. Paulos Milkias and Getachew Metaferia (Algora, 2005), 24

<sup>121</sup> The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, “Battle of Adwa: Italy-Ethiopia [1896]”, Encyclopedia Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/event/Battle-of-Adwa>

However, on March 1, 1896 the Italian invaders suffered a crushing defeat from a nearly 100,000-strong Ethiopian peasant army under the command of Menelik II.<sup>122</sup> The Ethiopians' victory was so complete that it assured Ethiopia's continued independence from western colonization. The single-day battle was proof that Ethiopia "had the power to defy any European imperialists".<sup>123</sup> Mennasemay describes how:

"Adwa has however resisted being reduced to a fact that merely inhabit the past precisely because, unlike the official history that has reduced it to a fact, collective memory has invested it with a singularity that has made it the historical happening par excellence that every Ethiopian, educated or not, knows as an event that surpasses all other events, and as a promise, however inchoately it is felt, of a different Ethiopia that is still unrealized"<sup>124</sup>

Government officials – including the President of the Republic, the Minister of Water, Irrigation and Electricity, and the Minister of Science and Education – have all compared the completion of the GERD to the victory at Adwa.<sup>125</sup> The comparison is drawn by those in power as well as by Ethiopian citizens. In the Facebook group Ethiopian Engineers for GERD, a member writes "As #Adwa enlightened Africa for Independence from colonizers, #GERD will enlighten Africa from Poverty and Darkness too. #ItIsMyDam #Ethiopia #Africa #FillTheDam".<sup>126</sup> The GERD is set up as the realization of Adwa's promise of a reborn Ethiopia.

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<sup>122</sup> Vestal, "Reflections on Battle of Adwa", 28

<sup>123</sup> Paulos Milkias and Getachew Metaferia, ed. *The Battle of Adwa: Reflections on Ethiopia's Historic Victory Against European Colonialism* (Algora, 2005), 29

<sup>124</sup> Mennasemay, "Ethiopian History and Critical Theory", 261

<sup>125</sup> Gebresenbet and Wondemagegnehu, "New Dimensions", 10

<sup>126</sup> Abiy Ayelew Admassu, "As #Adwa enlightened Africa", Facebook post in Ethiopian Engineers for GERD, April 30, 2021.

Furthermore, once the dam is built on the river it in fact becomes part of the river. As such, it is not just the GERD that is set up as the realization a different Ethiopia but also the river that becomes “the machinery of growth”.<sup>127</sup> The building of the GERD is not only compared to the Adwa victory because of its role in Ethiopian uplift, but also as a form of resistance through asserting relationship with the Nile. Through the invocation of the past either generally or specific historical touchpoints such as the battle of Adwa, individual Ethiopians continually integrate the Nile into the Ethiopian individual and collective identity.

The reflection of time and re-imagining of Ethiopia is made possible only through the river. Ethiopian discourse around the dam hinges around the present moment; the past is a framework for envisioning the future. The Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam embodies the vision of an Ethiopian rebirth and the river as the key to that new future.<sup>128</sup> A social media user writes that: “The great Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (The Grand Ethiopian RENAISSANCE Dam) I will see it as an official as a project. The message of the dam is that we can handle, the stamp of our union, the sunrise of tomorrow”.<sup>129</sup> In the new Ethiopian ontology, the GERD is realization of an unfulfilled Ethiopian promise.

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<sup>127</sup> White, *Organic Machine*, 76

<sup>128</sup> Haggai Erlich, “Professor Haggai Erlich: Ethiopia Need to do more than Celebrate Adwa Once a Year; Egypt Must ....”, *Ethiopian Broadcasting Corporation*, YouTube (March 2, 2021).  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v3zEBIZ7SZ8>

<sup>129</sup> Ayelew B. Dejen, “Thousands of world countries”, Facebook post in Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (#GERD) ታላቁ የኢትዮጵያ ሕዳሴ ግድብ 🇪🇹🇬🇪🇵🇬🇪, May 6, 2021.

## V. Conclusion

In this thesis I examine the ways in which the GERD produces and reproduces socionatural relationships between the Nile and Nile societies, and what these changing relationships can tell us about transboundary water conflicts. I find that socionature and ontological security are frameworks that, when read together, lend new insight to how and why conflict arises. Our socionatures are part of our ontologies, and it requires recognizing this to move forward.

I first outline the socionatural process of the river over time. Dams are part of changing the river's flow and time, and those changes in turn re-make the relationships people have with the river and with each other. As the river and its technologies evolved, so did the ways people interacted with and imagined it. And as these relationships with the river evolved, so did their relationships with each other. Treaties and negotiations are also ways of re-producing the river, and by claiming the river's resources actors also laid claim to their own ontological connection, sometimes at the expense of others.

These socionatural connections are deeply emotional, and individual's emotional realities are part of the construction of their individual ontologies. We see this expressed through Tarab, where the audience and the river are enjoined through the production of ecstasy. Individuals experience ecstasy and then through external performances like words or gestures confirm their experience of ecstasy to others. Ethiopian individuals connect to the river through the purchase of bonds. The purchase of the bond, like the performance of ecstasy, is an external expression of that new internal connection between the river and the individual. But the very nature of a bond as collective financing mechanism means the individual is participating in a larger collective experience, like a

Tarab performance. The river is therefore connected by individuals to the collective through those external performances.

These performances are also part of a project of re-temporalizing the Egyptian and Ethiopian collectives. *Al Nahr El Khaled* illustrates the fluid sense of time that the river shares with Egyptian people. The Nile gives eternity to time and also to Egypt. Thus the historic rights argument is a performance that re-produces that experienced eternity. Rather than an eternal connection to the river, Ethiopian re-temporalization relies instead on invoking historic memories of resistance. By calling on collective memory of resistance, Ethiopians nest the river into their ontology of the future. Both of these projects draw on the old to re-create the new, and both of these projects work with the river to do so. These projects are not the same, and Egyptians' and Ethiopians' sociocultural relationships to the river are not the same. Linton and Budds describe this phenomenon as them having different 'waters'. The hydrosocial cycle is thus a tool not only for grasping the water network, but also for allowing for mutual understanding and mediating between different readings of water.<sup>130</sup>

### *Looking forward*

As I touch on in Chapter 2, the Nile Basin Initiative is a partnership between the governments of 10 basin countries: Burundi, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Egypt, Ethiopia, Kenya, Rwanda, South Sudan, The Sudan, Tanzania and Uganda, with Eritrea participating as an observer. This initiative works on projects of environmental

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<sup>130</sup> Linton and Budds, "Hydrosocial Cycle", 178



research, water resources management and transboundary cooperation. Their 2017-2027

10-Year Strategy has 6 main goals:

- 1) Enhance availability and sustainable utilization and management of transboundary water resources of the Nile Basin
- 2) Enhance hydropower development in the basin and increase interconnectivity of electric grids and power trade
- 3) Enhance efficient agricultural water use and promote a basin approach to address the linkages between water and food security
- 4) Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of water related ecosystems across the basin
- 5) Improve basin resilience to climate change impacts
- 6) Strengthen transboundary water governance in the Nile Basin.<sup>131</sup>

The goals of the NBI, and the work of the NBI in general, is successful in its understanding of the Nile Basin as an interdependent network. The slogan at the end of the 10-Year Strategy report states “One River One People One Vision”. This idea is embodied through the strategy objectives themselves. Goals 1, 2 and 3 relating to water, food and energy security all take the approach that the outputs of the river as a common research should be distributed across the basin according to needs. Emphasis is placed on the collaborative nature of basin actions, for example in Goal 3 that “Together, we grow more crops with less water, make the most of rainfall and trade food across the basin – so that there is enough food on the table of everyone”.<sup>132</sup>

The work of the NBI frames the Nile Basin as a network, where no actor can be isolated. This river network must work in harmonious and fluid motion, where inputs of food, energy, water, and information are relational rather than static resources. As the report states, “Underpinning all the strategic priorities is the increase in cooperation between member states and dialogue with NBI’s broader stakeholders as well as regional

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131 Nile Basin Initiative, “NBI Strategy 2017-2027”

132 Nile Basin Initiative, “NBI Strategy 2017-2027”, 7

actors in the basin” indicating their broader vision of strengthening connections between actors in the network as a means for strengthening actors themselves.<sup>133</sup>

However, while the NBI’s does have an understanding of the Nile as a fluid and mutually dependent collective, what they do not include in their framework is how relationships with the river are a part of ontological securities in the basin. This is evident in the failure of the Cooperative Framework Agreement (CFA) to be adopted by all the actors in the basin. Egypt specifically rejects the CFA citing their historic rights, which I have explained to be not only a resource argument but also an ontological and



**Figure 7 - Nile Citizenship Process**  
 source: The Nile Project <http://nileproject.org/about/>

socionatural one.

Like the Nile Basin Initiative, the Nile Project sees the interconnected nature of the Nile is as critical to making meaningful steps forward. However, what the Nile Project does that the NBI does not is to include cultural and ontological connections with the river, and work at the scale of individuals instead of states. The Nile Project works through 3 main project areas: 1) music 2) university programs and workshops and 3)

133 Nile Basin Initiative, “NBI Strategy 2017-2027”, 2

networking scholars and civil society leaders across the basin. They focus on the importance of dialogue, trust, creativity, and cooperation at the citizen level, rather than just for state leaders and negotiators. Their model for Nile citizenship includes personal connection across borders, as well as with the river itself.

The Nile Project also emphasizes the centrality of cultural connections with the river and their role in cultural self-conception. This is especially evident in the musical initiative, where musicians from 11 countries come together to not only learn about each other's traditions but also find connections and harmonies in both the music and their relationships to the Nile. As they put it "On the surface, the Nile Project blends traditional musical idioms into one seamless Nile sound. But look a little further and you'll begin to see musicians collective modeling contemporary organizational ideas such as systems thinking, network theory, and participatory leadership".<sup>134</sup> Musicians don't leave their own cultures or backgrounds behind, but rather work to find ways of blending and building a heterogenous network. The music was never intended as the end goal, but rather a blueprint "for new ways Nile citizens can organize themselves to make the Nile more sustainable".<sup>135</sup>

Ultimately the Nile Project still operates at a small scale and building trust is a task that requires time. With the GERD project ongoing, the Nile Project seems a small fish in a very large reservoir, but the blueprint they offer is a hopeful one. As I demonstrate in the chapters on Egypt and Ethiopia, the conflict of the GERD is continually re-produced through history-invoking routines. But routines can change, and from new routines can form new ontologies. These ontologies by no means need to be

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134 The Nile Project, *Annual Report 2016-2017*, 10.

135 The Nile Project, *Annual Report 2016-2017*, 10.

separated from their pasts or their individual cultural identities. But like musicians in a band, and as actors in a network, together they can find a new sound that “shifts the Nile conversation from a divisive hydro-political argument to an opportunity for transboundary cooperation”.<sup>136</sup>

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<sup>136</sup> The Nile Project, *Annual Report 2016-2017*, 6.

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## Appendix A

قصيدة "النهر الخالد" – ترجمها الى الانجليزية - الدكتور معتصم بالله المهيري  
The poem "The Eternal River" – Translation to English – Dr. Mootacem B'allah Mhiri

The Nile is a traveler full of wonder, magic,  
scents and shades  
Thirsty while holding in his palms love, art, and  
beauty  
Time grows old and the mountains squander a  
lifetime  
While the Nile is still heading home by night and  
day  
In his love beguiled people wander along his wide  
banks  
Oh! How mighty your mystery is, and how  
colossal your wandering enigmatic waves are  
Oh Nile! Oh Mystical magician!  
Oh you who bestows eternal life upon time and  
inspires love and song  
Come hither and serve me a drink and let me fly  
merrily like a bird in the Garden  
I wish I were a wave pouring out my heartache to  
your night  
Or a companion to the wind, flooding the  
disoriented with light  
And if I were by love struck and forsaken, your  
nightly gusts would heal me  
Oh! How mighty your mystery is, and how  
colossal your wandering enigmatic waves are  
Oh Nile! Oh Mystical magician!  
Along your beautiful banks I overheard what the  
wind confided to the palm trees  
And I saw the birds swimming and schooling the  
bushes about romance  
Indeed, are those branches or young virgins tipsy  
toed on the wine of sunset  
And that boat gliding, perhaps, with yearning or  
maybe the innocent games of virgins  
It sails while igniting the fire of your love in me  
Oh! How mighty your mystery is, and how  
colossal your wandering enigmatic waves are  
Oh Nile! Oh Mystical magician!

مُسافرٌ زاده الخيالِ والسحر والعطر والظلالُ  
ظمانُ والكأس في يديه والحب والفن والجمالُ  
شابت على أرضه الليالي وضيعت عمرها الجبالُ  
ولم يزل ينشدُ الديارَ ويسأل الليل والنهارا  
والناس في حبه سكارى هاموا على شطه الرحيبِ  
آه على سرك الرهيبِ وموجك التانه الغريبِ  
يانيل يا ساحر الغيوب  
يا واهب الخلدِ للزمانِ يا ساقى الحب والأغاني  
هات اسقني واسقني ودعني أهيم كالطير في الجنان  
يا ليتني موجة فأحكي إلى لياليك ما شجاني  
وأغتدي للرياح جارا وأسكب النور للحيارى  
فإن كواني الهوى وطارا كانت رياح الدجى طبيبي  
آه على سرك الرهيبِ وموجك التانه الغريبِ  
يانيل يا ساحر الغيوب  
سمعت في شطك الجميل ما قالت الريح للنخيل  
يسبح الطيرُ أم يغني ويشرح الحب للخميل؟  
وأغصنُ تلك أم صبايا شربن من خمرة الأصيل؟  
وزورقُ بالحنين سارا أم هذه فرحة العذارى؟  
تجري وتجري هواك نارا حملتُ من سحرها نصيبي  
آه على سرك الرهيبِ وموجك التانه الغريبِ  
يانيل يا ساحر الغيوب

