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## Continuity and Rupture in Ethiopia under the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front

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# The Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam: Media Narratives and State Building

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## Abstract

This article explores how Ethiopian mainstream media portray the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), perhaps the most relevant materialisation of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF)'s developmental state approach. Through critical discourse analysis of a sample of articles from private media outlets from 2013 to 2020, we map the plurality of narratives employed by the media to represent the GERD and the Nile river. We analyse how changes and continuities in these narratives are related to the process of state building in Ethiopia, and to the unfolding of political events in the Easter-Nile basin. We conclude by pointing at how the continuity in the narratives about the GERD resonate with state-building discourses and strategies under different political regimes.

**Keywords:** GERD, state-building, media, Ethiopia, Nile, hydropolitics.

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

On 6 February 2011, the cover page of *Fortune*, one of the longest running English newspapers in Ethiopia, opened with the headline "Project X: Turning the energy tide". It conveyed the plan to construct Africa's largest hydroelectric power dam on the Blue Nile, the main tributary to the Nile River. The official inauguration of the project, which later came to be known as the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), was televised live by the state-run Ethiopian Television (ETV) on 2 April 2011. Since then Ethiopia has been through some of the most transformative events since the Ethiopian People

Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) took power in 1991: the death of Meles Zenawi in 2012; the relatively smooth transition of power to Hailemariam Desalegn, apparently consolidated by the almost uncontested elections of 2015; the eruption of protests in the Oromia and Amhara regions in 2016; the rise to power of Abiy Ahmed; and the downfall of the system erected by the once TPLF dominated EPRDF, eventually spiralling into open conflict between the TPLF and the Ethiopian National Defence Force (ENDF) in 2020. And yet the GERD, perhaps the most imposing symbol and materialization of Meles' developmental state ideology, has continued to attract national support and consensus, in an otherwise increasingly polarized political confrontation between competing ideas of Ethiopia, and its future.

Rivers have been used as metaphors, symbols, or key storytelling elements to define and illustrate the idea of national identity (Cusack 2010). Water infrastructures like dams play a key role in governments' strategies of state and nation building, enforcing both the symbolic and material presence of the state on its territory, often in the name of modernity and development (Swyngedouw 2015; Menga, Swyngedouw 2018). The media are one of the most relevant spaces where such strategies are crafted, presented, and legitimated (Menga 2017). Media influence goes even beyond the domestic sphere, perpetuating "the view that water is an increasingly likely source of violent conflict" (Zeitoun, Mirumachi 2008: 298) and, in the case of the Nile basin, contributing to the securitization of water issues and to diplomatic tensions among riparian states (Hussein, Grandi 2017). In spite of those claims, comprehensive studies on media narratives and roles in hydro-nationalism and hydro-politics are still at an infant stage. For instance, one of the most exhaustive and multi-disciplinary collections of studies on the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (Yihdego, Rieu-Clarke, Cascão 2018) does not include such analysis.

We wish to contribute to fill this gap by exploring how the media contribute to reproduce or contest the state's official discourse on the GERD and the Nile in Ethiopia. Our research builds on and expands previous studies on GERD representation in the Ethiopian media: Filippo Menga has argued that the GERD has been framed as a foreign policy issue by Ethiopian leadership to escape from the national debate of its negative consequences in terms of social and environmental impact (Menga 2017); one of the authors of this article, Yeshiwes Degu Belay, has previously analysed the framing of the GERD by one Ethiopian newspaper, *The Reporter*, in the period 2013-14 (Belay 2014). This article analyses media narratives about the GERD and the Nile in two private print media outlets from 2013 to 2020, to explore changes and continuities across different governments, within the broader context of Ethiopian domestic politics, as well as of legal, political, and technical developments in the Eastern Nile basin (composed by Ethiopia, Sudan and Egypt). We identify four main narratives: (1) the GERD as an engine for development (developmentalism); (2) Ethiopia as a nation united behind the dam (nationalism); (3) Ethiopia as the victim of colonial water use arrangements

(Pan-Africanism); and (4) the GERD as a regional project (regionalism). We argue that, in spite of their plurality, these media narratives and their interplay resonate with, reproduce, and legitimize official political discourses on the GERD and Nile River, or *Abay* as it is called in Amharic. Since 1991, mainstream national media has been among the favored spaces for Ethiopian elites to articulate and negotiate their ideas and projects on state building (Stremlau 2011). In the case of the GERD, media narratives and political discourses show continuity across different governments and leadership (Meles Zenawi, Hailemariam Desalegn, Abiy Ahmed), cementing the image of a unanimous support to the project among the Ethiopian public opinion and political elites. Thus, public conversations on the GERD, at least on mainstream media, seem to have escaped the polarised, often vitriolic, nature of media debates in contemporary Ethiopia (Skjerdal 2011; Bonsa 2002): a remarkable feature when considering the recent process of 'ethnification' of the media, with increasing plurality resulting also in its polarization along ethno-political cleavages (Skjerdal, Moges 2020).

After presenting our methodology, we sketch a chronology of the GERD against the background of the main political events in Ethiopia, highlighting the official discourses on the dam adopted by different governments and political leaders. We then analyse the coverage of the GERD and the Nile River, presenting the four media narratives that we identified. We conclude by discussing the implication of our findings for the broader debates on state and nation building in Ethiopia, as well as hydropolitics and water diplomacy in the Eastern Nile basin.

### Researching media narratives on dams

Often the (re)production of state politics and policies occur behind closed doors, and the general public is distant from getting access. However, as "mediatised politics is an important part of contemporary politics" (Fairclough 1998:147), its "presentation takes place on the public stage that the media provide", mostly through televised transmissions or published outlets (Sarcinelli 1987, cited in Lauerbach, Fetzer 2007: 5). The traditional media, as Berge (2013: 3-4) indicated, "are full of narratives" and hence they are the key in mediating the communicated message. They "can transform its readers [and audience] into travelers in the backstage of the social [political] world" (Neveu 2014: 538), but "the media has to ensure that it owns the narrative[s]" that it provides to the audience/ readership (Kurum 2018: 6).

Media helps to understand the material interests of the state and other complex political, social and ecological aspects of dam constructions (Wu *et al.* 2017: 2). It provides a simplified account of discourses and narratives, and representations of different actors (Flaminio 2016), frames narratives and sets the agenda aimed at influencing both the leadership and public views (McCombs, Shaw 2017; Lundberg *et al.* 2017). Studies on media coverage of dams, though limited, are generally focused on certain important themes and methodologically diversified. Some studies focus on a

cross sectional analysis of media framing of dam constructions in Ethiopia (Belay 2014) and discourse analysis of debates on dam removals in Sweden (Jørgensen, Renöfält 2012). Others move beyond and analyse the spatial and temporal changes in public perceptions of environment in France through interviews, textometry and content analysis of dam related news articles (Flaminio 2016); the role of the media narratives in shaping and influencing public awareness of the dams in Canada using a systematic content analysis (De Loe 1999); a linguistic-discourse analysis of the national media representations of social movements that run against dam infrastructures in Brazil (Da Silva, Rothman 2011); and local media's role in promoting the construction of dams in the US (Daws, Brinson 2019). There are also studies that applied a longitudinal content analysis of foreign media coverage of the dam developments in China (Wu *et al.* 2017), and a comparative and thematic analysis of national media coverage of dams across several countries in Asia (Delang 2019).

Longitudinal studies on media coverage of the GERD using multiple analytical frameworks, however, remain scarce. This article seeks to address the lacuna by placing Ethiopian national media at the center of scholarly discussions. For this purpose, we focus on three private newspaper outlets, *The Reporter*, *Reporter Amharic* and *Fortune*.<sup>2</sup> *The Reporter*, owned by Media and Communications Center, was founded in 1995 and publishes *The Reporter*, a weekly English newspaper, and *Reporter*, a biweekly Amharic newspaper.<sup>3</sup> *Fortune*, an Independent News and Media Plc established in 2000, is dominantly a business affairs weekly English language outlet. Both are based in Addis Ababa, the capital of Ethiopia, but they have a national circulation and are available in print and online forms. Fairly, they carry open criticism of the government. The choice of these outlets was motivated by different factors. The press in Ethiopia has been characterized by high volatility, with numerous newspapers, especially those critical of the government, ceasing to operate after a few years, in some cases even a few months since their launch (Bonsa 2002; Gagliardone 2016). Our interest in covering a relatively long temporal arc required focusing on outlets that offered a high chance to continue publishing for the whole period covered by the research. Also, the findings presented here emerge from a larger project aimed at studying narratives on the Nile rivers across multiple countries, including Egypt, Sudan, and Uganda, and the selection of outlets in Ethiopia was informed by the possibility of comparing them with outlets following similar editorial policies and goals in those other countries.

We used Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) of newspaper articles, considered as a unit of analysis. Articles were retrieved from each outlets' online databases using the key word 'Nile' and 'ጎሳ' (*Abay*). The acquisition of articles from *Reporter Amharic* required additional archival research in the media house in Addis Ababa, as some of the articles for the first three years within the selected period were not available online. This process generated a total of 3710 articles containing at least a word Nile/*Abay*. After a preliminary assessment of their relevance and elimination of duplications, 250 articles

constituted the analysis. To ensure fair representation of voices, within and outside the media organization, the sample articles were delimited to news, editorials, journalist contributions, interviews and commentary and opinion pieces. Following Fairclough's exhortation to use CDA to "systematically explore often opaque relationships between discursive practices, events and texts" (Fairclough 1995: 132), the analysis was conducted both at the article level through close examination of the content of messages communicated and at the newspaper level emphasizing the position of the newspapers and how events positioned them in the debate about the Nile and the GERD.

This process led to identifying four, not mutually exclusive and often overlapping, narratives – summarized in Table 2. Similarly, to other attempts to map and analyse tensions and conflicts around environmental issues (Benjaminsen, Svarstad 2008; Roe 1989), our approach did not look for specific narratives, but let narratives progressively emerge by comparing and connecting emerging patterns. Given our focus on the politics of the Nile, the definition of narratives we adopted was not simply as discourses characterized by a greater or lesser degree of coherence, and seeking to attribute meanings to social phenomena, but, in resonance with Roe's definition (Roe 1994), as stories that underwrite and stabilize assumptions in situations that persist with unknowns and a high degree of interdependence. Differently from Roe, however, and as it will become clearer from the discussion of the specific narratives we identified, narratives emerging around the Nile were not meant as much to inform policy, or to support a specific policy over another, but to connect a policy which allowed limited room for negotiation to a constellation of meanings that emphasised its relevance from different perspectives. This is reflective of another of Fairclough's key tenets, about how texts are "ideologically shaped by relations of power and struggles overpower" (Fairclough 1995: 133), indicating in this specific case how media outlets that have been allowed to publish for an extended period of time, despite their intermittent criticism of the Ethiopian government, had to operate within a discursive space that was delimited by power, while being allowed greater freedom to make use of that space.

### **A dam for two leaders**

Built in the western Benishangul-Gumuz region, close to the border with Sudan, the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam stands as the flagship project of the Ethiopian developmental state (Lavers, Terrefe, Gebresenbet 2021). With a 74 billion cubic meters water storage capacity, a 1.8 km length, a 155 meters height, and an installed capacity of 6,450 megawatts, once completed it will be the biggest hydropower plant in Africa (Whittington, Waterbury, Jeuland 2014).

The project is led by the state owned Ethiopian Electric Power Corporation (EEPCo). The main contractor for the civil works is Salini Impregilo (since 2020 called WeBuild),

a global player in the sector, with Italian origins and strong ties in Ethiopia, where it has been working since the 1960s, and notably in the past twenty years at the implementation of the cascade dams of Gilgel Gibe in the Omo valley (Hailu 2018). The electro-mechanical works, initially allocated to the state-owned Metals and Engineering Corporation (METEC), were later contracted out to other foreign companies.

The mere cost of the dam – 4.8 billion of US dollar as per the contract awarded to Salini in 2011 without competitive bidding– represents a considerable quota of the national GDP, that according to the World Bank was around 30 billion USD in 2011, and later grew to 107 billion USD in 2020.<sup>4</sup> Remarkably, the construction of the dam was financed only by domestic funds, including private donations, compulsory withdrawals from public officers' salaries and *ad hoc* state bonds that have been massively bought by all Ethiopians including those in the diaspora. This endeavor has been promoted through a vast mobilization campaign that by means of all available media – e.g. TV and press, arts, sport, and lottery – made the dam omnipresent in Ethiopian public spaces (Menga 2017). Such mobilisation was also possible because of the unique place that the Nile holds in the Ethiopian culture, religion, history and identity (see for instance Oestigaard 2018; Erlikh 2002). The GERD benefited from this bond, and at the same time contributed to change the Ethiopian public imaginary about the Nile: from a river flowing away without fertilising the country, to a symbol of development and renaissance (Ayenalem, Fantini, van der Zaag *forthcoming*). The idea of building a dam on the Blue Nile was already developed under Haile Selassie's reign (1931-74) (McKinney 2011; McCann 1981).<sup>5</sup> However, it was only in 2011 that the Ethiopian government was finally able to overcome the traditional Egyptian opposition and start building such a dam (Cascão, Nicol 2016).

Thus, being at the centre of the development strategy of the Ethiopian state and of the hydro-politics in the Nile basin, the construction of the GERD has been shaped by the unfolding of political events at national and regional level, also influencing some of them (see Table 1).

**Table 1: Main domestic political events and GERD chronology since 2011**

Domestic political events	Month/Year	GERD chronology
	April 2011	Beginning of the construction of the GERD
Prime Minister Meles Zenawi died	August 2012	
Hailemariam Desalegn became the Prime Minister	September 2012	
	May 2013	Diversion of the Nile river
	March 2015	Declaration of Principles signed between Ethiopia, Sudan and Egypt
Hailemariam Desalegn re-elected	May 2015	
Protest across Amhara and Oromia regions	August 2016	
	January 2018	Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn met with El Sisi in Cairo
PM Hailemariam Desalegn resigned	February 2018	
Abiy Ahmed came to power	April 2018	
	November 2018	Kinfe Dagnew, a Brigadier General and former Chief Executive of METEC, arrested
	June 2018	Prime Minister Abiy met with President El-Sisi in Cairo
	July 2018	Simegnaw Bekele, former GERD Chief Engineer, found dead in Addis Ababa
Sidama Regional State established through referendum	November 2019	
EPRDF officially dissolved	December 2019	
	October 2019	The US led talks on the GERD in Washington between Ethiopia, Sudan and Egypt
	February 2020	Ethiopia refused to sign the US sponsored agreement
The House of Peoples Representatives postpones the sixth national election - initially scheduled in August 2020 - for an unspecified time	April 2020	Negotiation resumed under the AU chairmanship
	June 2020	GERD discussed at the UN Security Council upon request of Egypt
	July 2020	First filling of the dam completed
Tigray Regional State holds elections in disagreement with the Federal Government	September 2020	
The war between TPLF and the federal government started	November 2020	

Source: the authors.



In laying down the first stone of the dam, in April 2011, the late Prime Minister Meles Zenawi encased the dam as an essential component of a larger project of state and nation building. Initially called the Millennium Dam, resonating with the celebration in the Ethiopian calendar of a few years earlier, the project was presented as a turning point in the history of the country.

In a country of more than 120 million people of which less than 45% have access to electricity,<sup>6</sup> in Meles view "this project will play a major and decisive role in realizing the five-year Growth and Transformation Plan and the consequent advance towards the eradication of poverty".<sup>7</sup> Considering that the benefits in terms of improved water management for development and economic growth "will clearly extend to all neighboring states, and particularly to the downstream Nile basin countries, to Sudan and Egypt", Meles even argued that "one might expect these countries to be prepared to share the cost in proportion to the gains that each state will derive".<sup>8</sup> While calling for a turning point in transboundary cooperation in the Blue Nile basin, Meles also reasserted the Ethiopian people's will of "paying any sacrifice" to build the dam,<sup>9</sup> as well as "the capacity to assert our rights", ending the epoch in which "centuries of impoverishment curtailed our development and restricted us from exercising our right to use the resources of our own rivers".<sup>10</sup> During his rule Meles was a controversial figure,<sup>11</sup> with strong opposition both internally in his party (Tadesse, Young 2003) and outside, in spite of a general appreciation by international observers and donors (De Waal 2013; Lefort 2013). The cult of personality that followed his death, attempted to remove such controversy, celebrating a leadership and legacy that has often been visualised by public portraits of Meles standing beside the dam.

The leadership of Hailemariam Desalegn, who served as deputy PM and Foreign Minister in the last cabinet led by Meles, stands in continuity with Meles' political discourse around the GERD. For instance, Hailemariam referred to the dam as a turning point in history that could be compared to the victory of Adwa in boosting "Black people pride".<sup>12</sup> On the international stage, Hailemariam signed with the leaders of Egypt and Sudan the Declaration of Principles that constitutes so far the only legal documents recognised by the three parties to regulate the negotiations over the dam.

When Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed came to power in April 2018, he received a huge attention because of the implication for state policies, approaches and responsiveness to domestic and international affairs. The change and rupture brought by Abiy seems to reverberate also in the less triumphalist tones on the GERD that he initially adopted. In his first media brief, he expressed that "the GERD bears the fingerprint of each one of us... and provides a ground to demonstrate to the world that we Ethiopian can dream and execute our project. So, if we fail to finish the GERD, it is a disgrace for us".<sup>13</sup> He also acknowledged that the completion of the dam would have been taking years more than planned with the pace of the time. Among others, he said: "When we started the mega dam like *Hedassie* ["Renaissance" in Amharic], it is difficult to think that we had

full preparation. It is not only with GERD that we have had the problem of finishing our projects on time".<sup>14</sup> It was the first time that the delay of the nation's centerpiece project was officially acknowledged.

The military run company Metals and Engineering Corporation (METEC), EPRDF's developmental state symbol and key strategic player, was mentioned as responsible for the delay of the installation of the electromechanical part of the dam, and as the result a delay to the filling of the water reservoir according to the plan. The Director-General Major-General of METEC Kinfe Dagnaw was charged with corruption. When he was arrested in April 2018, it was breaking news on state-run EBC. The corruption case was also exposed by a video documentary produced and broadcasted by the state-run media company FANA.<sup>15</sup> The documentary indicated METEC leadership of abusing their position and power to influence decisions for personal gains, to divert public resources for private benefits, to trump official norms in contracting and bidding, and to fail in delivering all the mega projects in which they had been involved, like the GERD and several sugar factories. These allegations and the media reports contributed to the revoking of METEC's contract. Through this move, together with the confirmation or appointment of key figures, like the "technocrat" Seleshi Bekele as Minister of Water and Resources and several other water diplomats, or Aregawi Berhe, a leader of opposition leader/Tigray Democratic Coalition Party as Director General of the Office of the National Council for the Coordination of Public Participation to the Construction of the GERD, Abiy was able to affirm his influence on the GERD management, ousting the leadership like the head of the GERD National Council and METEC, loyal to the previous regime (Gebregziabher 2019).

In spite of such a deep material rupture, the official discourse of the dam did not drastically change. In his briefing to the Ethiopian parliament on 22 October 2019, televised live, Abiy expressed Ethiopia's national interest, pride and willingness to complete the dam at any cost, including "If there is a need to go to war, we could get millions ready". At the same time, he tempered the tone, recalling that "Ethiopians have no intention to hurt Egyptians. They only want to use the water" and "No one would benefit from war".<sup>16</sup> In a discussion with national experts, the top management and member of the Board of the GERD on the progress of the project, broadcasted in national news, Abiy stressed the continuity in the project and its uncompromising nature: "[...] a demonstration to the world that despite changes in government or individual leadership in anytime Ethiopian national interest and sovereignty, for the government and the people, today is the same as yesterday".<sup>17</sup>

More recently, as a reaction to the Egyptian attempt to transform the GERD into an issue of global security, involving first the USA and later the UN Security Council, Abiy reasserted the Ethiopian request for an African solution, mediated by the African Union.<sup>18</sup> Such emphasis on Ethiopian national sovereignty and independence - "No force can stop Ethiopia from building dam" -<sup>19</sup> was clearly illustrated by the first two rounds of unilateral filling of the dam reservoir, undertaken during the rainy seasons of July 2020 and 2021. Such stands dovetails with the Ethiopian government's rebuttal of international criticism and allegations of mass human rights violations in the war in Tigray.

## Plurality of narratives on the GERD

This section presents the narratives on the GERD/the Nile that have emerged from the analysis of the two media houses. They are: (1) the GERD as an engine for development; (2) Ethiopia as a nation united behind the dam; (3) Ethiopia as the victim of colonial water arrangements; and (4) the GERD as a regional project. As summarised in table 2, these narratives are not necessarily exclusive, rather they often intersect and reinforce each other, and may appear within the same media outlet and within the same article at once.

**Table 2: Summary of the main media narratives on the GERD**

Narratives	Claims	References	Main actors/ issues representation
Developmentalism	GERD as an engine for development: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Economic growth</li> <li>• Human development</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Epistemology of dams as development</li> <li>• History of dam in big economies</li> <li>• Ethiopian Renaissance</li> <li>• Poverty as an existential threat</li> <li>• The right to development</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• State economy and social services presented to grow</li> <li>• Human development expected to improve</li> <li>• National energy demands conveyed to be satisfied</li> <li>• Foreign exchange from power trade</li> </ul>
Nationalism	Ethiopia a nation united behind the dam <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• GERD as a symbol of unity</li> <li>• GERD as history in the making</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• State discourse of Unity in Diversity</li> <li>• The history of the Battle of Adwa</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• State and society as united</li> <li>• Public ownership of GERD</li> <li>• Ethiopians as heroic and patriotic</li> <li>• Battle of Adwa as an example</li> </ul>
Pan-Africanism	Ethiopia as a victim of colonial water arrangements: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Decolonizing the Nile</li> <li>• Advancing a new Nile order</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Colonialism/ Neo colonialism</li> <li>• The 1929/59 Nile agreements</li> <li>• CFA and NBI</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ethiopia as a key actor</li> <li>• Sudan, Egypt, WB and US are problematized</li> <li>• African solutions to African problems as a wayout</li> </ul>
Regionalism	GERD as a regional project <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A genuine vehicle for mutual benefit</li> <li>• A source of electricity to African states</li> <li>• An emblem of regional progress and prosperity</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Energy led integration</li> <li>• African Renaissance</li> <li>• Principle of no significant harm</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ethiopia as Africa's energy hub</li> <li>• Sudan and Egypt as beneficiaries of constant water flow</li> <li>• Kenya, Tanzania, Rwanda, Uganda and other African countries as beneficiaries of electricity</li> </ul>

Source: the authors.

### *The GERD as an engine for development (Developmentalism)*

Development is the dominant narrative in the media coverage of the GERD invoking the instrumentality of hydropower dams in generating economic growth, and it is legitimised by placing "the right to development" at the center of the Nile debate – for example, for *Fortune* the GERD stands as "an affirmation to the rights of Ethiopia to use the waters of the Nile".<sup>20</sup> Using an "engine" metaphor, GERD is communicated as a "special project" to accelerate Ethiopia's economy and meet the energy demand of its population. Published on 5 April 2016 the *Fortune* article – Journey to a Hydro-dollar Nation – frames the dam "as a source of foreign exchange" through transnational power trade. A commentary by Mekdelawit Messay (a PhD researcher) emphasizes how the GERD will improve the wellbeing of women, free them from travelling several kilometers to fetch water and collect firewood, and from fear of gender-based violence.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, *The Reporter* editorial conveys: "[...] It's not because the dam is being built on the Blue Nile that we attach special importance to it; it is because of the significant benefits that can be derived from the dam. The dam will be a dependable source of energy. [...] It will play a crucial role in the growth of industry, agriculture, transportation, technology, and a host of other social services".<sup>22</sup>

Development narrative is constructed in reference to other examples of hydropower dams that "produced economic miracles" and that are portrayed as icons of modernisation in countries like the United States, Canada, China, Turkey and, of course, Egypt.<sup>23</sup> This account conveys hydropower dams as symbols of progress and common global practices to sustain economic growth, subscribing to the dams–development epistemology which is commonly adopted to legitimise mega-hydraulic projects (see also Boelens, Shah, Bruins 2019). In addition the narrative is inspired by a more inward looking reference to the Renaissance of Ethiopia, striving for an imagined state, or its rebirth.<sup>24</sup> The latter notion is linked with Ethiopia's past glory, citing its historic civilization, as a crossroads of world's trade, and architectural achievements like the construction of Axum obelisks and Lalibela rock-hewn churches. The GERD is represented as a bridge between the past and the future so as to maintain continuity of the civilisation.

The media has also recounted the history of famine and drought to signify the importance of dam infrastructures to break with the painful experiences of the past. Citing the global environmental problems, Ethiopia remains categorised among the countries that could relapse into a famine trap, which poses an existential threat. This is illustrated as follows by *The Reporter*: "The threat of rainfall scarcity has not disappeared. Nor have its linked repercussions which can include food insecurity, land degradation, overgrazing, drought, [...]. Ethiopian farmers along the tributaries of the Blue Nile and in the gorge, itself can still face such dangers which can have such a huge impact on their lives and even threaten the survival of Ethiopia as a nation".<sup>25</sup>

The above excerpt suggests a moral reasoning that the people who live along the source

of the longest rivers in the world shouldn't be experiencing famines and droughts. It also provides the ideational content to see the GERD as vital to prevent such catastrophe from reoccurring and to address Ethiopia's existential threats. Hence, the symbolic and material importance of the dam is, therefore, both informed by the current developments needs of the nation and significantly linked with historical experiences of both glory and shame – of poverty and famine– and projection of Ethiopia's future.

### *Ethiopia as a nation united behind the dam (Nationalism)*

The narrative of Ethiopia as a nation united behind the dam spans across political regimes. Ethiopians are often represented as supportive of the state project and united in terms of financial and ideological engagements. Domestic opposition parties, as *The Reporter* writes, "[...] believe that the construction of the GERD is in the national interest and have not stooped to acting as instruments of the country's enemies".<sup>26</sup> The appointment by Abiy's government of opposition leaders as part of the GERD management team was topical. On a similar tone, *The Reporter* editorial – The Great Ethiopian Renaissance Dam: a monument being erected by all Ethiopians for the edification of Ethiopia (05 April 2014) – writes: "Seeing through the construction of the Renaissance Dam is not an agenda of politicians, the ruling Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) or the government alone. Neither is it something which the people of Ethiopia are coerced into supporting. It is a feat which politicians, the public and the government alike are willing and determined to achieve through a collective effort".<sup>27</sup>

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To represent this united front, journalists usually employed words like "we", "all Ethiopians" and "the people of Ethiopia" in GERD stories downplaying the volatile internal politics and public discontent against the government. In addition, they portrayed the GERD as "a collective feat" and "a national agenda" demonstrating the agency of the infrastructure in bringing national unity, even at the time of controversies on the outset of METEC for its scandal as *Fortune* article echoed on 13 April 2019. *Reporter Amharic* headline – የህዳሴው ግድብ የአንድነታችን አዲስ ምልክት (15 March 2020) – fully captures this narrative conveying the GERD as a new symbol of Ethiopian's unity.

The narrative of unity is infused with Ethiopia's historical-cultural account and presented as a reason for victory, sovereignty and nationhood exemplified by Adwa victory against the Italian colonial army in 1896. The media has conveyed that this national pride has been replicated at Guba, where GERD is located, – for example, *The Reporter* headlined as "Rewriting Adwa in Guba". The article writes: "in the face of international refusal to help finance GERD and any projects on the Nile River, as well as Egypt's incessant campaign and lobby to block funds to these projects, Ethiopians should harken back to the lessons of not the military side of Adwa but rather the intellectual, political and developmental facet of the battle. Ethiopians have won the battle [...] through the employment of domestic resource mobilization".<sup>28</sup>

To demonstrate Ethiopia's achievements, the physical environment of both Adwa and Guba is described as extremely challenging. For example, Adwa's chain of mountains was the test of Ethiopia's fighters in the battle against the Italian well militarized army. Similarly, dealing with the very harsh weather and diverting the Nile River, which has long been seen as mysterious and untouchable, has been incredibly challenging. Adwa has been echoed for its "historic and heroic pan-Ethiopian unity" and mediatized to serve as a historical, cultural and ideological tool to deal with such challenging endeavours and to accomplish the development needs of contemporary Ethiopia. Using a battlefield metaphor, the GERD is portrayed as a "new" or "second" Adwa perpetuating a narrative of victory.<sup>29</sup> On 15 December 2013, *Fortune* headlined "Like the Adwa victory, the Great Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) will be venerated for generations".

Ethiopians are represented as "heroic people" and "fiercely patriotic" and they are expected to accomplish "this proud chapter [...] with victory".<sup>30</sup> They are also depicted as history makers. *The Reporter* article– History in the Making– covers how Ethiopians are making another embodiment of history by building "the largest and most complicated construction project to date".<sup>31</sup> Like the heroes and heroines of the battle of Adwa, Semegnew Bekele, the late chief engineer and project manager, has been repetitively presented as the human face of the GERD. When he was found dead at the heart of Addis Ababa, *Fortune* expressed that Ethiopians were in shock and in a state of disbelief.<sup>32</sup>

In sum, Ethiopia's unity and patriotism in defense against colonialism has been given primacy over the recent past. It is placed at the center of media conversations and has become a powerful tool for contemporary development endeavours. Though this narrative continued throughout all the time, the media has provided extensive coverage on Ethiopians' unity behind the GERD around the commemoration of the Adwa Victory in March capitalizing on nationalism and pride, emotional politics, of the past.

#### *Ethiopia as the victim of colonial water arrangements (Pan-Africanism)*

Colonialism and asymmetric power to utilize the Nile among the riparian countries is another central theme in Ethiopian media coverage of the GERD and the Nile River. The story goes back to the early XX Century when Britain water imperialists imposed a treaty preventing upstream countries from using the Nile. For example, *Fortune* writes: "[...] the treaty of 1929 between Britain, which controlled Egypt at the time and needed Egyptian cotton as a raw material for its textile industry, and the British colonial governments in the upper Nile basin colonies of Sudan, Uganda, Kenya and Tanganyika. The treaty prohibited the upstream British colonies in the Nile basin from building water infrastructure on the Nile without Egypt's permission".<sup>33</sup>

This arrangement was solidified by the 1959 agreement between Egypt and Sudan for the *Full Utilisation* of the Nile allocating the entire river to Egypt (55.5 billion cubic meters), Sudan (18.5 billion cubic meters) and evaporation at the Sahara Desert (more

than 10 billion cubic meters). The remaining riparian countries were allocated zero drop of water. *Fortune*, *The Reporter* and *Reporter Amharic* have communicated the agreement as "unfair" and downstream countries as victims. In multiple newspaper articles these figures appeared conveying a negative representation about the agreement. *The Reporter* entitled – On the Nile and the GERD: O Egypt, O shame, where is thy blush? – criticizes the agreement for ignoring the other's interest and blames Egypt.<sup>34</sup> Reflecting on public emotions, another article from the same newspaper informs how the treaties deprived Ethiopia "worthy of drinking water from the Nile", "prohibited from using the Nile" and created "a deep feeling of betrayal and animosity in the hearts of generations".<sup>35</sup> The 1929/59 arrangements are depicted as colonial treaties suggesting to locate the current Nile debates not simply as part of a recent confrontation initiated by the GERD, but in the broader context of decolonization, and of the need to redress injustice created by the colonisers. Colonialism is problematized for creating asymmetric water use arrangements by granting some riparian countries exclusive power and privilege. *Fortune* presents the arrangement as the main challenge to reorder the Nile governance in post-colonial Africa due to, as a commentary by Dejen Yemane (a PhD student at Addis Ababa University) writes, Egypt's fierce position to maintain the treaties for justifying claims of prior use and "ownership" of the Nile.<sup>36</sup> Similarly, *The Reporter* presents the Nile as a place where competing interests of "Pax Britannica" and "Pax Africana" exist: "The main goal of Egypt's strategy [...] has been to sustain the colonial treaties of Pax Britannica and its 'water imperialism'. This meant that the strategy is also directed against any efforts by other upstream countries to develop and use the Nile waters as part of the decolonization process and their own development".<sup>37</sup> A *Fortune* article by Nurye Yassin (a diplomat at the Ethiopian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, MoFA) further emphasizes the need to change "the mindset of the colonial era agreements" because it "prevents an understanding of the logic of Ethiopia's natural rights to rescue its citizens from poverty, along with the interests of other riparian countries".<sup>38</sup>

Pan-Africanism is presented as a solution for inclusive water use and more broadly for re-shaping Africa's political economy and identity. Institutions like the Nile Basin Initiative (NBI, an intergovernmental platform for political and technical cooperation among Nile basin countries, established in 1999) and the Cooperative Framework Agreement (CFA) adopted therein in 2010, are framed as key elements in this Pan-African reading of the GERD, with Ethiopia represented as leading the interests of upstream countries. *Fortune* communicates that "by denying the 1929 and 1959 colonial era treaty, which gives rights over the Nile to Egypt and Sudan, the six countries have reached an agreement, which Ethiopia has become the first to ratify".<sup>39</sup> *The Reporter* further suggests downstream countries to abandon the colonial treaty and join the CFA as it is in the common interest of all basin countries.<sup>40</sup> Yet, because Egypt and Sudan are against the CFA, they are often problematized as a challenge to Pan-Africanisation of the Nile.

Colonialism, however, is not simply framed as a distinct historical phenomenon. It is also evoked as a process seeking to impose the interests of foreign powers over African nations. When the United States stepped in more aggressively into the dispute between Ethiopia and Egypt, Ethiopian media reacted denouncing President Trump's interference. An article in *Fortune* questions: "Why are they pressuring a poor African country to relinquish its sovereign rights to manage its dam and use its fair share of the river in accordance with international rules and norms?"<sup>41</sup>

Sovereignty has become a more topical issue and a large volume of commentary and opinion pieces were published by Ethiopian experts, students and even diplomats advising the Abiy's government not to fall under the US and WB trap, otherwise – as Jesse Jackson (a prominent American civil rights activist) wrote to *Fortune* – "Ethiopia could become 21st Century colony of Egypt".<sup>42</sup> Instead, the media has been poured in with the idea of a Pan-African solution – 'the need to solve an African problem within Africa' – and the media like *The Reporter* (30 May 2020) questioned "Why is the AU eying the ominous GERD row from a distance?"

#### *The GERD as a regional project (Regionalism)*

Ethiopian media coverage of the GERD is also broadly linked with transnational flows of goods and services across the region carrying another narrative in the positive representation of the dam, which is depicted as "a genuine vehicle for mutual benefit" and "an emblem of regional progress and prosperity".<sup>43</sup> At the basin level, the GERD is described as an important infrastructure to better regulate the flow of the Nile to downstream countries and as a technical solution to the recurring problem in the downstream countries. *The Reporter* writes: "According to hydrologists, the Dam will indeed prevent the detrimental effects of flooding that afflicted Egyptians and Sudanese in 1964, 1973 and 1988, and promote the consolidation of the navigation sector in lower streamers, which in turn contributes to the development of the tourism and fishing industries, when completed. They also say that the Dam on the Ethiopian highlands will reduce evaporation, sedimentation and siltation in downstream basins like those of the Aswan or the Merowe dams. The reduction in sedimentation and siltation at Aswan will enable Egypt to avoid the increasing coastline erosion (125–175m [410–574ft] per year) encircling the Nile Delta. When the GERD is completed, the evaporation loss at Aswan Dam will be 9.5 percent instead of the already 10.8 bcm per year".<sup>44</sup>

The deployment of scientific/expert position in the above excerpt helps to "convey authorial stance by proxy", in the words of Catenaccio (2017: 137), communicating benefits of the dam to downstream economies, hydrology and ecology of the Nile, which is clearly presented in the article as relevant to the ongoing discussion between the three states.

This narrative has emphasised the principle of "no significant harm". On 8 June 2013,



the editorial of *The Reporter* wrote that while the right to water development of upstream basin countries is internationally recognized, they cannot exercise this right in a manner that affects other's interests significantly. The newspaper published the official account on this topic by interviewing Alemayehu Tegu, the then Minister of Water, Irrigation and Energy, who mentioned that the international panel of experts (IPoE) confirmed the dam does not inflict any significant harm against downstream countries.

At the regional level, the GERD is presented as a source of "a cheaper and greater supply of electricity" to African countries.<sup>45</sup> Ethiopia, with a potential of 45,000 MW of hydroelectricity to meet Africa's current demand, has been constructed as an energy hub and center of regional connectivity. To exemplify this narrative, *Fortune* article – "Ethiopia, Sudan Negotiate Pact for 1,000MW Electric Export" – communicates the bilateral agreements for the installation of the second power interconnection line to export 1,000 megawatts of electric energy to Sudan.<sup>46</sup> The newspaper also covered the benefit of Ethiopia's hydropower energy to reach Tanzania, Rwanda, Burundi, Uganda and other African countries. The materialisation of energy connectivity is conveyed to be transformative and to improve the resilience of many communities beyond borders and reinforce mutually cooperative partnership and fast track regional economic communities.

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*The Reporter* article emphasizes that the GERD "will inspire the entire African continent to realize the ideals of Pan-Africanism and African Renaissance [...]. Hydropower generation and trade will open a new horizon for Ethiopia's industrialization and African economic transformation".<sup>47</sup> Such representation of the dam will also contribute "to end Western portrayal of apocalyptic vision of the African experience as a famine overwhelmed, hopeless continent, sociopolitical traumatic field, and many other distressing words in their visualization of African past, present and future".<sup>48</sup> Thus the GERD is framed as a project for "inclusive regional prosperity" and "a symbol of regional integration",<sup>49</sup> with Ethiopia as the material and symbolic base through which Africa is being constructed.

## Conclusion

Concocted as a national flagship project launched by EPRDF developmental state, and built on a highly symbolic river like the Nile, the GERD has occupied a central place in Ethiopian public spaces and debates since its inception. Despite a polarized and ethnificated media, the change in political leadership, and an increasingly divided and conflictual political space, the GERD stands out as a symbol of national unity, sovereignty and pride. Stunningly no critical opinions and narratives on the dam can be detected in Ethiopian mainstream media and public spaces.

The plurality of narratives developed to represent and legitimise the GERD have certainly facilitated the consensus around this infrastructure: a dam at the same time for

sustainable development, national unity, Pan-African revival, and regional integration. These narratives resonate with the framing of the GERD that Meles advanced at the inauguration of the project. They have later been blended and combined in different ways, to respond to the unfolding of domestic and international events, as well as to legitimise the agenda of successive political leadership – Hailemariam and Abiy. Such consensus of discourses and positions on the GERD, at least in mainstream media and public debates, seems astounding when confronted to the fact that all around the world, large scale water infrastructures and mega-hydraulic developments are usually highly contested projects, in terms of technical approaches and material interests (Crow-Miller, Webber, Molle 2017), as well as meanings, knowledge and epistemologies mobilised to make sense of these infrastructures (Boelens, Shah, Bruins 2019). With this in mind, the findings of our research can engage with two broader debates: on the process of state and nation building in Ethiopia, and on the hydropolitics in the Eastern Nile basin.

In relation to the former, the official unity of the political discourse and media narratives on the GERD should be scrutinised against two main events: the recent developments in the implementation of the project, with the removal by Abiy of one of its main stakeholders, the military controlled construction company METEC – arguably, once presented as the industrial champion of EPRDF developmental state, and the dramatic unfolding of the conflict in the North of the country. These developments point at the need to reflect on the extent to which an infrastructure can effectively inform and shape strategies of state and nation building. Notably the ongoing armed conflict, with the recrudescence of ethnic based violence, seems to indicate that, while successful in cementing consensus on the dam, these narratives alone cannot legitimate the state and the political leadership that promote them. In this respect, further research is needed to explore discourses and narratives outside the mainstream, for instance in social media or in languages other than English and Amharic. Large scale development projects like dams have historically been – and still are – contentious elements of state-building strategies aiming at incorporating the peripheries into the core of the Ethiopian state (Markakis 2011; Mosley, Watson 2016). Therefore, it would be interesting to explore the representations of the Nile river and the GERD by the groups living at the geographical and political frontiers of these state building projects.

In relation to ongoing debates on hydropolitics and water diplomacy initiatives in the Eastern Nile basin, the findings of our research subscribe to the call for further attention to the interplay between the domestic and the international level in transboundary water conflicts (Menga 2016). The seemingly unanimous consensus around the GERD in the Ethiopia public opinion, reflected in the unity of media and political narratives, represents both a strength and a limit for the Ethiopian negotiators sitting at the international diplomatic table with Egypt and Sudan. Once the dam is framed in high and cherished symbolism, even a small concession on seemingly technical issues like

the filling of the dam reservoir and its operation, risks to appear as a political defeat in the public opinion's eye, – and perhaps delegitimise the ruling leadership. Therefore, scholars and diplomats should not overlook the role of national media and narratives in shaping the contours and the conditions of water conflict and cooperation in the Nile basin, like elsewhere.

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## NOTES:

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2 - As this article is part of a larger ongoing project on media, science, and water diplomacy in the Nile River basin, it was important to ensure comparability of newspaper outlets across countries.

3 - For this study we call it *Reporter Amharic* to eliminate confusion with the English version of the newspaper, *The Reporter*.

4 - See also *Ethiopia: Country Profile*, "The World Bank", 2021: [https://databank.worldbank.org/views/reports/reportwidget.aspx?Report\\_Name=CountryProfile&Id=b450fd57&ttbar=y&td=y&inf=n&zm=n&country=ETH](https://databank.worldbank.org/views/reports/reportwidget.aspx?Report_Name=CountryProfile&Id=b450fd57&ttbar=y&td=y&inf=n&zm=n&country=ETH).

5 - The vision of strategizing Guba's, where the dam is located, lowland peripheral area through large-scale hydropower development dates back to the period of Emperor Haile Selassie (1931-1974) when Ethiopia invited US experts to conduct a Blue Nile survey to identify a location. See also McCann (1981) and McKinney (2011). In 2009 and 2010, national experts accomplished substantial work including detailed analysis of the actual project site.

6 - See also *Access to electricity (% of population) - Ethiopia*, "The World Bank", n.a.: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/EG.ELC.ACCS.ZS?locations=ET>.

7 - The speech made by the late PM Meles Zenawi of Ethiopia at the official commencement, groundbreaking ceremony of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) project, Guba, Benishangul Gumuz, *Ethiopian PM Meles Zenawi Speech on Launching GERD (Text and Videos)*, "Meleszenawi.com", 02 April 2011: <https://www.meleszenawi.com/ethiopian-pm-meles-zenawi-speech-on-launching-gerd-text-and-videos/>.

8 - *Ibid.*

9 - *Ibid.*

10 - *Ibid.*

11 - R. Armin, *The Zenawi Paradox: An Ethiopian Leader's Good and Terrible Legacy*, «The Atlantic», 20 July 2012: <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/07/the-zenawi-paradox-an-ethiopian-leaders-good-and-terrible-legacy/260099/>.

12 - Speech of Hailemariam Desalegn on the 120th anniversary of the battle of Adwa, 01 March 2016, Addis Ababa: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h5zWS4oB1ZE>. See also Demeke H., *GERD as a Modern-Day Adwa*, «The Ethiopian Herald», 2 March 2021; Belay YD, *How Ethiopia's History of Resistance Shaped the ongoing Battle for the Nile*, «Addis Standard», 2 March 2020.

13 - *PM Abiy Ahmed Press Briefing/Part 2/Source Ethiopian News Agency*, 25 August 2018: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bsnWlh4Go\\_o](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bsnWlh4Go_o).

14 - *Ibid.*; N. Haile, *Abiy Ahmed in his Words, Full Translation of the First Press Conference*, «Ethiopia Insight», 7 September 2018, <https://www.ethiopia-insight.com/2018/09/07/abiy-ahmed-in-his-words-full-translation-of-first-press-conference/>.

15 - *Documentary on METEC Grand Corruption*, «Fana Television», 13 November 2018: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kh841D3YcaM>.

16 - *Ethiopia: PM Dr Abiy Ahmed Q and A in Parliament*, "Youtube", 22 October 2019: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XMen5Qnmqb0>.

17 - *Dr. Abiy Ahmed Speech On The Progress Of Ethiopian Grand Renaissance Dam*, "Youtube", 21 August 2020: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SROSG5tIV8&t=1452s>.

18 - See for instance Abiy's recorded message to the UN General Assembly on 25 September 2020: <http://webtv.un.org/watch/ethiopia-prime-minister-addresses-general-debate-75th-session/6194655910001/>.

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23 - Bruh Yihunbelay, *History in the making*, «The Reporter», 11 April 2015.

- 24 - Ethiopian Foreign Ministry, Ethiopia – Land of renaissance, 04 February 2015: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ba1L6cPEPwM>.
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- 27 - *The Great Ethiopian Renaissance Dam: A Monument Being Erected by All Ethiopians for the Edification of Ethiopia*, «The Reporter», 5 April 2014.
- 28 - Nurye Yassin, *Rewriting Adwa in Guba*, «The Reporter», 18 April 2015.
- 29 - *Ibid.*
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- 31 - Bruh Yihunbelay, *History in the Making*, «The Reporter», 11 April 2015.
- 32 - *Semegnew Leaves Many in Grief, Doubt*, «Fortune», 26 July 2018.
- 33 - Seifulaziz Milas, *Is War Over Nile Likely?*, «Fortune», 9 June 2013.
- 34 - *On the Nile and the GERD: O Egypt, O Shame, Where is thy Blush?*, «The Reporter», 2 November 2019.
- 35 - *War with Ethiopia over Nile water, a mother of all naivety!*, «The Reporter», 26 April 2013.
- 36 - Dejen Yemane, *Time to Redeem Imprudent Diplomatic Path on GERD*, «Fortune», 23 May 2020.
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- 42 - *Ibid.*
- 43 - *Rethinking the voices of Aswan Dam and GERD*, «The Reporter», 19 April 2014.
- 44 - *Ibid.*
- 45 - *Sudan stands by Ethiopia on the dam project*, «The Reporter», 8 June 2013.
- 46 - Fasika Tadesse, *Ethiopia, Sudan Negotiate Pact for 1,000MW Electric Export*, «Fortune», 4 March 2018.
- 47 - Bruh Yihunbelay, *History in the making*, «The Reporter», 11 April 2015.
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