

INTERNATIONAL RESEARCHERS

Volume No.3 Issue No.1 March 2014

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THE NILE POLITICS

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www.iresearcher.org

ISSN 227-7471

THE INTERNATIONAL RESEARCH JOURNAL "INTERNATIONAL RESEARCHERS"

www.iresearcher.org

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THE COMMINGLING OF FAITH, WATER AND BULLETS IN THE NILE POLITICS

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ABSTRACT:

The electronic media is overloaded with discussions about the capricious, untidy and occasionally stormy Ethio-Egyptian relation over Nile which has attained new momentum following the inauguration of the Ethiopian Grand Renaissance Dam. However, most of the discussions ignored the fact that the potent interstate relation was embarked on ever since the pharaonic times. It has elapsed for centuries conditioned by the ebbs and tides of the exchange of water with religion, interstate conflict and European imperialism. Besides the primal role of the river in engineering the interstate relation has been given marginal attention. However, the relation was substantially the 'gift of the Nile' which was the artery that fuses the cultures and the civilizations of the peoples within its course and without. On the other hand, to the extent that the Nile serves as cultural melting pot, it has also been an object of discontent in the nitty-gritty of inter-state relation which is usually depicted as 'fraternal affinity.' Therefore, this paper examines how the quest for maximal appropriation of the Nile water has fundamentally shaped interstate intercourses in the Easter Nile Basin. In fact, the narratives are constrained by overreliance on secondary sources due to inaccessibility of archival materials. Nevertheless, the application of the historical descriptive method and critical inferences made out of it has served to offset this limitation.

Keywords: Egypt: Ethiopia: faith: hydro politics: water: Nile

1. INTRODUCTION

The Nile has an important place in the development of Egyptian culture be it religion, visual art, technology or economics (Shavit, 2000:80-81). It has played a vital role in the creation of Kemetic philosophy, agriculture, and localized religion (Shavit, 2000:95). Moreover, penetrating its geography in the south, the Nile had paved the way for its interaction with the African proper unlike the defensive wall in the North. But, the role of Nile as uniting agent of Egypt with its African neighbors has been a subject of contentious debate (Shavit, 2000:79). According to Shavit (2000:81), barely any of the classical and ancient sources of Egypt and Greco-Roman world mentioned the Nile as a water gate way or a pipe line of cultural transmission and diffusion from Egypt to inner Africa. In fact, Egyptian traders were conducting commerce with the lands south of Nubia which they usually referred it as Punt extant from the beginning of Ancient Egypt, yet virtually all relevant surviving ancient Egyptian texts indicated that Punt and Aksum were reached by travelling south along the Red Sea crossing the Eastern desert than navigating through the Nile River (Phillips, 1997:425).

We can imagine that the indifference of using the river for navigation could be due to technological insufficiencies and inability of traveling upstream against the gravitational pressure of the water. However, the absence of navigations over the river is hardly suffice for nullifying its contribution for the beginning of the interstate relation because the inspirational role of the river for undertaking adventures to its origin should not be underestimated.

1.1. HISTORICAL EXPEDIENTS OF THE ETHIO-EGYPTIAN RELATIONS

Egypt and Ethiopia are tied by eternal bond which neither of them could ... underestimate even during times of. . . [crisis]. Thus, this natural bondage, which dwarfs all other situations, could not be broken by any human force (Yohannes, 2010).

The long but dynamic relation held between Egypt and Ethiopia was primarily engineered by the natural connection crafted by the Nile River. Thus, as it's noted by Yohannis, this interstate connection is 'the gift of the Nile' because the cultural fabrics and other human achievements witnessed in the Nile Valley Civilization were rested on this natural connector and they mighty flow and sink from and to its source. Thus, Nile was the highway of cultural diplomacy and conquest held through hot and soft power. But in most cases down to history, conquerors were either conquered by the river or by its peoples as its elucidated here under:

No one crosses this border with impunity. When the Arab invades Ethiopia, his camels die in the mountains and he himself loses heart in the fearful cold. When the Ethiopian comes down into the desert his mules collapse in the appalling heat, and he is soon driven back to the hills for the lack of water. It is the conflict between two absolutely different forms of life, and even religion seems unable to make a bridge since Christianity falters as soon as it reaches the desert and Islam has never really been powerful in the mountains. Only the river binds these two conflicting worlds together (Bruce, 2009:11)

This quotation from James Bruce highlights the failure of conquests and cultural diffusions from both sides of the divide. But, the barriers that produced the graveyards of the Camels of the Arabs and Abyssinian Mule were not in a position to halt the power of the might river. As it's indicated in the above account of James Bruce, the power of the river as natural connector has perpetuated even after its de-Africanization in the course of its Romanization, Hellenization, Christianization and Arabization.

2. FAITH AND WATER

. . . water is not only a physical substance, biological necessity or scarce resource but it is also an intrinsic part of peoples' identities, cultures, worldviews, and religious perceptions of themselves and the "otherworld" or the life thereafter (Oestigaard, 2010).

Water plays social, cultural, ideological and religious roles which ranges from personal self-identification to the perception of cosmological realms and religious beliefs (Oestigaard, 2010). According to Oestigaard, water symbolism serves for the understanding of religious divinities and for the idealization of cosmological realms (Oestigaard, 2010). In many religions practiced in the Nile Basin, from the ancient Egyptians' cosmology to the idea of the rivers of Eden narrated in both Christianity and Islam, water is taken to be a source of cosmos or uniting agent of the divine realms to this world(Oestigaard, 2010). Hence, the ideas attached to water are still part of peoples' identity and the core of the value systems and the religions in the Nile Basin region.

2.1. THE EXCHANGE OF BISHOPS FOR WATER

The Nile water is not the only issue that binds, if not divides, Egypt and Ethiopia. Religion has also served for figuring out the Ethio-Egyptian relations since the 4th century A.D which is usually cited as the beginning of the Christianization of Ethiopia (Bahru, 2002:8, Munro-Hay, 1991:69). This event has marked a new epoch in the country's foreign relation which was comprehensively oriented towards Egypt. Thenceforth, both the Ethiopian church and state were knotted with the Alexandrian patriarchate which has assumed the sole authority in consecrating the head of the Ethiopian Church (Bahru, 2002:8).

Therefore, the Christianization of Ethiopia made it diplomatically and ideologically dependent on Egypt for about 1600 years till E.O.T.C attained its autonomy from Coptic Church through self-determination in 1950s. However, barely anyone examined the reason that made the psyche, the body and the mind of Ethiopians subordinate to the dictation of the Alexandrian Bishops for about 16 centuries due to the acceptance of the normative explanations about the date of the Christianization of Ethiopia as for granted. However, this understanding is bereft of empirical evidence and

most often refuted by the contemporary local scholars. In fact, there is strong debate among religious scholars in reference to the exact date of the Christianization of Ethiopia. Some scholars refer back to the first century arguing either on the basis of the conversion of Bacos, the treasurer of Queen Candace (Eusabius, 1887) and the two paintings in St. Mathew Church of Italy.

In fact, the historical dating of the Christianization of Ethiopia has hardly any empirical source/s. Historians usually quote the trilingual **Inscription of Ezana**, which itself is vague. Disregarding the debate on the issue of its credibility, the narratives produced out of it couldn't address the fallacy of generalization if we ask the question 'how could it be possible to talk about the Christianization of the state/people/ merely because of the conversion of its leader? In this regard, the date of the total conversion of the broad mass can't be perfectly the same as the date of the conversion of the imperial man. The description of Rufinius, the Church historian, is the second source of historical relevance but it's also dominated with self-contradicting narratives. Rufinius's description about the wrecked ship and the appointment of a Greek captive at Red Sea as head of the Ethiopian Church by Egypt contradicts with Ezana's inscription and as well with his own account which narrates about the coming of St. Mathew to Ethiopia in the first century following the drawing of apostolic lots. Relegating the above narratives for scholarly debates, denying the then 'Ethiopia' an access to Christianity for about 300 years while its neighbor Nubia embrace it in the first century looks anomalous. This limit of historical reasoning in the investigation of the religious history of Ethiopia is probably due to the epistemological plunder made Egypt for ensuring its ideational hegemony for securing a bargaining power in the Nile Politics. Thus, the Nile River and the Coptic Church were the protagonists that silhouetted the key aspect of the relation between Ethiopia and Egypt than other features. Ethiopia's natural position in the supply zone (Tvedt, 1992:79) and Egyptian possession of the suzerain Alexandrian See resulted in a reciprocal quid pro quo of water for cross. Thus, While Egypt depended on Ethiopia for its water, Ethiopia depended on the Coptic Church for its patriarchal authority. Never the less, for the Egyptian mind which valued water more than the cross, the geographical location of Ethiopia at the head waters of the Nile marked a relation packed of mistrust.

2.2. THE ALEXANDRIAN PATRIARCHICAL HEGEMEONY

Egyptians were well aware of the role of religious institutions for realization of their dream over the Nile long before their imperialist expansion and military encroachment in the horn of Africa. Taking this in mind, in the long historic tie, the Alexandrian Bishops heavily invested their labor to turn mythologies and cosmogony into a core cultural identity of Ethiopian society (Bahru, 2002:8, Beshir, 1984). Therefore, they were serving as emissary for the enculturation of Ethiopian society with the veneration and fear of streams whose imprints still felt everywhere in the country.¹In a dispassionate study of the religious history of the country, we find that every single Bishop from the See of Alexandria was serving as political pope. Thus, to control the secular affairs of the state and as well the religious beliefs of the peoples, these religious figures associated themselves with the palace men. Besides, the Alexandrian Bishops were entitled with the ultimate power to decide on the legitimacy of the political figureheads that can rule the country. Ethiopian monarchs were anointed by Coptic Bishops who were even held sway in courts. Thus, they were serving both as political and spiritual representatives (Paulos, 2005:243). They were also serving as an important bargaining chip for Egypt in times of misunderstanding. Besides blessing the coronation of kings, the popes were also active in unmaking them. They instigate a protest against rulers of the country such as Tewodros IV and Lejilyassu using the church as epicenter of the protest. Thus, disguise themselves in the question of the church, the Egyptians were intervening in the internal political affairs of Ethiopia. For instance, after the defeat of DejjachWube at the battle of Deresege, the captive Abune, AbuneSelama, was affiliated with Tewodros IV and blessed him in his coronation in return for enforcing the Tewahido doctrine. But eventually this mutuality weakened and ultimately Tewodros found himself beset in an opposition spearheaded by priests under the tutorship of the Abune. This can be inferred from the 'imprisonment of AbuneSelama at Meqedela' (Paulos, 2005:46). Though in most cases the church opposition against Tewodros IV narrated as internal contradiction between the modernization project of the state and the church resistance against the program, the opposition was initially an outside driven and initiated by AbuneSelama, the agent of the Egyptian policy, in response to Tewodros's obsession against the them and suspicion about the diversion or damming of the Nile as part of his economic modernization program. Bahru, underestimating the deep seated Egyptian motive of controlling every aspect of the peoples of Ethiopia under the Church and thereby dictating the state affairs, he attributed the root of the contradiction to turban controversy (Bahiru, 2002:35) and of course the issue of land right. In fact, it's very difficult to disentangle the place of Egyptians in the history of Ethiopia. For the majority of the peoples undertaking the case were Ethiopians, the discontent might sound to have only an internal

¹The researcher observed the sacrificial ceremony of slaughtering oxen to Abbay River in Gojjam which is intact till today. The peoples living in and around 'Debreziet' also believe in the existence of Lucifer in Hora and Bisheftu lakes. There are a lot of streams which are referred as abodes of devil in Tigray. In fact, the foundations of this issue demands an in-depth critical ethnographic research in the future.

dimension. However, it has to be noticed that they were misdirected in spirit by the head of the church, who was at odd with Tewdros IV. Though Tewdros IV come up with a strong belief of defeating the 'undefeatable' and attain the state power by crushing the squabbling noble of the era of princes by dint of his power, yet he couldn't escape the established trap for securing political legitimacy through the blessing of the Egyptian Abune. This engrained mentality of the reigning kings that valued this blessing for the attainment of political legitimacy than the will and the aspiration of the people has cost the country high due to internal strife to capture the throne and the Abune. The horrific atrocities witnessed in such wrangling could inspire anyone to ask the question 'how spiritual father that works for the celestial kingdom legitimize political power secured by bloodshed? It's also perplexing why the Ethiopian rulers who were fighting Egyptians at the coast, allowed the Bishops to do whatever they want in the hinterland. The development of religious nationalism was also crippled and the quest for autocephaly silenced through the infusion of frightening myths and in few cases with the application of coercion. Meresae Hazan in his book, documented the cost paid in the long history of struggle for assuming an autocephalous status by culminating the domination of the Alexandrian church, which was instrumentalizing the Nicæan Creed for maintaining the statuesque. Mandated by the *FethaNagast* and the apocryphal canon of the Nicæan Creed, every head Bishop of the Ethiopian Church was appointed by the Egyptian Patriarch in Alexandria until 1959. This claim is vividly indicated in *FethaNagast* as follows:

ወሰብእኢትዮጵያይሚሙላዕሌሆሙሊቀጳጳሳትእምራኒሆሙወኢበስምረተርዕሰሙእስመጳጳሰሙወዲበስምረተርእሰሙእስመጳጳሰሙይኸወን እምታትተእዴሀለበአለአስከንድርያወወእቱዘይደልዋይሚሙላዕሌሆሙሊቀእምሀቤሀዘወእቱመትሕተሊቀጳጳሳት (FethaNagast, 1990:30)

(Lit. Trans.)

[Ethiopians are not allowed to be assigned as patriarchs from their own for they are under the suzerainty of the Alexandrian seat and therefore, it's only the Coptic Fathers that can hold the position with exception of ranks below arch bishop.]

In its earliest form, the *FethaNagast* predates the Nicæan apocryphal canon. This fact indicates that the prohibition of the assignment of Ethiopian citizens as heads of its Church is rooted in the original version of the *FethaNagast* than the Nicæan Creed (Mahoney 1994:77). Though the main concern of the council of Nicæa was dealing on the teachings of Arius, which focuses on the subordinationism, it also came up with the nucleus of the first universal code of ecclesiastical law (Mahoney, 1994:74). The council issued 20 canons and 84 apocryphal canons. As in the case of *FethaNagast*, the apocryphal canon which focuses on episcopal jurisdiction and about Ethiopian dependence on the episcopacy of Alexanderia was canon 42 (Mahoney, 1994:79). Using this pseudo privilege, whenever the quest for a new Abune coincided with a nadir in Ethio-Egyptian relations, Egypt delays and sometimes denies appointments (Fasil, 2011). But, this doesn't mean that the entire history of water-bishopric exchange was full of trickery.

For most traditional societies, the identification of their faith is almost identical with their nation. It's unimaginable for them to visualize the independent existence of these two social phenomena (Eyasu, 1990:3). However, the Ethiopian society was hardly experiencing the convergence of these two elements till the rise of religious nationalism in 1950s. Of course, the Caesaropapist kings of Ethiopian who were acting in defiance of the autonomy of the Church were requesting the Coptic Church for autocephalous status. But he was Hareb who raised the question first as its clearly stated by BlataMersea Hazen (Mersea Hazen 1964:6). Mersea's narrative reads in Amharic as follows:

ጳጳስናሊኢትዮጵያወያንጳጳሳትእንዲፈቀድለመጀመሪያጊዜየተጠየቀውናከርከርየተነሳውበ፲፩ኛውመቶከፍለዘመንላይነበር፡፡የኢትዮጵያንጎሰቅዱስሀርቲየምንግስቱንናየህዝቡንስፋትተመልከቶበ፩ግብጻዊሊቀጳጳሰብቻየወንጌልንስብከትበየጎረቤትሰየማይቻልስለሆነበተጨማሪኢትዮጵያወያንኤጳጳሳትይሾሙልኝሲልጠየቀ፡፡(Mersea Hazen 1964:6)

(Lit. trans.)

[Observing the expansion of his kingdom and the increment of its population, and the difficulty of addressing the Gospel under single Egyptian Bishop, in the 11th century St. King Hareb of Ethiopia has requested the Egyptian Pope for the assignment of Ethiopian Bishops.]

As it's indicated in the description of Haggai about the politicization of religion and water in the Nile Basin, the former was pivotal for shaping popular imaginations of one another (Haggai, 2000:23). Nonetheless, following the Arabization of Egypt religious differences continue to animate mutual suspicion in Ethio-Egyptian tussles over the Nile. In short, the whole course of the interstate relation of Ethiopia and Egypt that has elapsed till the birth of Ethiopian religious nationalism for establishing an autocephalous church in 1950s (Wodu, 2006: 28-78) can be

named as 'physico-spiritual symbiosis' in the words of Tesfay (2001:59) thought this mutuality faced an early crisis during the period of the Zagwe dynasty. This crisis oriented mind set is still intact as it's reflected in the Egyptian wave of thoughts in reference to the inauguration the Ethiopian Grand Renaissance Dam.

3. THE ALLEGED DEFLECTION OF THE NILE BY ETHIOPIAN EMPERORS

Egyptians were anxious about the blockade of the river by Ethiopian leaders as it's indicated in the exchanges of the long multifaceted relationship. This fear emanates from Ethiopian emperors' claim as defenders of Christian Minorities in Egypt and their usual reliance on the river as source of bargaining gizmo. As early as the Middle Ages, Ethiopian emperors were supporting the Coptic brethren. They were threatening to divert the Nile whenever they received complaints from them (Silverberg, 1990:178-79).The analyzes of this claim from realist argued about the incapability of Ethiopian rulers to divert the river though Ethiopia controlled the headwaters of Nile. This argument is bereft of the Ethiopian excelled experience in construction technology as it's witnessed in the building of the world wonders such as the obelisk of Aksum.The generation that had carved the obelisk of Aksum could do the same thing in damming the Nile but historically Nile was in the outreach of the mind horizon for it's believed to be sacred river.Though the threat of blocking Abay proved very effective for centuries in safeguarding the appointment of Egyptian bishops, it was merely verbal in practical terms (Pankhurst, 2000:25, 34).

Generally, the long annals of Blue Nile revolved mainly around the idea that by controlling the river, Ethiopia could deprive Egypt of its life-blood neglecting its reliance on the Coptic Church as the source of Patriarchal Authority. The Egyptians were suspicious of progressive leaders such as AtseLalibäla (Bairu, 2000:160). In fact, the Egyptians were against the legitimacy of the Zagwe dynasty since its inception. Their fear about diverting the river rooted in this antipathy and the eventually increment of his glory. However, the Blue Nile was out of the reaches of the Zagwe Kingdom. It was initially incorporated and Christianized during the reign of AtseAmdätsion(Henze,2000: 41,Bairu,160).The emperors of the Solomonic dynasty, especially Dawit II, Yéshaq and ZärýaYaéqob went on asserting Ethiopia's control of the river as a tool in their intercontinental relations. They also worked to cement this concept of mastering the Nile in religious terms, identifying the Abbay with the Biblical Gion. Following the end of the Zagwe rule and the accession of YukunoAmlak to power in 1270, Egypt has refused to send its bishop backing Sultanate of Yifat.

4. FAITH AND BULLETS: MILITARY INVASION

In order to perpetuate its hegemonic control, Egypt has conducted a military encroachments of over the horn of Africa. Which is the basic hallmark of the win-loss hydro political strategy and foreign policy (Fasil, 2011).Egypt historically thwarted efforts to develop the Nile through military threat. In the pre-colonial period, it had secured structural power by capturing resources through military means as it's manifested in Muhammad Ali's systematic use of modernization discourse to legitimize territorial aggrandizements towards the Nile in first half of 19th century & Khedive Ismail's incursions of Ethiopia (Turton, 2000).

The founder of modern Egypt, Muhammad Ali, involved Egypt in a series of wars. He was expansionist unlike his son who was inward looking but similar with khedive Ismail who was more like his grandfather. As part of his modernization program, Muhammad Ali had labored high for the assurance of the uninterrupted flow of the Nile which could be realized through the conquests of Ethiopian head waters. Egypt's conquest of the Sudan in 1821(Bahru, 2002:24) was largely motivated by its desire of controlling the entire Nile system and for using it as springboard for the annexation of Ethiopia from the West. Accordingly, in the early period Egypt succeeded annexing Kassala [1834], Metema [1838], Kunama [1869] and Bogos[1872]. These peripheral lands under the siege of Egyptians served them as spring board for the grand military operations against the rest part of Ethiopia which was launched in 1870s.

In this period, Egypt's foreign policy towards Ethiopia has been spearheaded by zero sum hydro political game (Girma, 2000: 4) where by Egypt was pre-determined to win always. Under Khedive Ismael, it had a grand expansionist plan of making the Nile an Egyptian lake by annexing all the geographical areas of the basin. Therefore, following the successful military expedition of Napier, the Egyptians who allowed him a gate way through Massawa begin to underestimate the power of Ethiopia in defending itself and they assigned Munzinger for architecting their expansion strategy. In response to this call, Munzinger advised Egyptians as: "Ethiopia with a disciplined army and a friend of the European powers is a danger for Egypt. Egypt must either take over Ethiopia and Islamize it or retain it in anarchy and misery" (Rubenson, 1976:169).The hasty aspiration to put this plan in to effect has led to the battles of Gundet and Gura which were concluded with the humiliating defeat of Egypt along with European and American mercenaries (Bahru, 2002: 50-54) by the Ethiopian counter offense. In spite of the mammoth debacle, Egyptian raids

against Ethiopia has continued guided by the principles of Munzinger with temporary halt due to the British occupation.

5. CONCLUSION

Historically water has always been the most important catalyst of the interstate relation between Ethiopia and Egypt. Moreover, while Egypt depended on Ethiopia for its water, Ethiopia was dependent on the Coptic Church for its patriarchal authority. Hence, it's safe to argue that the cross and the water politics were intimately intertwined in the millennial of Nile dispute. Therefore, the Nile River and the Coptic Church were the protagonists that silhouetted the key aspect of the relation between Ethiopia and Egypt than other features. However, Ethiopia's natural position in the supply zone of the Nile marked a relation packed of mistrust.

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