

My thoughts on Ethiopia's "Renaissance Dam" and its strained relations with Egypt
By Lucy Gebre-Egziabher

Many years ago, I was chatting with Professor Teshome Gabriel (may God rest his soul) on various topics in Cinema. Prof. Gabriel was a Professor of Cinema at UCLA, specializing in Third Cinema. Suddenly, he said to me: "You need to make a film about the Nile"; this came out of nowhere! We were not even discussing the Nile; so, I had a confused expression on my face. He continued "You are the daughter of the Nile...you are from its beginning and from its end!" While I had no interest in making a film about the Nile, Prof. Teshome's statement made me smile and touched my heart as it was so poetic; and frankly, though I felt attached to both countries through my parents; I never really thought of it in those terms.

I was born in Egypt and left when I was 6 years old, when we moved to Ethiopia. Though I do not know much about the country, I have a special attachment to Egypt as she represents my mother, Linda Rizallah. I still have family and dear friends who live there. I grew up in Ethiopia and lived there until I was about to turn 18. Ethiopia, aside from representing my father, Gebre-Egziabher Gebre-Yohannes, is the place I called my home as I spent my developmental years there and feel more connected to the country, its people and its culture. Eventhough I now claim the United States of America to be my home, I feel, as a result of my multi-nationality experience, that I am a global citizen, with a more objective look at conflicts.

In recent days, some of friends, who know that I am half Egyptian and half Ethiopian, asked me what my thoughts are about the hydro-politics surrounding the Nile river that have been headlining the news lately. I have refrained from commenting as I wanted to take time to process not just my thoughts and feelings but I also wanted my thoughts and opinion to be more fact based rather than an emotional reaction or based on my attachment to one or the other or both. I studied the fact from a historical, geographic and political perspectives. And though I would not consider myself an expert on the subject, I feel that I am now informed enough to comment.

First, I would like to state that I wish that Ethiopia's "Renaissance Dam" mostly known by the acronym "GERD" was called something else, as GERD is also the name of a gastroesophageal reflux disease; I wish more research was done before deciding on using this acronym; "renaissance dam" sounds so much better! But, while this may be a personal peeve, it is more on the superficial side compared to all the issues surrounding this conflict that is a ticking time bomb for the entire region.

Second, I would like to recommend a book that I purchase a while back, by Dr. Gebre-Tsadik Degefu, "The Nile – Historical, Legal and Developmental Perspectives – A Warning for the Twenty-First Century"; 2003 (ISBN: 1-4120-0056-4). If it is still available, I would like to encourage anyone who did not read this book to order and read it. It is one of the most comprehensive account on the Nile river and issues surrounding the history of various agreements, geopolitics, and other facts. It also serves as a warning about future hydro-conflicts. I have recently picked it up again to refer to some facts in light of current tensions around the subject.

And now, my position on this matter. First, I would like to state some facts:

The Nile river has 4 tributaries; of its 4 tributaries, 3 originate in Ethiopia: Blue Nile, Sobat & Atbar. Ethiopia's contribution to the Nile through its tributaries totals 86% of the water flow of the Nile river.

When both major agreements about the Nile were signed, Ethiopia was not at the table:

1929 agreement was signed between Egypt and Great Britain (which at the time represented all of its colonies in the region, who are considered Nile Basin Countries). “The British colonies then included Kenya, Uganda, Tanganyika, and what was known as Anglo-Egyptian Sudan”. (Kimeyi & Mbaku, 2016) Ethiopia, was not part of any talks on this agreement!

“In 1959, Egypt and an independent Sudan signed a bilateral agreement, which effectively reinforced the provisions of the 1929 Anglo-Egyptian Treaty. The 1959 agreement increased water allocations to both Egypt and Sudan—Egypt’s water allocation was raised from 48 billion cubic meters to 55.5 billion cubic meters and Sudan’s from 4 billion cubic meters to 18.5 billion cubic meters, leaving 10 billion cubic meters to account for seepage and evaporation...The 1959 agreement, like the 1929 Anglo-Egyptian Treaty, did not make any allowance for the water needs of the other riparian states, including even Ethiopia, whose highlands supply more than 80 percent of the water that flows into the Nile River.” (Kimeyi & Mbaku, 2016)

Kimenyi, M. S., & Mbaku, J. M. (2016, July 29). The limits of the new "Nile Agreement". Retrieved from <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/africa-in-focus/2015/04/28/the-limits-of-the-new-nile-agreement/>

Territorial Sovereignty: Ethiopia is a sovereign nation and therefore has every right to do what it deems necessarily for its nation and its people. No one has the right to dictate anything to the contrary.

And as a sovereign nation, Ethiopia does not need to “get the blessing or approval of any other nation”? When Egypt, under Gamal Abdel Nasser, built the Aswan dam (1970), did it seek Ethiopia’s or any of the other Nile Basin countries approval or blessings? It did not. At the time, Egypt played both superpowers beautiful (I may add) and with the help of the then Soviet Union, finished building Aswan.

Does Ethiopia have the duty to look out for its neighbors? Yes! But not at the expense of its own survival and development.

Good neighborly approach versus threats and bullying would go a long way on resolving conflicts regarding Ethiopia’s Renaissance Dam. Egypt’s political tactics to destabilize Ethiopia in recent years in order to ensure the “Renaissance Dam” is not completed, is neither a neighborly nor a wise diplomatic approach to say the least. It only makes Ethiopia’s stance stronger. Egypt threatening to go to war in order to protect its so-called “acquired-rights” is preposterous!

Both Ethiopia and Egypt should be aware of the puppet masters! Geopolitics and hydropolitics are at play here. Nile basin countries should be aware that they may be used and pinned against one another in order to destabilize the region. A destabilized region is always welcome to neo-colonial powers who are intent on depleting countries of Africa of their natural resources.

Finally, I am a firm believer in peaceful resolutions to conflicts. I think Ethiopia should exhaust all peaceful resolution available to her in resolving this matter. Not because she HAS to but because it is the human thing to do. But if Egypt continues to use unwarranted bullying tactics, then by all means Ethiopia will have to do what it needs to do for its own survival and development.

May God’s Peace guide the leaders of Ethiopia & Egypt and the rest of the Nile Basin Countries, to seek Peace instead of war; cooperation instead of bullying; common good instead of selfish greed. Amen!