



Popular culture and Nile hydropolitics: Amharic songs about the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam

Abebe Yirga Ayenalem^{a,b}, Emanuele Fantini^{c,d}, Pieter Van der Zaag^{c,e}

^a*Department of Political Science and International Studies, Faculty of Social Studies, Bahir Dar University, Bahir Dar, Ethiopia*

^b*Blue Nile Water Institute, Bahir Dar University, Bahir Dar, Ethiopia*

^c*IHE Delft Institute for Water Education, Delft, the Netherlands*

^d*Department of Human Geography, Planning and International Development Studies, Amsterdam, Institute for Social Science Research, University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands*

^e*Delft University of Technology, Delft, the Netherlands*

Corresponding author: yirga1283@gmail.com (A. Ayenalem)

Abstract

Water conflicts and negotiations between riparian states in the Nile Basin have mostly focused on legal, political, technical, and hydrological aspects of the river and dam construction. The contemporary cultural, emotional, and symbolic dimensions of the river and its dams have been largely overlooked. Therefore, this article explores how the Nile is portrayed, embedded, and perceived in Ethiopian popular culture, particularly popular songs. The *Abbay*, as the Nile is called in Ethiopia, is an integral part of the country's identity, culture, history and politics. The river is at the heart of Ethiopian public space and popular songs, which both influence and are shaped by public opinion and official government discourses. The narratives communicated through these popular songs dramatically changed after construction began for the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) on the Blue Nile in 2011. While most songs had previously lamented and cursed the river's indifference to Ethiopians' strife, newer narratives glorify and celebrate the river and the GERD. This study used discourse analysis to illustrate how popular songs shape public opinion about *Abbay* and mobilize popular support for the construction of the GERD. The article concludes with broader implications for water diplomacy and ongoing GERD negotiations.

Keywords: Songs, Popular culture, *Abbay*, Nile, Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, Water Diplomacy.

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1. Introduction

Water is not only an essential physical resource for human life and ecosystems, but a fundamental part of identity, culture, religion, and worldview (Oestigaard, 2009). It plays different roles across societies; water is at once universal and particular, with common functions and meanings shaped by specific cultural perceptions in different geographical places (Tvedt, 2015). Rivers have become an important metaphor for the never-ending flow of national history—rivers flowed in the past, flow today, and will flow into the future (Cusack, 2010). Water and waterfalls are also significant symbols of nation-building processes and the development of national identities (Nynas, 2010). However, iconic rivers like the Nile are rarely studied from a cultural perspective (Cusack, 2010).

In Ethiopia, the Nile and the Blue Nile are perceived as one legendary river called *Abbay* (Getahun, 2014). Songs, poetries, fairy tales, and ritual/religious practices in the popular imaginary are attributed to the “great *Abbay*,” a source of shared prestige and identity (Arsano, 2007). They contribute to the personification of *Abbay* as “the great father of rivers.” Despite significant transboundary cooperation in the last decades (e.g., the Nile Basin Initiative (established in 1999) which improved “trust and dialogue among riparian states” (Woldetsadik, 2017) and the Declaration of Principles on the GERD (signed in 2015), the history of the river has been marked by conflicts between the riparian states, particularly between Ethiopia, Sudan, and Egypt (Endaylalu, 2019; Petersen-Perlman et al., 2017).

During colonial times, Great Britain was deeply involved in the conflictive water relations between riparian states on the *Abbay* (Sandstrom et al., 2016). For example, Great Britain signed a controversial 1902 treaty with Ethiopia in which Emperor Menelik agreed not to construct any infrastructure along the *Abbay*. Later, in 1929, another treaty between Egypt and Great Britain (representing Sudan) allocated the use of the entire Nile to Egypt and Sudan. This treaty was updated in 1959 with a new agreement between Egypt and the now independent Sudan, but without involvement from or mention of other upstream countries. The subsequent conflicts emerged from the absence of comprehensive treaties and states’ unilateral water resource developments (Bekele, 2016; Cascão, 2008; Ferede & Abebe, 2014). The construction of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) is one such unilateral water development.

The GERD has been under construction in the Guba District since 2011; it lies 60 km from the Sudanese border and has a maximum storage capacity of 74 billion m³ (Zhang et al., 2015). The dam is a hydropower project funded by the Ethiopian public and government (Tesfa, 2013). The dam was formally inaugurated by Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, and its first 375 MW turbine began generating hydropower energy on 20 February 2022 (Fana BC, 2022).

In Ethiopian public discourses, the dam is presented as a much-needed response to the lack of electricity access for a rapidly growing population. Ethiopia has one of the highest deficits in access to electricity (World Bank, 2019), despite its significant hydropower potential (Mulat et al., 2018; IRENA 2011). According to an Ethiopian expert, “no

significant negative impacts on downstream countries have been verified” since the GERD plan does not include irrigation projects (Arsano, 2012, p.4). This aspect “is key for fostering equity and establishing a fair system among the parties” (Yihdego & Rieu-Clarke, 2016, p.19). Proponents hope the dam will bring shared economic advantages, electricity trade, intensified regional development, and integration throughout the Nile basin (Yihdego, Rieu-Clarke, & Cascão, 2016). From an Ethiopian perspective, the GERD represents more than water infrastructure: it symbolizes an “overarching unifying national development project” (Seid and Beyene, 2021).

However, the GERD has also triggered conflict between riparian states (Endaylalu, 2019). Egypt perceives the dam as a threat to water security (Tayie, 2019). In Sudan, the dam is perceived as both an opportunity (e.g., flood control and increased irrigation potential) and a risk (e.g., a lack of coordination between the GERD’s operation and the Sudanese dams just a few kilometres downstream). Over the last decade, these different perceptions have placed the GERD at the centre of water diplomacy efforts by the three riparian governments and the international community.

Cultural settings, norms, and values are important for either igniting conflict or facilitating cooperation in water diplomacy (Huntjens et al., 2016). However, cultural facets are often ignored in international conflict resolution (Newman, 2008). Importantly, in conflict resolution, culture “colours” the lens through which one defines the world (Vassallo, 2016) and, when ignored, cultural and historical contexts can make water cooperation unsuccessful (Swain, 2004). Therefore, water diplomacy in transboundary river basins must “include the perceptions, sentiments and values towards water” (Price et al., 2014). Ethiopia, Sudan, and Egypt’s conflicts over the GERD have mostly focused on legal, political, technical and hydrological aspects; the cultural, emotional and symbolic dimensions of the river and dam have been largely overlooked (Seide and Fantini, 2023).

Scholars have yet to investigate the role of popular songs in water diplomacy. To fill this gap, this article analyses the narratives of Ethiopian popular songs about *Abbay* and the GERD and their role in public mobilization through two research questions:

1. What are the main narratives or messages communicated by popular songs about *Abbay* and the GERD in Ethiopia?
2. What role do popular songs play in mobilizing the Ethiopian public around the construction of the GERD?

There are three reasons to focus on popular songs. First, reading culture is poorly developed in Ethiopia (Hailu, 2019), so messages and public discourses are often “conveyed through music through radio and television” (Getahun, 2014). Songs have played a pivotal role in transmitting political, social, religious, and economic questions to the people (Kebede, 1976). Additionally, songs have been used to incite a sense of patriotism, thank God, and express messages of happiness and sorrow (Lulseged, 1994).

Second, popular songs efficiently and effectively reach a wide audience and feed the public with sensational and moving narratives that are intended to galvanize emotions (Jensen, 2019). Music has the power of “mass appeal in its ability to transport an audience

into a variety of emotional states” (Statler, 2012, p.1). Third, singers (and musicians) are mirrors that reflect the society (Levy & Sidel, 2014). Songs reflect (changing) public opinions and offer windows into social opinions articulated in the past (Tomlinson, 2010). Thus, popular songs about *Abbay* and the GERD influence public emotions, symbolic constructions, and the production of cultural meanings.

This article is based on the first author’s MSc thesis (Ayenalem, 2020), which builds on previous studies of Amharic songs about the Nile River (Getahun 2014). It examines how the construction of the GERD changed Ethiopians’ perceptions and representations of the Nile. This large water infrastructure has had a deep impact on popular culture and imaginaries (cultural and symbolic) about the river, which should be accounted for in water diplomacy. We first present the methodology and the songs studied (section 2). We then analyse the predominant narratives before the construction of the dam (section 3) and after (section 4). Next, we discuss how the emotions elicited by these narratives have been used in public mobilisation campaigns (section 5) before concluding with the relevance for ongoing negotiations over the GERD and wider water diplomacy (section 6).

2. Methodology

We conducted a critical discourse analysis (CDA) of selected Amharic-language Ethiopian songs to understand their narratives and influence on water diplomacy. Amharic is the working language of the Federal Government of Ethiopia and is commonly used in public and private spaces as a *lingua franca* to communicate across different ethnic, national, and linguistic groups. CDA sees language as a form of social practice and is interested in exploring how it (re)produces social and power relations (Janks, 1997). Therefore, we complemented our textual analysis with semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions about how the selected songs were produced and used in public mobilisation for the GERD.

We analysed the discourses of the selected popular songs in three steps following Janks’ (1997) operationalisation of Fairclough’s (1995) three dimensions of discourse (i.e., the text, the process of production and interpretation, and the conditions of production and interpretation). First, we considered what the text actually said and interpreted its hidden or implicit meanings—a common feature of Amharic language and culture. Second, we analysed how the text and its meaning resonated with social, historical, political, and ecological issues surrounding the river and dam. Third, we noted how emotions were potentially elicited by these songs among an Ethiopian audience.

Each of the songs is fully dedicated to *Abbay* and/or the GERD. They were identified on YouTube and Facebook from six search queries in both Amharic and English. Due to the length of its Amharic translation, singers prefer to substitute the GERD’s full name with these keywords.

☞ Abbay (አባይ)

☞ Abbay Gidib (አባይ ግድብ) - Gidib (meaning “dam”)

- ጂ Hidassie Gidib (ህዳሴ ግድብ) meaning “The Renaissance Dam”)
- ጂ Songs about Abbay (የአባይ ዘፈን)
- ጂ Songs about Abbay dam (የአባይ ግድብ ዘፈን)
- ጂ Songs about Hidassie dam (የህዳሴ ግድብ ዘፈን)

This search yielded 35 songs from the beginning of Ethiopian music recording in the 1940s (Adu, 2016). The eight songs with the highest number of YouTube and Facebook views and likes were selected. The list was validated by asking the opinion to key informants (journalists, singers, public officers). One additional song was included because it has been incorporated into the primary school (grade 5) music curriculum since the early 1980s, so many children learned to chant it. These selections were cross-checked through discussions with key informants from different institutions, including the Office of National Council for the Coordination of Public Participation on the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, Ahadu Radio and Television, Ethiopian Broadcasting Corporation, and with artists. We also considered songs used in Getahun’s (2014) previous study on Nile songs. This paper presents the full text of four iconic songs (and their translations) to illustrate the thematic narrative shifts about *Abbay* before and after the construction of the GERD. Excerpts from the remaining songs are also presented to complement the analysis.

The nine selected Amharic popular songs about *Abbay* and the GERD

No	Title of the song	Singer	Release Year	YouTube Link
1	Abbay-Abbay – አባይ አባይ	the choir of the Addis Ababa University Cultural Center	mid-1970s	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TakLF-iCH28
2	Abbay – አባይ	Ejigayehu Shibabaw	2001	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TEhG6TD7CuU
3	My Smokeless fuel – ጭነ አልባው ነዳጅ	Genet Masresha	2009	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wEop44Ib-S4
4	Abbay-Abbay – አባይ አባይ	Assegid and Etenesh	2011	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7ZUUCQJL698
5	Quchit to ‘Eskista’ – ቁቂትን በእስከሲታ	Tadele Roba and Mesfin Bekele	2011	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=srBk10swIO0
6	Let us reach high accolades through work – ከፍ እንበል በስራ	a group of artists	2013	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lkcVWfITJWg
7	Abbay – አባይ	Gashie Abera Molla	2013	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UZc4UGfTLzW
8	Wasie – ዋሴ	a group of artists	2018	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QbI0EkP6fIE
9	My sister from Abbay – እቴ አባይ	Abraham Belayneh	2019	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w8GArtFPTFM

“Abbay-Abbay” by Tesfaye Lemma was the first song fully dedicated to *Abbay* since the beginning of music recording in the 1940s. Ejigayehu Shibabaw’s “Abbay” is the second oldest song, and has been covered by many other artists. The two remaining songs were released after construction on the GERD began. Assegid Eshetu and Etenesh Demeke’s “Abbay-Abbay” track samples the first song (Lemma’s “Abbay-Abbay”), but shifts the narrative for contemporary times. The fourth song, “Let us reach high accolades through work”, was performed by a group of 13 artists from different national, regional, and age groups. The performers hoped to convey that the dam enjoys support from all age and ethnic groups in Ethiopia.

We conducted nineteen semi-structured interviews with Ethiopian artists (singers and songwriters in particular), government officials, journalists, and representatives from different audience groups like students and farmers between November 2019 and January 2020. These interviews collected data about how the songs were produced, their role in public mobilization events, their influence on diplomatic negotiations, and public reactions to the songs. We also conducted two focus group discussions with Debre Tabor University students to understand the songs’ influence on emotions, public opinion, and mobilizations. Data collected from the songs, interviews, and focus group discussions were triangulated with information from mainstream media, social media, and official government documents.

3. Narratives before GERD construction began

In this section, we identify two narratives—the homeless river and the deaf river—that dominated popular songs before construction for the GERD began.

3.1. *The homeless river*

The first song fully dedicated to *Abbay*—“Abbay-Abbay” – አባይ አባይ—was written in the mid-1970s by the well-known artist Tesfaye Lemma, shortly before his exile to the USA. It was performed by a choir composed of Addis Ababa University students and volunteer artists. This song has been included in the primary school (grade 5) music curriculum since the Derg regime (1974–1991). Therefore, all Ethiopian students learn it, even in regions where Amharic is not the official language of instruction. For instance, a senior officer at the Oromia regional government’s Culture and Tourism Bureau confirmed, “during music period at lower elementary class, students chant this song in Amharic. In addition to Amharic, children also chant songs about *Abbay* in Oromo language”¹.

The song starts by representing *Abbay* as a physically (naturally) beautiful national treasure (e.g., line 2). However, lines 1–6 suggest that *Abbay* has not helped uplift its nation from poverty. The national treasure/blessing ‘migrates’ to an alien place. After leaving

¹A senior officer at Oromia regional government’s Culture and Tourism Bureau – Interview conducted on 10/06/2020 via phone call.

Lyrics of “Abbay Abbay” by Tesfaye Lemma

1	አባይ አባይ፣	Abbay, Abbay,
2	ያሀገር ለምላም፣	The nation’s greenery,
3	ያሀገር ሰሳይ፣	The nation’s treasure,
4	ያለሀገሩ ዘምሮ፣	Singing outside of his nation,
5	ያለቅኝት ከክሮ፣	It sang out of tune,
6	አባይ ያላሻራ ኑሮ፣	Abbay having lived without a benefit,
7	እስከ ሙቼ ድረስ ሲተረት ይኖራል	For how long would the tale be told:
8	አባይ ማደሪያ ቤስ ግንድ ይዞ ይዞራል፣	That Abbay the homeless wanders: Not having a place to rest its debris
9	ለሀገሩ ልጅ ባዳ ባይተዋር ይሆናል፣	Estranged from its compatriots, for how long would Abbay remain
10	ስንቅ ሳንሰንቅ እኸው ዛሬ ደርሷል።	Look here! Time has come, yet again without us preparing the traveller’s rations.

its homeland, *Abbay* becomes troubled and uncomfortable, singing ‘out of tune’. *Abbay* was portrayed as ‘homeless/ማደሪያ ቤስ/’ and forced to migrate.

This migration to an alien place hurts the people; *Abbay*’s betrayal of Ethiopia and Ethiopians, together with the latter’s inability to give the river a home elicited internal sorrow, anger, and resentment. There was also a strong ‘*quchit*’—the Amharic word for an intense regret, grudge, and a feeling of chagrin, accompanied by a firm intention to reverse the past. Lines 7–10 imply that *Abbay* has not contributed to economic development and has left Ethiopians in poverty. This resonates with the fact that Ethiopia’s agriculture is mainly rain-fed (with some small-scale irrigation). Frequent droughts result in low agricultural productivity, failed harvests, and recurring famine for millions of Ethiopians. Furthermore, most Ethiopians live without electricity, with only 45% of the country even having *access* to electricity (IEA, 2019). Therefore, *Abbay* was considered “estranged from its compatriots”—a traitor that left Ethiopians in poverty and underdevelopment.

The song’s main narratives are: 1) the river is a migrating river and traitor that flows out of the country without contributing to the economy, and 2) there is a need to give it a home. This song calls for building a home for *Abbay* so that it can stop migrating to an alien place. The type of home to be built is not explicitly mentioned. However, it could be inferred that this home should be a dam since the construction of a dam on the *Abbay* (around Lake Tana) had been on the national agenda since the 1920s (Sandstrom et al., 2016). The First Five-Year Plan (1957–61) and the Second Five-Year Plan (1963–67) of the imperial regime in Ethiopia were focused on water infrastructural developments on the *Abbay*, Wabi Shebelle, and Awash Valley (World Bank, 1963).

The *quchit* about *Abbay* flowing out of the country without contributing to its development is found in other songs. For instance, Genet Masresha’s song called “smokeless

fuel/ ጭስ አልባው ነዳጅ,” which was written by artist Tesfa Birhan in 2009 and released in 2010, also calls on Ethiopians to build a home for the river.²

1 ስንት ዘመን ቁጭት ስንት ዘመን ፍጭት	For how long should we be with regret? For how long with conflict?
2 ስንት አመት በጣሣ ስንት አመት በወጭት	For how long drawing water with a can? And for how long with a pot?
3 አባይ አንተ እያለህ ታላቁ ወንዞችን	“While you are there, Abbay, our grand river,
4 መሳለቂያ አንሆንም በድህነታችን	We shall not be scorned about our poverty.
5 አባይ አንተ እያለህ ጭስ አልባው ነዳጅ	While you are there the smokeless fuel,
6 አልመለከትም አኔሰ የሰው አጅ	I shall not look to other people’s hand for help
7 አምላክ የሰጠንን የፈጣሪ ጸጋ	The natural treasure which God has endowed us with, ³
8 ስንሰጥ ኑረናል ለሰው ለራሳችን ሳንበቃ	We have been giving out while we are not self-sufficient.

In this excerpt, Genet sings with *quchit* that the era of not utilizing the water needs to end. According to this song, Ethiopians have suffered abject poverty because they have not used *Abbay* for development. The song implicitly calls on Ethiopians to use the river to eradicate abject poverty and rely on themselves instead of foreign aid. This song was written shortly after the Nile Basin Initiative’s Joint Multipurpose Project to build the first of a series of dams on *Abbay* (World Bank, 2009). However, this Joint Multipurpose Project—a collaborative transboundary project between Egypt, Ethiopia and Sudan—failed to materialize (Yihdego, et al., 2017).

The song urges Ethiopians to stand together to construct the dam, utilizing the God-given “smokeless fuel” to make their country economically self-sufficient.

3.2. *The deaf river*

Ejigayehu Shibaba—better known by her stage name Gigi—is an Ethiopian musician based in the USA. She usually sings for a broad public, both in Ethiopia and abroad. The song “Abbay” was released in 2001 on the album *Guramayle* and has become popular as a soundtrack for documentaries on radio and television after construction began on the GERD.

Gigi portrays *Abbay* as a courageous and mythic man who is capable of alleviating economic crises in Ethiopia (“we are thirsty; we are hungry”-line 16). Like the songs in the previous section, Gigi presents *Abbay* as a physically beautiful national treasure. In line 5, *Abbay* is portrayed both as a grace for the nation and as the cloth for Ethiopia. In the Ethiopian poetry tradition of “wax and gold”, Amharic words can have double or triple meanings; hidden and salient meanings (the gold) lie behind the literal meaning (the wax).

²This song will be further discussed in section 5.
³Getahun (2014), the translation was found on page 9.

1	የማያረጅ ውበት የማያልቅ ቁንጅና	“Timeless magnificence, unfading beauty,
2	የማይደርቅ የማይነጥፍ ለዘመን የጻና	That prevail for ages never drying up,
3	ከጥንት ከፅንሰ አዳም ገና በዘፍጥረት	From the creation of Adam, from Genesis,
4	የፈለሰ ውሃ ፈልቆ... ከገነት	A water that sprang from heaven”,
5	ግርማ ሞገሰ... ያገር ጸጋ ያገር ልብሲ	Grace, a blessing to the nation, cloth of the nation,
6	ግርማ ሞገሰ... አባይ....	Grace, Abbay...
		[One repetition of lines 5 and 6]
7	የበረሃው ሲሳይ (4×)	Manna of the desert (4×)
8	ለመጭህ ተነሱ አንቀጠቀጣቸው	“They rose up to roar, it made them shudder,
9	መሆንህን ሳላውቅ ስጋና ደማቸው	I did not realize you were their blood and flesh” ⁴
10	የሚበሉት ውሃ የሚጠጡት ውሃ	The water they drink; the water they eat
11	አባይ ለጋሲ ነው በዚያ በበረሃ	Abbay is generous there, in that desert.
12	አባይ... አባይ...አባይ...አባይ....	Abbay, Abbay, Abbay, Abbay
13	አባይ ወንዛ ወንዙ;	Abbay the very river with its parts,
14	ብዙ ነው መዘዙ	It will bring wide-ranging problems
		[One repetition of lines 12 and 13]
		[Longish instrumental ...]
		[Begins song again, repeating lines 1–6
		followed by another repetition of line 6 & 4;
		repeats line 7 once]
		[Longish instrumental ...]
15	አባይ የወንዝ ውሃ አትሆን እንደሰው	Abbay, water of the river! You are not humane
16	ተራብን ተጠማን ተቸገርን ብለው	You do not listen to our plea: “we are thirsty; we are hungry”
17	አንተ ወራጅ ውሃ ቢጠሩህ አትሰማ	You down-streaming water, neither you hear their call
18	ምን አስቀምጠሃል በግብፆች ከተማ	Tell us, what you find in the Egyptian cities dear
		[Two repetitions of line 12 and 13
		plus two repetitions of line 7]

In this text, the cloth would make Ethiopia beautiful (for physical beauty) while serving as a veil to protect it from problems like “hunger and thirst” (line 16).

However, lines 15–18 blame *Abbay* for abandoning Ethiopians at a critical time. Though the river provides food and drink for the Egyptians, it is deaf and blind to Ethiopians’ suffering and lack of food and water. With anger, sadness, and *quchit*, Gigi demands that *Abbay* heal from its deafness and uplift Ethiopians from poverty and drought. This excerpt intends to provoke *quchit* to (symbolically) bring *Abbay* back to its homeland and uplift Ethiopians from hunger and thirst. Gigi praises the river’s natural beauty, emphasizes its importance to Ethiopians and downstream riparian countries, and elicits *quchit* to bring the migrant river back home.

These three songs—released before construction on the dam began—all acknowledge the beauty and the importance of the river, but also blame it for betraying Ethiopia and

⁴Getahun (2014), the translation was extracted from Page – 9

failing to contribute to development. These songs instil *quchit* in the audience and implicitly call for bringing the river back by building it a home. In the broader Ethiopian public socio-political context and imaginary, such a home would usually take the form of a dam.

4. Narratives after construction began on the GERD

The beginning of construction of the GERD in spring 2011 marked a proliferation of new songs and a narrative shift. These more recent songs have a cheerful and optimistic tone. The river is now portrayed through three main narratives: the homecoming of *Abbay*, the re-unifying dam, and the making of history.

4.1 The homecoming of Abbay

After construction of the GERD began, *Abbay* was portrayed as a river coming back home to listen to Ethiopians and uplift them from poverty. One such song is “Abbay-Abbay,” performed by the Children and Youth Theatre in Addis Ababa. Assegid Eshetu and Etenesh Demeke produced this song, which was released in April 2011, immediately after construction of the GERD began. According to Mr. Andualem Wubishet, a senior GERD public mobilization expert at Addis Ababa City Administration, this was the most popular song among children and was frequently used during public mobilization activities for the dam at schools. The song starts by quoting the first four lines of Tesfaye Lemma’s classic song discussed above. It then completely changes the message, claiming that the time has come to stop lamenting.

1	አባይ (8x) ያገር አድባር ያገር ሲሳይ	“Abbay (8x), an icon of the country; treasure of the country
2	ያላገሩ ዘምሮ	Singing outside of its country
3	ያለቅኝት ደርድሮ	Singing out of tune
4	ዐባይ ያላሻራ ኑሮ	Abbay having lived without a fingerprint, [humming the 1 st 4 lines]
5	እንጉርጉሮ ይብቃ ይብቃ	Let the lamentation end let it end
6	ይገባል ውዳሴ...	Time for thanks giving,
7	እንጉርጉሮ ይብቃ በሉ ይብቃ	Let the lamentation end say let it end
8	ይገባል ውዳሴ	time for thanks giving
9	ገዛውን ጀምሯል አባይ በሀዳሣ	Abbay has started a journey in renaissance
10	ትውልድ እንደ ጅረት ... ጅረት	Generations, like waterfall waterfall
11	የተቀባበለው	(generations) relayed it,
12	ትውልድ እንደ ጅረት ... እንደ ጅረት	Generations, like waterfall like waterfall
13	የተቀባበለው	(generations) relayed it”,
14	ቁጭት ጸጸት ስቃይ ዛሬ ሊቆጭ ነው	<i>Quchit</i> , regret and suffering is about to end today.
15	ቁጭት ጸጸት ስቃይ ሀይ ባይ ሊያገኝ ነው	<i>Quchit</i> , regret and suffering has got a listener. [repetition of lines 5–15]

16	ያገሬ ሰው ተነስ	My compatriot stand up,
17	ሆ ሆ ... ሆ በል ለአባይ	Ho ho ... say ho for Abbay
18	ገልበትህን ኢድስ	replenish your energy, your force
19	ሆ ሆ ... ሆ በል ለአባይ	Ho ho ... say ho for Abbay
20	ተባብረን እንስራው ...	Let's build it together
21	ሆ ሆ ... ሆ በል ለአባይ	Ho ho ... say ho for Abbay
22	አባይን በጋራ ...	Together (let's dam) the Abbay
23	ሆ ሆ ... ሆ በል ለአባይ	Ho ho ... say ho for Abbay
		[repetition of 16–23]
24	ለትውልድ የሚተርፍ ... እዎ የሚተርፍ	That which benefits generations to come Yes which benefits
25	ስራን ስርቶ ማለፍ..... ስርቶ ማለፍ	To leave good work behind To leave good work.
		[repetition of 24–25]
26	ሀሊናን ይሰጣል ወደር የለሽ አረፍት (4×)	It gives immense satisfaction
		[repetition of lines 5–15]
27	ጨለማውም ይብቃ	May the darkness end
28	ሆ ሆ ... ሆ በል ለአባይ	Ho ho ... say ho for Abbay
29	ለብርሃን እንብቃ	May we get to see light
30	ሆ ሆ ... ሆ በል ለአባይ	Ho ho ... say ho for Abbay
31	ተባብረን እንስራው	Let's collaborate and do it
32	ሆ ሆ ... ሆ በል ለአባይ	Ho ho ... say ho for Abbay
33	በሰላም በጋራ	(let's do it) together in peace
34	ሆ ሆ ... ሆ በል ለአባይ	Ho ho ... say ho for Abbay
		[repetition of lines 26–32]
35	እኛ ብቻ አንልም ... እዎ አንልም	We would not say it is just for us ... no we would not say that
36	ጥቅሙ የጋራ ነው ... የጋራ ነው	The benefit is for all It is for all
		[one repetition of lines 34–35]
37	ወትሮም ባህላችን ተካፍሎ መብላት ነው (4×)	It is our culture to share and to eat together (4x)
38	ተካፍሎ መብላት ነው	It is to share and to eat together
39	ተካፍሎ መብላት	to share and to eat together
		[3 repetitions of lines 37 & 38]

Lines 7–9 say that it is time to end lamenting and *quchit*. The people should start giving thanks to *Abbay* because the river has symbolically started its journey back home and will finally deliver the long-denied benefits to Ethiopians via the GERD. This message is reinforced in the official video for the song, which depicts children happily frolicking around Asegid, the singer. The video begins with melancholy to evoke *quchit*. However, when the singers realize that *Abbay* is coming back because of the GERD (line 9), the emotion changes to happiness.

While generations of Ethiopians’ suffering was unaddressed (lines 10–15), their dream of constructing a dam (lines 14–15) was realized with the GERD. However, the figure of the ‘listener’ (the one capable of listening and addressing generations of Ethiopians’ pleas) remains contested. Supporters of the power regime at that time claim that the late Prime Minister Meles Zenawi was the listener as he dared to start building the dam on *Abbay* (Shewit, 2015). Critics of the Meles regime claim that the current generation of Ethiopians are themselves capable enough to build the dam (Wasihun, 2012). With the river’s homecoming, the song calls for thanksgiving, ending the *quchit*, sharing the river and its benefits, and building the GERD collaboratively to answer a generations-old demand.

The song “Quchit to ‘Eskista’” (Amharic for *folk dance*) – ቁጭትን በእስከሁታ (published in 2011) by Tadele Roba and Mesfin Bekele calls on the Ethiopian diaspora to return home just like *Abbay*. In the official video, the singers wear American-style clothes to play the diaspora. Diaspora groups, particularly those based in the USA, are perceived to be influential actors in domestic politics. Their political mobilisation capacities and fundraising have been instrumental in anti-government campaigns and support for opposition parties (Solomon 2020).

እስቲ ዲያስፖራ እንደ አባይ ሰብሰብ በልና ወደ አገርህ ግባ	Hey diaspora! Please, get together and return to your country as <i>Abbay</i> did
የአላደገኝ አባይ ቢጠራኝ ገስግሸ	<i>Abbay</i> that raised me calling upon me
ከወንዞቼን ጋራ መጣሁ ተመልሻ	I hastened and returned with our river

The video depicts a poor farmer calling those in the diaspora back home. He knows that Ethiopians in Ethiopia cannot build the dam alone. The song depicts an unbreakable bond between *Abbay* and the people; *Abbay* is a personified entity – the mighty man – that raises Ethiopians, takes care of them, and brings them up. Therefore, the diaspora have a moral responsibility to return to Ethiopia to build a home for *Abbay* since they owe it a great debt.

Another song, “Let us reach high accolades through work/ከፍ እንበል በስራ” (published in 2013), also states that *Abbay* was reborn with the construction of the GERD. It was performed by thirteen singers from different ethnic groups and generations (half of whom had already released many albums of their own). The group’s composition reveals how the GERD is a symbol of unity, even between ethnic groups (Seid and Beyene, 2021).

1 ሳይቆድም ዘመናት እንዳላስቆጠረ	As if it did not spend centuries without going forward
2 አባይ ተግባር ሆኖ ዳግም ተፈጠረ	<i>Abbay</i> is reborn, it became an action

The metaphor “*Abbay* is reborn” implies that it had been lost to migration but is now reborn to compensate for its betrayal. The GERD and *Abbay*’s rebirth will give Ethiopians a better future after past disappointments, suffering, and repentance.

In Gashie Abera Molla's⁵ song, *Abbay* (published in 2013) is asked to come back to Ethiopia. This song is used as a soundtrack for the *Ethiopian Rivers* radio program (Ahadu Radio and Television), which aims to create awareness about rivers in Ethiopia and water generally. Unlike the other songs, Gashie Abera uses a traditional musical instrument called the *kirar*. He opted to play the *kirar* to show the “power of traditional musical instruments” and to “reflect attachments and emotions to *Abbay*”⁶.

1	ሜዲትራንያን አዳፋን ትተህ	Give up spending the night at the Mediterranean.
2	በካይሮ አድርገህ ወይ ካርቱም ገብተህ	Travel through Cairo or enter Khartoum.
3	በካርቱም አርገህ	Travel through Khartoum.
4	ኢትዮጵያ ገብተህ	Enter Ethiopia.
5	እኛ ልጆቻህን	Us, your children.
6	ሰላም ሰላም በለን	Give us: “peace be with you”.
7	እንዴት አሆናለሁ እኔ አንተን ሳለይ	How can I survive without seeing you?

In Gashie Abera's song, the river returns from the Mediterranean, through Egypt and Sudan. The song communicates emotions of happiness and pride. In the popular imagination, *Abbay* was considered a migrant river that did not economically contribute to Ethiopia (Damtew, 2016); therefore, Gashie Abera Molla's song requests that the flow of water be reversed—for *Abbay* to return.

4.2. The symbolic re-unifying power of the GERD

In the song “Wasie-Wassie/ዋሴ ዋሴ” (2017) by the Southern Ethiopian Musicians Association, the GERD is said to strengthen the quality of being Ethiopian. Over nearly seven minutes, *Wasie* (“my guarantee”) and *Abbay* are mentioned 264 and 45 times, respectively. Both *Abbay* and the dam are portrayed as a *guarantee* for the people's unity and for eradicating poverty. The GERD and *Abbay* are important elements for connecting and reuniting Ethiopians across language, political opinion, ethnicity, wealth, religion and age.

1	ዘረ ብዙ አባይ	<i>Abbay</i> belongs to all
2	ኢትዮጵያዊነቴ ብርታቴ	My Ethiopian identity, my strength.
3	አባይ ፈንድቋል ውብቴ	My beauty, <i>Abbay</i> , has blossomed.
4	ኢትዮጵያዊነት	Ethiopianness.

The new metaphor, “*Abbay* belongs to all,” suggests that the dam and *Abbay* have strengthened Ethiopianness and unity among the people of Ethiopia. This resonates with

⁵This is the stage name of Sileshi Demisie, a renowned musician who sings about social and environmental problems.

⁶Gashie Abera Molla –Interview date 07/12/2019 at Ghion Hotel, Addis Ababa

the Office of Public Mobilization of the GERD’s official narrative, which presents the dam as a source of unity, pride, and national consensus. It creates a common heritage that each nation, nationality, and people of Ethiopia can place their fingerprints upon (ONCCPPGERD, 2016). Such unity in plurality is also a feature of Gashie Abera’s “Abbay”.

1	የሰሜንዋ ልጅ የምስራቁዋ ልጅ	The son of the mother from the North, the son of the Eastern mother.
2	የደቡብዋ ልጅ የምዕራብዋ ልጅ	The son of the Southern mother, the son of the Western mother,
3	የአፍሪካዋ ልጅ የአለምዋ ልጅ	The son of the African mother, the son of Mother Earth
4	የኢትዮጵያዋ ልጅ	The son of Ethiopian mother
5	አባቱ ደጀን አናቱ ጣና	Mount Dejen is his father; Lake Tana is his mother.
6	የኢትዮጵያ ልጆች “መጡ እንደገና”	The children of Ethiopia, they have come back again

The singer claims that Ethiopians from different corners of the country have come together to bring *Abbay* back. This song (like others) portrays the river as a masculine entity – the son – while Ethiopia is represented as a mother the *Abbay* returns to.

The GERD re-unifies three groups: *Abbay*, Ethiopians living in the country, and the Ethiopian diaspora. Tadele Roba and Mesfin Bekele’s song *Quchit to Eskesta* (published in 2011) portrays the GERD as a re-unifying dream finally coming true.

1	እስቲ ዲያስፖራ እንደ አባይ ሰብሰብ በልና ወደ አገርህ ግባ	Hey diaspora! Please, get together and return to your country as <i>Abbay</i> did
2	ያስጨንቀኝ ነበር አምናና ታች አምና	Last year and the year before daunted on me (like a nightmare)
3	ወደ አገሬ መራኝ ዛሬ ተፈታና	Now my dream is interpreted and it led me the way to my country

Both *Abbay* and the diaspora became homesick after migrating from Ethiopia. The diaspora also felt a *quchit* for their inability to bring *Abbay* back. Likewise, Ethiopians living at home longed for both to return, as the intro of this song proclaims: “Hey diaspora! Please, get together and return to your country as *Abbay* did”.

4.3 Making history through the dam

The third main narrative in the songs released after construction began on the GERD was a celebration of the dam as a cornerstone in Ethiopian history. In the official video for “Let us reach high accolades through work”, athletes are seen running and celebrating victory on the world stage by holding the Ethiopian flag. This suggests that what has been achieved through sports—Ethiopian runners are among the best in the world—could be replicated in the GERD’s engineering. This song was released in 2013, a year after the death of former Prime Minister Meles Zenawi who spearheaded the dam’s construction.

1	የኢትዮጵያ ግርማ ሞገስ	For the pride of Ethiopia
2	ከጥንቱ ቦታ እንዲመለስ	To return to its previous glory.
3	ታላቅ ብርሃን ይምጣ ከዚያ ጋራ	Let great light come from that hill
4	ወገን በአባይ ጉዳይ ቁም በጋራ	Compatriots stand together on the case of Abbay
5	ኢትዮጵያ ታላቅ ግድብ ሰርታ	Ethiopia, having built a great dam.
6	በአለም ትታይ በአራስ ተመክታ	Let it be seen in the world being proud of itself.
7	ይቻላል ብለላች ኢትዮጵያ	Ethiopia said that it is possible
8	እንምጣላት እኛም በዚያ አጥቢያ	Let all of us come to her this instant
9	ሁሉም በየድርሻው ይሳተፍ	Let all participate within its share
10	የሃገር የውጭውም ሰው ይሰለፍ	Let locals and diasporas line up
11	ሴት ወንድ ሃብታም ሳይል ድሃ	Males and females, rich and poor
12	ላቡን ያፍስስ ወደ አባይ ውሃ	Pour their sweat into the Abbay's water
13	ከፍ እንበል በስራ ከፍ እንበል በዝና	Let us reach high accolades through work, let us get higher in fame
14	እንደገና ክብር ሞገስ እንደገና	Let us reacquire respect and value
15	ከፍ ከፍ እንበል ከፍ እንበል በሉ	Let us reach higher, proclaim that we should get higher
16	ይቻላል ያልነው ይፈጸማል ቃሉ	What we said is possible, our words will be accomplished
17	ሳይቀድም ዘመናት እንዳላስቆጠረ	As if it did not spend centuries without going forward.
18	አባይ ተግባር ሆኖ ዳግም ተፈጠረ	Abbay is reborn, it became an action
19	ይታይ በውጤቱ መቻላችን በአለም	Let our capacity be seen throughout the world due to its results
20	ላገር ይሁን ቃሉ ከቶ የማይሆን የለም	Let the word be that of the country's, there is nothing that is impossible.
21	ከቶ የማይሆን የለም	There is nothing that is impossible.
22	ለሃገር ጎረቤቱ ተግባርታላች	She (Ethiopia) has called out to the country and the neighbours
23	ለሁሉም እኩል አልማላች	She has planned equally for all
24	ሲፈጥራት በሰጣት ልዩ ፀጋ	Through the special grace that was given to her when created
25	ትክፈል ዋጋዋ ቀኗ ይንጋ	Let her be paid her price, Let her day dawn
26	ኢትዮጵያ በፍቅር ተወልዳ	Ethiopia, being born through love
27	ትታይ በአለም ዳግም ተወልዳ	Let her be seen by the world, reborn
28	አወቀንበት እንሙት ማሳደሩን	May we die after discovering the knowledge and skill to keep (Abbay) for the night
29	እየተለምንላት ደግ ደገን	Dreaming, wishing the best for her
30	ለሚመጣው ትውልድ ለገው	For the generation that comes;
31	ህይወትን ቀላል አናድርገው	Let's make life easy.
32	ኢትዮጵያ ፍቅራችንን ትውደድ	Let Ethiopia adore our love.
33	ዳግም በኛ ሃሳብ ትወለድ	Let her (Ethiopia) be reborn through our idea
		[repetition of 13–16]
34	አይተንዋል አባይ ሲፈስ በአንክሮ	We have seen Abbay while it flowed attentively
35	በሱዳንና በግብጽ በታሪክ ተፈጥሮ	Being born through history, in Sudan and Egypt
36	ብርሃን ስናወጣ እዩ ተረጋጉ	Look and stay calm while we bring out the light.
37	ተባበሩን እንጂ በፍጹም አትስጡ	Collaborate with us, but never fear.
38	በፍጹም አትስጡ	Never fear

[repetition of 13–16]

Lines 1–6 communicate that the GERD is a source of pride. It is key to Ethiopia’s attempts to regain past splendour, prestige, respect, value, and glory. The song communicates that Ethiopia aspires to regain the ‘height’ of its past. According to the official video, these heights include the Axum civilization, the Zagwe dynasty and the Gonderian period. The song places the dam at the same level of those historical achievements, echoing a 2010 speech by Meles Zenawi⁷:

How can the people who have built Axum Obelisk, Lalibela Rock-hewn Churches, and Gonder Castle beg? When will we stop the begging? If everyone works with repentance in respective fields by thinking about the country, we have the power to demolish the mountain and have the knowledge to change Ethiopia. (Ethiopian TV, 2010)

Lines 28–31 explain that Ethiopians need knowledge and skills to keep the river in Ethiopia. This alludes to the fact that Ethiopia only established a Ministry of Water Resources and a comprehensive national water policy in the 1990s, meaning the country has “expertise-based knowledge” gaps (Cascão, 2008). The same excerpt communicates how the GERD is a crucial water infrastructure for present and future generations. Lines 32 and 37 call for popular participation and collaborative contributions to make history real.

In this song, *Abbay* is considered a treasure the creator blessed to Ethiopia. The recurrent narratives are: 1) reaching the highest accolades through work, 2) reclaiming past prestige and fame, 3) supporting and contributing to the dam, 4) reassuring the doubters, 5) the dam as a uniting project, 6) the rebirth of Ethiopia and *Abbay*, 7) proving what Ethiopia can do for itself, 8) eradicating poverty and achieving prosperity, and 9) the dam as a pan-African project. The emotions conveyed include power, splendour, happiness, pride, and hope.

In *Abbay-Abbay* (published in 2011), Asegid and Etenesh suggest the GERD marks the beginning of a new era. The music video features all members of the group wearing the same T-shirt with a design depicting the dam (GERD).

1	ያገራ ሰው ተካህ ጉልበትህን አድስ	My compatriot, stand up, replenish your energy, your force
2	ጨለማውም ይገራፍ ለብርሃን አንብቃ	Let darkness vanish and let’s see light,

In this excerpt, the word “light /ብርሃን” has a gold and wax meaning. The explicit meaning (wax) suggests the electricity produced by the dam will generate light. The hidden meaning (gold) evokes Ethiopia’s renaissance. Here, light symbolizes the rebirth of past glory and greatness. In Ethiopian popular tradition, light symbolizes the revival of past heights, prosperity, greatness, and success, while the darkness represents misery, poverty, and deep-rooted problems. The GERD is key to achieving Ethiopia’s prosperity and wiping out poverty. As Ethiopia’s Minister of Foreign Affairs Gedu Andargachew stated, “upon completion, the GERD is expected to liberate 65 million Ethiopians from inaccessibility to the electricity, and 110 million Ethiopians from poverty” (Associated Press, 2020). This statement resonates with the wax side of the ‘light’.

⁷At a Foreign Affairs Security Policy Workshop, Addis Ababa,

After the death of Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, anxiety grew over whether the construction of the dam would continue (Al Jazeera English, 2012; see also lines 36 & 37 from “Let us reach high accolades through work”). Meles Zenawi was one of the longest-serving African leaders and the Ethiopian public worried that his death could create a power vacuum that would disintegrate the country. The singers call on people to remain confident in energy generation and continue supporting the dam. The late Simegnaw Bekele (the chief engineer of the GERD) vowed, “we accepted Meles’s vision, we will complete the dam, we are constructing it, nothing can stop us from completing the dam” (Ethiopian TV, 2012). However, after Bekele’s own death and METEC corruption scandals, doubts circulated again about the dam’s completion. This song and others were instrumental in fostering trust among the audiences and cementing support for the dam as a new chapter in Ethiopia’s history (Teshome, 2018; International Crisis Group, 2019).

5. Songs and popular mobilisation

This section explores how these songs were used to mobilise the population, elicit emotions, and raise funds to support the GERD. The public responses to songs about *Abbay* and the GERD were intertwined with existing and constantly evolving emotions and discourses in the public sphere. For instance, old *quchit* and lamentation tones publicly resurfaced when the Treasury Department of the USA released a statement on 28 February 2020 warning Ethiopia not to fill the dam without first reaching an agreement with the downstream states. After this, a video⁸ circulated of the song “Abbay-Abbay” by Tesfaye Lemma performed by students wearing dam builder costumes. As Mr. Wossenyeleh Mebreku outlined, “when audiences hear and watch the art performances (any) on *Abbay* and the GERD, they are so excited because they have a strong feeling.”⁹ Musician Gashie Abera Molla confirmed that “fans from all age groups have loved it, even kids did.”¹⁰

The two focus group discussions with university students revealed how the songs have strengthened national sentiments and emotional and symbolic constructions (representations) about *Abbay* and the GERD. They have (re)shaped public opinion and pushed the public to contribute to the dam. For the students, the songs “stimulated our emotions,”¹¹ “made us give special attention to *Abbay* and the dam,”¹² instilled “everything-is-possible feelings on us,”¹³ “stimulated pride for our country,”¹⁴ “made us feel nice and regret (for not using *Abbay* in the past).”¹⁵ Assegid and Etenesh’s song

⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TakLF-iCH28>

⁹ Mr. Wossenyeleh Mebreku- Director for Directorate of Music, Ethiopian National Theatre. Interview date: 04/12/2019, at his office, Addis Ababa.

¹⁰ Gashie Abera Molla –Interview date 07/12/2019 at Ghion Hotel, Addis Ababa

¹¹ Debre Tabor University student from Amhara region, 27/12/2019, at Debre Tabor

¹² Debre Tabor University student from Afar region

¹³ Debre Tabor University student from South Nations Nationalities and Peoples region

¹⁴ Debre Tabor University student from Oromia Region.

¹⁵ Debre Tabor University student from Tigray region.

(the children's song), in particular, "influenced us to contribute and buy [treasury] bonds."¹⁶ Supporting the GERD was associated with patriotism and no students were critical of these songs.

We collected anecdotal evidence about how people in leadership positions were also considered part of these songs' audience. For instance, Mr. Zerihun Abebe, an Ethiopian diplomat who has been part of the GERD negotiation team, acknowledged that songs "elicit our emotions that we carry a huge responsibility. They recall that we are negotiating a dam where people's hope relies on and the dam is more than a water infrastructure."¹⁷ These songs even reached top government officials, with the songwriter and actor Tesfa Birhan (who has written more than nine songs about *Abbay* and the GERD) claiming that Prime Minister Meles listened to his songs. Birhan explained, "Someone told Meles Zenawi that a song about *Abbay* was sung and gave him the CD."¹⁸ After listening to it, he praised the singer and recommended the song to be modified because he thought that some parts were provocative to the Egyptians."¹⁹ Despite this censorship attempt, the song continued to be aired in its original version on national media platforms and was made available on the Ethiopian National Television YouTube account. While these two anecdotes do not allow for generalisation about the popular songs' influence on water diplomacy, they suggest that songs do frame a social imaginary that not only influences the masses, but also the actions of officials.

The GERD is primarily funded by domestic resources, including the governmental budget and the purchase of public bonds by the Ethiopian people. Therefore, public mobilization has been crucial for fundraising from all Ethiopians, both in the country and in the diaspora. The Office of the National Council for the Coordination of Public Participation on the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (ONCCPPGERD) was established in May 2012 to facilitate this goal. According to the former director, Mrs. Roman Gebresilassie, the GERD is both a "development project and a history."²⁰ Similarly, Mr. Andualem Wubishet, a senior GERD public mobilization expert at Addis Ababa City Administration, sees the GERD as "a new-Adwa,²¹ where all Ethiopians stood together and have won, again."²² These discourses resonate with song narratives that portray the GERD as a turning point in national history. Mr. Mulugeta K. Muhammed, a senior Arts expert at the GERD's public mobilization office, explained that people's support manifested in mechanisms like "giving money, in-kind gifts, promises to contribute till the end."²³ According to

¹⁶ Debre Tabor University student from Addis Ababa.

¹⁷ Mr. Zerihun Abebe Zegeye – an Ethiopian diplomat and negotiator on the GERD. 25/01/2020 via Phone

¹⁸ 'Smokeless fuel/ Chis Albaw Nedaj' - Smokeless fuel by Genet Masresha was written by Tesfa Birhan.

¹⁹ Tesfa Birhan, a songwriter and actor. Interview Date: 18/12/2019, at Hager Fikir Theatre, Addis Ababa.

²⁰ Mrs. Roman Gebresilassie – Director at the Office of National Council for the Coordination of Public Participation on the GERD (ONCCPPGERD). Interview Date: 17/12/2019, Addis Ababa.

²¹ This refers to a battle on 2 March 1886 in a place called Adwa (the current Tigray region of Ethiopia) where Ethiopians unified to defeat the Italian army. The Adwa victory is celebrated as an annual national holiday.

²² Mr. Andualem Wubishet – Senior Expert of Public Mobilization and Participation at Addis Ababa City Administration's the GERD's Construction's Coordination Office. Date: 12/12/2019 at his office, Addis Ababa

²³ Mr. Mulugeta Kassaw Mohammed- Senior Art's Expert at the Office of National Council for the Coordination of Public Participation on the GERD. Date: 06/12/2019 at his office, Addis Ababa

Mr. Tilahun, head of the Communication Office, “the *quchit* and a dream to build a home for *Abbay*” have ignited the people to contribute.²⁴ Songs about *Abbay* and the GERD have played important direct and indirect roles in public mobilization.

The songs directly contributed to fundraising. For instance, musicians voluntarily released dozens of songs in different languages on the “Hiber Album” in 2016. According to Mr. Mohammed, “hundreds of thousands” of CDs were quickly sold, generating income for the dam. Songs also indirectly served as a “source of information”²⁵ and have generated awareness about the politics of the GERD and *Abbay*. As Mr. Mulugeta notes, “songs were sensitizing the people about the dam and the politics of the Nile River. For example, songs urged us to take the risk of building the dam despite troubles coming mainly from Egypt”²⁶. Furthermore, the GERD’s public mobilization office frequently played songs during their activities and campaigns. They organized Arts Night (songs, poems, musical theaters, and paintings), field visits to the dam, the Hidassie Cup (a cup that moves between regions every year), the Hidassie Torch, a Hidassie football tournament, the Hidassie Great Street Run, the Hidassie beauty pageant, a Hidassie tree-planting programme, the Hidassie Lottery, and 8100A (a fundraising campaign mobile via phones/SMS).

Most of these mobilization projects were voluntarily initiated by different groups or individuals across the country, in collaboration with the Office. Songs were played at all these events to exhilarate the atmosphere, elicit public emotions, and captivate participants’ drive to support and contribute to the dam. Both the mobilization activities and songs instilled a sense of belonging, unity, and purpose around the dam in an ethnically and politically divided country. According to Mulugeta, the most popular songs promoted “Ethiopianism, unity, and brotherhood.”²⁷ The GERD’s public mobilization offices planned an annual “bonds week” campaign to promote the buying of bonds across the country. According to Mr. Andualem, songs were played with the intention to “arouse the public to buy [treasury] bonds and feel more attached to the dam.” He acknowledged that “without the songs, we could not have achieved this much.”²⁸ Mr. Mulugeta agreed: “if songs had not contributed to the fundraising, we would not have raised more than fifty percent of the money we have raised.”²⁹

Finally, songs have been used as soundtracks for television and radio programmes about the Nile. For example, the private Ahadu Radio and Television produces the

²⁴ Mr. Tilahun Dejene – Head of Communication Office, South Gonder Zone. Date: 16/01/2020

²⁵ Mrs. Roman Gebresilassie – Director at the Office of National Council for the Coordination of Public Participation on the GERD (ONCCPPGERD). Interview Date: 17/12/2019, Addis Ababa.

²⁶ This refers to a battle on 2 March 1886 in a place called Adwa (the current Tigray region of Ethiopia) where Ethiopians unified to defeat the Italian army. The Adwa victory is celebrated as an annual national holiday.

²⁷ Mr. Andualem Wubishet – Senior Expert of Public Mobilization and Participation at Addis Ababa City Administration’s the GERD’s Construction’s Coordination Office. Date: 12/12/2019 at his office

²⁸ Mrs. Roman Gebresilassie – Director at the Office of National Council for the Coordination of Public Participation on the GERD (ONCCPPGERD). Interview Date: 17/12/2019, Addis Ababa.

²⁹ Adwa refers to the battle on 2 March 1886 in a place called Adwa, in the current Tigray region of Ethiopia, where Ethiopians in unity defeated the Italian army. Every year on this date, Adwa victory is celebrated, and it is a national holiday.

programme *Ethiopian Rivers*. Journalist Lidya Abebe, creator and editor-in-chief since 2017, said that songs were used to “elicit the emotions of the audiences and assert how much we (Ethiopians) have not yet benefitted from *Abbay*.”³⁰ Songs were also used in the Ethiopian Broadcasting Corporation’s programmes like *Intellectuals of the Nile* (ሊቀ ናይል) and *Abbay’s Era* (የአባይ ዘመን). Editor-in-chief Abera Minwuyelet explained that they “captivate the emotion of the public, give attention to the GERD, and refresh the public’s capacity so as to finish the dam.”³¹

Songs about *Abbay* and the GERD have been instrumental in mobilizing the public and raising funds for the dam. The songs’ “emotional power” (Volgsten 2014) elicited emotions and national sentiments, promoted unity, and acted as soundtracks for different campaigns.

6. Conclusion

This analysis of songs revealed that *Abbay* is not just down-flowing water and the GERD is not merely water infrastructure. For the Ethiopian public, they both have deep and shared cultural, emotional, and symbolic meanings. Before the GERD, *Abbay* was portrayed as a homeless masculine mythic entity. Such songs were melancholic (*quchit*), articulating the need to build a home for *Abbay* and lamenting its indifference to Ethiopians’ requests. New narratives emerged after construction of the GERD began; the *Abbay* became a faithful, thankful, and homecoming river.

The GERD is celebrated as a symbol of hope that can reunite Ethiopians (local and diaspora) with the *Abbay*. The songs praise the dam’s capacity to unite the Ethiopian population—an ethnically and politically divided society—by boosting a feeling of “it is our dam” across the country. Finally, the dam is portrayed as a historical project—a new Adwa to address the generations-old quest to uplift Ethiopians from poverty. Ethiopians hope to achieve prosperity and renaissance through this dam. The new narratives of *Abbay*, as promoted in popular songs, have directly and indirectly contributed to public mobilisation for the GERD. Music album sales have generated income and created awareness; songs have triggered public emotions and nudged people to contribute to the dam with money, volunteering, and in-kind gifts.

Since the beginning of its construction, the GERD has been at the centre of international tensions and negotiations between the three riparian countries in the Blue Nile basin: Ethiopia, Sudan, and Egypt. This study offers general implications for water diplomacy. As shown in section five, Ethiopian water diplomats also listen to popular songs, which might influence their perceptions, emotions, and approaches. The water diplomats seemed aware of the symbolic meanings (cultural and political) that public opinion and

³⁰ Journalist Lidya Abebe – Editor in chief of *Ethiopian Rivers* at Ahadu Radio & Television. 11/12/2019 at her office, Addis Ababa.

³¹ Journalist Abera Minwuyelet – Editor in chief of *Youth Programme* at EBC. 15/12/2020 at his office, Addis Ababa.

discourses associated with infrastructures like the GERD. While songs effectively galvanize popular support for the GERD among Ethiopians, charging the dam with such hefty political and cultural meaning may reduce the margin for manoeuvring and negotiation at the international level. It becomes complicated for water diplomats to negotiate and accept compromises on the dam when it is an issue of identity, pride, and a symbol of national unity.

Our study on Amharic popular songs about *Abbay* and the GERD indicates that popular culture and narratives play an important role in shaping our understanding of rivers and infrastructures. This theme remains largely uncharted territory in water diplomacy, so we call for a joint effort by researchers and practitioners to further reflect on the implications of such narratives in international river basins. We suggest that scholars and observers who want to better understand the Nile hydropolitics consider the cultural and symbolic dimensions of the river and its infrastructures. Water diplomats negotiating sustainable water resource development solutions should not be limited to the hydrological, technical, legal, and financial aspects of such projects. Rather, they must engage with people's emotions and cultural attachments throughout the entire (transboundary) basin area and the impacts that infrastructures might have on those feelings.

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