

Research Article

Personifying the river: An ethnographic interpretation of the symbolic importance of the Blue Nile River in Ethiopia

Abraham Genet<sup>1</sup>, Yihenuw Alemu Tesfaye<sup>2</sup> and Teferi Abate Adem<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Social Anthropology, Faculty of Social Science Bahir Dar University, Bahir Dar, Ethiopia

<sup>2</sup>Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Dire Dawa University, Ethiopia

<sup>3</sup>Research Anthropologist, Human Relations Area Files (HRAF), Yale University

Corresponding author's email: [abrahamgenet2015@gmail.com](mailto:abrahamgenet2015@gmail.com)

**Abstract:** *The article explored core symbolic values, shared cultural meanings and popular folkloric and artistic representations associated with the Blue Nile River, locally known as the Abay River. Based on qualitative, ethnographic design, field data were gathered utilizing semi-structured interview guides from residents living along the Abay River. The specific research site is Wetet Abay, which includes a small town and surrounding rural communities. In addition to interviews, popular Amharic proverbs, poems and lyrics of songs were analyzed to provide the research a folkloric context. Thematic and content analysis were employed to interpret the symbolic meanings of the Abay River through the integration of field data and folkloric evidence. The findings of the study indicate that the Abay River, especially to the local communities, is more than just an inanimate flowing body of water. Rather, it is perceived*

*through a human lens where its natural features are profoundly embodied as symbolic elements in the language used to express diverse phenomena and aspects of people's lives. The Abay River is also a common and unique natural and cultural icon for the people of Ethiopia. The findings of the study imply that the symbolic presence of the Abay River has deep and enduring legacy in the traditions of communities and imaginations of individuals. Thus, beyond its natural attributes and economic values, the cultural and symbolic importance of the Abay River is profoundly relevant for both the local people and the broader Ethiopian community.*

**Keywords:** Abay River, folk proverbs, symbolic representation

**Article History:** Received 10 September, 2025; Accepted May, 2026

**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.20372/ejss.v12i1.3705>

## 1. Introduction

In Ethiopian popular tradition, the Blue Nile River (locally known as the Abay River) is treated not just as a naturally flowing river. Instead, the Abay river is widely considered as a humanized 'living entity' that engages in both amicable and hostile interactions with humans and non-humans. The curiosity to empirically explore and understand this 'humanized' aspect of the Abay River laid the basis for producing this article. The article seeks to explore the cultural,

specifically the symbolic representation of the Abay River by collecting comprehensive empirical data from field research as well as from the analysis of certain folkloric and artistic expressions about the river. To achieve this goal, as popular perceptions as well as empirical evidence demonstrate, we rely on the discernment of the Abay River not just as a natural occurrence, but on its personification as a living entity with a sensibility to listen and respond to humans (Berhanu, 2014; Genet et al., 2025).

The humanization of rivers as real persons with a capability to influence other humans is highlighted by a variety of cross-cultural studies such as Wantzen (2015), Gill (2016) and Anderson et al. (2019). These studies underscore that rivers are not merely natural systems; instead, they hold substantial significance in the cultural, social and spiritual realms of communities. According to this understanding, the flow of rivers falls at the intersection of ecological functions and cultural relationships, networking people across diverse environmental settings and nurturing a variety of cultural beliefs and traditions (Antweiler, 2013; Wantzen et al., 2016).

In addition, rivers carry socio-cultural and emblematic meanings for the communities situated along their routes. As Erlikh (2002), Gad (2008) and Oestigaard (2009) fittingly noted, the flows of rivers should be understood from diverse perspectives including people's social, cultural, symbolic and religious views and values and interactions that surround them. This view is also shared in cultural models of nature and the environment across the world in which rivers are viewed as lively and anthropomorphized beings due to their significant contributions to the symbolism of unity, power and social structures (Bahrami & Saboonchi, 2019; Azeb, 2023). Furthermore, rivers are also widely symbolized to be instruments of animosity, optimism and collective societal mobilization (Berhanu, 2014; Damtew, 2016). This theoretical and conceptual underpinning has led to an increasing body of research across various disciplines aimed at investigating the humanly perceived dimensions of river flows.

In Ethiopia, rivers, particularly the Abay River, carry significant cultural and symbolic importance for the local communities as well as for the broader population of the country. The

Blue Nile's cultural influence is also significant in the lower basin countries. Much empirical evidence such as McHugh (1994), Erlikh and Gershoni (2000), Erlikh (2002) and Goshu (2025) revealed that the Blue Nile River heavily influenced the cultural and spiritual life of the Egyptians, the Nubians, the Meroe and various other civilizations that had existed in the present day Sudan. However, particularly in Ethiopia, there is a lack of sufficient empirical research examining how the communities and the general public perceives and communicates about their interactions with and the symbolic interpretations of river flows, such as the Abay River.

The cultural significance of the Abay River is a rich and anthropologically exciting theme to study as it provides a window for understanding how people think of nature in general and rivers and water resources in particular. However, as highlighted earlier, unparalleled to this richness, empirical research on the cultural aspect of the Abay River is inadequate and limited to certain cultural features of the river, such as its spiritual significance. Especially, after the alleged 'discovery' of the source of the Blue Nile at the Gish Abay River, research works on the river focused on its hydrological, political and economic dimensions, which resulted in the ignorance of the river's immense cultural and social features. In addition, the Ethiopian government's depiction of the Abay River as a principal driver of 'national development', especially after the construction of the "Great Ethiopian Renaissance Dam" (GERD) has begun, appears to be a major factor contributing to the inadequate focus on the river's cultural aspects. According to development narratives put forth by the Ethiopian government, the Abay River is a significant national asset that should be utilized to help the country become a middle-income country and maintain regional competitiveness with the nations in the lower basin. Therefore, discussions on the Abay River in Ethiopia now are increasingly shaped by political economics analysis, both locally and nationally. While the need to harness the Abay River and the economic advantages of utilizing the river are irrefutable, this focus often downplays and overlooks the local cultural narratives established over thousands of years of interaction between people and the river. Principally, the substantial symbolic, spiritual and ritual significance of the Abay River for the local population, whose livelihoods are closely interconnected with the river, are often overlooked and at times dismissed as 'primitive practices' (Oestigaard & Gedif, 2013; Genet, 2015).

Records from some sources provide exceptions to this lack of recognition regarding the cultural aspects of the river. These include the accounts of European travelers and explorers, notably Paedro Paez and James Bruce. Paez documented the physical, social and historical features surrounding the spring at Gish Abay (Martinez, 2019). Bruce described his triumphant personal feeling upon his alleged discovery of the source of the Blue Nile for the ‘first time’. He also noted that pre-Christian and Christian spiritual traditions were practiced at Gish Abay (Bruce, 1790). Since Paez’s and Bruce’s visits, in the later centuries, several other foreign explorers and scholars visited and attempted to document the River Abay and its source.

Among these explorers and scholars was Charles Beke, who visited Gish Abay in 1842. Beke scientifically documented the spiritual practices at Gish Abay and exposed that the people around the source performed both Paganic and Christian rituals, which were closely intertwined (Beke, 1844). The research by Oestigaard and Gedif (2011) revealed that Cheesman was the other explorer who visited Lake Tana and Gish Abay in the late 1920s. In his visit together with his wife, Cheesman noted that the spring at Gish Abay was venerated to be holy, which was believed to have high healing powers. Cheesman also described about Abune Zerabruk, the monk who established St. Zerabruk and/or St. Michael Church at Gish Abay. Abune Zerabruk is commonly thought to have changed the river’s name from Ghion to its current widely recognized national name, Abay. Chessman’s documentation shows that Abune Zerabruk heavily shaped the modern day religious practices at Gish Abay after the source has been Christianized. The research by Oestigaard and Gedif (2013) also asserted the historical relationship between Abay and Abune Zerabruk and the Abune Zerabruk’s subsequent influence on the name and veneration of the river. Oestigaard and Gedif (2009; 2020) documented rituals, beliefs, sacrifices and traditions along the Abay river and discussed the role of water in the history of the Lake Tana region in historical and contemporary contexts. Also, the study by Oestigaard (2011) showed that the source of the Abay River, Gish Abay, had been a site of traditional ritual sacrifices and the importance of the place for spiritual practices has continued in a modified manner after the place has been Christianized.

More recently, Berhanu (2014), Damtew (2016) and Azeb (2023) published articles on the symbolic and social attachments of Ethiopians with Abay by analyzing some of the traditional Amharic songs and poems associated with the river. Berhanu (2014) showcased and analyzed various folk songs that depicted Abay as a powerful entity, an unrecognized asset and a stunning natural wonder, as well as expressing sorrow by criticizing the Abay River in a personified manner over the lost chances to harness the river for the country's growth. Damtew's (2016) research divulged that the local people's emotional, spiritual and symbolic attachment to Abay River was profound. The people's sense of identification with it, and their use of the river's valor as an emblem of pride were paramount. He also stated that, paradoxically, oral traditions reveal the presence of a popular feeling of resentment towards the Abay River because of its minimal economic significance for the people of Ethiopia. Azeb's (2023) research, on the other hand, disclosed how Ethiopians across different generations have built a special cultural affiliation with Abay River by praising the river through their popular songs and poetry couplets.

Although there is some more research on the topic of the Abay River's cultural relevance scattered across the fields of philology and folklore, most of these works were not published empirical sources and lack analytical rigor. Additionally, the previous empirical and published studies on the Abay River have largely emphasized its spiritual significance, with limited attention to the river's broader importance across social, cultural, and ecological domains. Moreover, much of the available research has focused primarily on its source, Gish Abay, while offering little insight into the perspectives of communities living along its banks. Therefore, despite the Abay River's profound symbolic presence in Ethiopian history and identity, there remains—aside from a few notable exceptions—a significant lack of empirical studies examining its symbolic dimensions.

This article seeks to address the aforementioned gap by exploring the popular symbolic depictions and interpretations of the Abay River among local communities residing along the river as well as within the wider Ethiopian populace. Central to this analysis is the symbolic significance of the Abay River, where a symbol is understood as an image, object, person or concept that represents something beyond its literal meaning. The study also makes occasional reference to a closely related term—metaphor, which is defined as a figure of speech that draws

a direct comparison between two dissimilar things. While symbols often convey abstract or complex themes, metaphors serve as linguistic devices that illuminate meaning through comparison. By engaging both concepts, this study aims to shed light on the multifaceted symbolic importance of the Abay River in the cultural and social life of Ethiopians. We believe that the study also contributes and advances knowledge on the empirical and cross-cultural vernacular understanding of people-river interactions in general. Therefore, we argue that studying history, myths, civilizations and the religious and symbolic values of societies living along rivers requires an understanding of how people perceive river flows (Erlikh & Gershoni, 2000; Finneran, 2009). Regarding the utilization of theoretical frameworks, the earlier mentioned theoretical and conceptual underpinnings play significant role in shaping this investigation, but, the study is not rigidly constrained by them.

## **2. Research methods**

The field data collection for this ethnographic study was conducted from 2022 to 2025, among residents of Wetet Abay town and neighboring rural communities. Ethnically, the communities of this study site are Amharas, speaking Amharic as their first language and, religiously the majority of members of the communities are adherents of Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity (EOC), followed by Islam. The choice of this research site stemmed from a series of initial first hand investigations. Wetet Abay, located at the middle course of the Abay River, remains one of the least explored localities along the river, despite its significance as a location for traditional and spiritual beliefs and ongoing symbolic and ritual practices upon the river. This makes Wetet Abay an important area for examining the cultural and symbolic dimensions of the Abay River,

The research is based on a qualitative, ethnographic design, where descriptive data were gathered through interviewing the local residents in Wetet Abay area. Interview data were generated through semi-structured guiding questions, using a voice recorder as well as by taking important notes. The informants consisted of local people of both urban and rural backgrounds and all age groups capable of providing research data. The informants were selected purposefully based on their significance in providing relevant data for the research questions. Totally, 33 people were interviewed, with 21 men and 12 women. In terms of religion, the informants practiced Ethiopian

Orthodox Christianity (EOC) and Islam, with 20 informants EOC followers and 13 Muslims. Data collected from informants who possessed profound physical interactions and cultural ties with Abay provided insights into the symbolic significance of the river that has been shaped over generations through collective imaginations of individuals and communities.

Parallel with the primary ethnographic data, important folkloric information was composed from the analysis of selected popular Amharic proverbs, poems and songs about the Abay River that showcased the symbolic representations of the river. With regard to secondary data, existing academic research on people-river interactions served to define the conceptual and theoretical basis of this study. Additionally, a critical evaluation of some of the most important empirical literature on the cultural and symbolic values of the Abay River was conducted in order to identify research gaps and supplement the findings. The research utilized the methods of thematic and content analysis to discern the symbolic representation and interpretation of the Abay River through the joint analysis of descriptive field data and popular folkloric evidence. Field data was transcribed, labeled and organized by identifying key themes. Based on their contents, the folkloric verses were analyzed and interpreted comprehensively with the interview data gathered from the local residents along the river.

The research obeyed ethical standards. We received ethical clearance from the Social Science Ethical Review Committee of Bahir Dar University with reference number ሰሻ/ም/ማ/ድሀ/አ069/2017. We also secured verbal informed consent from all of the research participants in the process of field data collection and adhered to privacy procedures during the analysis and interpretation of the field findings.

### **3. Findings and discussion**

#### **3.1. Symbolic meanings and representations of the Abay River**

Undoubtedly, the Abay River is the mightiest river in Ethiopia. Hydrologically, the Abay River is the largest contributor to the Nile, which is a lifeline to the downstream countries, especially to the Egyptians, that symbolize the river as a representation of life and abundance (Sutcliffe & Parks, 1999). As an enormous river in Ethiopia and most controversial among the downstream countries, the Abay River is one of Ethiopia's most significant national symbols. It is a river of

profound cultural, social, artistic and symbolic significance in Ethiopia. Moreover, the Abay River holds a substantial religious and spiritual value among the Jews, Christians and Muslims, as it is believed to be one of the four rivers that flow from the Garden of Eden, traditionally identified with the biblical River Ghion (Genesis 2: 11–14). Our discussion of the findings that follows involves elaborating on the aforementioned symbolic representations of the Abay River that emanated from peoples' long-term interactions with as well as perceptions and imaginations about the river. Broadly speaking, our analysis explores and interprets the enduring cultural and national implications that stem from the imaginations and connections of people with the Abay River in a cultural but most importantly in a personified context of the river.

### **3.2. Abay River symbolized as powerful and unifying paternal figure**

In terms of gender, Abay is a river widely perceived in a graceful masculine character. As Oestigaard and Gedif (2011, 2013) correctly noted, Abay is popularly imagined as a male river, having distinct masculine traits. However, Oestigaard and Gedif also revealed that, in the Geez language, Abay means motherhood, representing fertility and femininity. Nevertheless, the river is popularly perceived in masculine characteristics as we know it today among the people of Ethiopia. It is not common for Abay to be portrayed as a mother; it is subtle and concealed by its masculine character. This is strongly supported by rhetoric and popular imaginations, as well as field evidence from informants who live along the river's banks. Therefore, in the Ethiopian popular tradition, the Abay River is conspicuously and commonly perceived to represent a powerful masculine symbol. However, Abay is not just envisioned as a powerful masculine entity; the river occupies the highest position of patriarchy in the hierarchy of rivers.

Information gathered and interpreted from a variety of informants likewise reveal that the Abay River is considered as 'father of rivers', as it collects many tributaries along its meandering course. The Abay River is symbolized as a father that unites otherwise sparse and unrelated tributaries. It is a natural platform in which many streams, big and small, meet and mix. Owing to this natural feature of the Abay River, it is represented not only as a paternal figure but also embodies the qualities of unity and strength. Hence, based on the firsthand experiential

evidences from informants, it can be asserted that the natural attributes of the Abay River are symbolized as emblems of a potent and unifying paternal figure.

### **3.3. The Abay River as a sacred symbol**

The Abay River is a notable river that holds a special and sacred religious symbol. As mentioned earlier in the introductory section of the findings, Abay is a river of the Paradise, which led the river to occupy a cherished position in the traditions of the Abrahamic religions. Abay is the prominent river in Ethiopia which is religiously considered sacred, matching a few other rivers around the globe. For many of the local residents along the river's course, their devotion to the Abay River is akin to their reverence for a church, as the river has taken an esteemed place in the beliefs of the people. The Abay River has played a crucial role in the spiritual practices of those living along its banks. Periodic rituals and sacrifices are frequently conducted at the river's banks. One of our informants in Wetet Abay says: "Symbolically the Abay River is like our father. As children, we even used to swear in the name of Abay, we say "የአባይ ቆሌ ይወቅ- *ye Abay qole<sup>1</sup> yiwoq*". This means "*qole* of Abay knows that I am telling the truth".

The aforementioned explanations make clear that, in addition to its religious value, Abay has a significant place in the traditional belief systems especially of the local people residing along its banks. The river is believed to host a powerful supernatural being referred to as *Jinn*<sup>2</sup> and the spirit mentioned above in the name of *qole* is most likely a reference to this supernatural being in another designation used by the local people. *Jinn* is an invisible spirit, supposed to be beneficial to the well-being of the local people and their cattle if it is properly treated and satisfied with periodic animal blood sacrifices. This supernatural being is often referred to by Abay's religious name as 'Ghion'. Usually the river and this supernatural spirit believed to reside in the river are recognized as a single mighty entity in the name of Ghion. As was disclosed by several informants, the portrayal of Abay as a paternal figure and as a sacred entity are mutually reinforcing. Due to the strongly established religious and spiritual beliefs about Abay, the river is

---

<sup>1</sup> *Qole* is a local term which refers to a kind of guardian spirit. But, as highlighted in the text of the analysis, in the context of this research the name *qole* stands to be another way of referring to the *Jinn* spirit.

<sup>2</sup> The belief in *Jinn* is a long standing folk tradition rooted in pre-Islamic and Islamic Arab cultures, as well as Ethiopian spiritual practices (Dein & Illaiee, 2013; Østebø, 2014; Degarege, 2023). The *Jinn* folk tradition is also widely recognized among Orthodox Christians, Muslims, and various other Ethiopian communities.

envisioned as a strong, personified figure, a formidable father who has the ability to safeguard as well as punish its children based on how they treat him. This perception of the Abay River is also supported by other empirical studies such as Oestigaard and Gedif (2013), Azeb (2023) and Genet (2025). These studies assert that, especially among communities living along the River, Abay is envisioned as a powerful, personified paternal figure with an important influence on the cultural and spiritual lives of the people.

**3.4. The Abay River as a symbol of might and generosity**

The symbolic significance of Abay’s physical might is reflected in its representation of superior and generous features and traits of persons. The image of Abay shades grandiosity in the imaginations of people. The informants similarly stated that when they envisioned Abay, they thought something grand and magnanimous. Correspondingly, Oestigaard and Gedif (2013) emphasize that Abay symbolizes greatness, plentiful and splendor feature. The following traditional proverb reflects Abay’s mighty symbolization.

*አባይን ያላቤ ምንጭ ያመሰግናል*

**Free translation**

**Phonetic transcription**

One who has never encountered Abay praises a spring.

*Abayin yalaye minch yamesginal*

As many other sayings that refer to the Abay River, this proverb is not just about the river; it is a reminder of the need to see things comparatively and relatively. Understanding the true essence of things is not possible until one encounters something greater and different than their usual experiences. Symbolically, the proverb indicates that the Abay River is a reference of might and magnificence. In addition, the voluminous flow of Abay embodies a generous character. As it stands for untamed mighty power, the Abay River also represents bigheartedness and kindness. When individuals convey that someone is generous, they metaphorically say, “he/she is Abay.” The next folk proverb symbolically expresses Abay’s linguistic instrumentality to refer to a bountiful feature.

*የአባይን ልጅ ውሃ ጠጥው*

**Free translation**

**Phonetic transcription**

A child of the Abay Rivers thirsts for water.

ye Abayin lij wuha temaw

Abay flows with abundant water, but a person living nearby (denoted as ‘child of Abay’) gets thirsty. This is a paradox. The saying is not just About Abay and a person living nearby; it is rather a symbolic expression of the lack of something in the midst of the abundance or accessibility of that thing. For instance, what if a shoe maker remains barefoot himself/herself? What if the son of a barber has unkempt hair, insisting he hasn’t been able to locate someone to tidy it up? All these assumptions are contradictions and absurdities. Amharic is a language rich in metaphorical and figurative expressions, and a discourse is praised when it becomes allegorical than literal. Therefore, when encountered with paradoxes and contradictions like those described above, Ethiopians often use the phrase “*Ye Abayin lij wuha temaw*” instead of addressing the issue directly. Abay’s allegorical linguistic instrumentality has evolved significantly, and the river’s symbolic importance for richer and more compelling expressions is acknowledged in various other aspects.

### **3.5. The Abay River as a symbol of superpower**

Abay is a representation of an entity of untamed force that can wash away anything that stands on its course. The river is hard to cross during the rainy season. Along many stretches of the river where people need to cross, contemporary concrete bridges are still uncommon. Though the local communities construct wooden bridges over Abay in several locations, it is a recurrent phenomenon that the horrendous flow of the river during the flooding season sweeps away bridges. Hence, movement and interaction of people across the river is limited during the rainy season. The condition starts to change upon the commencement of autumn. The following popular folk couplet expresses this condition:

አባይ ጉደል ብለው አለኝ በታህሳስ

**Free translation**

የማን ሆኖ ይቸላል እስከዚያው ድረስ

I asked the Abay River to recede, but it told me to wait. Who could keep hunger at bay until then?

#### **Phonetic transcription**

*abay gudel bilew alegn betahsass*

*yeman hod yichilal eskeziyaw diress*

The above folk couplet is uttered by a person who needed to cross Abay during the rainy season for an urgent issue across the river. Unfortunately, the person finds the river overflowing and was told by the Abay River that the possibility of crossing it is not possible until December. Most of the time, the rainy season in Ethiopia lasts from June to September. However, in the couplet we learn that to demonstrate Abay’s supernatural power, the impossibility of crossing the river is extended until December. Cross-cultural empirical evidence shows that the Nile River plays the dual role of bringing together as well as dividing the communities along its course (McHugh, 1994; Mohamoda, 2003). This is also true for the Nile’s largest water contributor—the Blue Nile (Abay River). Abay both connects and separates people residing across its banks. Frequently, those living on opposite banks find themselves helpless observers of the river’s unruly force, contributing little to its controlling, but expressing their pity through songs like the one mentioned above.

The violent and unruly power of the Abay River is a source of both esteem and criticism. It is condemned as it hinders communication and commerce between the communities on either side of the river. However, people do not always accept being helpless victims of Abay’s wildly tough flows. Occasionally, the river’s overwhelming force can be confronted by individuals with remarkable bravery. In her analysis of symbolism and the power of Abay, Azeb (2023: 4) interpreted another popular folk poem as follows.

አባይ ሲደፈርስ ሲመስል እንቆቆ

**Free translation**

ጋሬጣው ጎጃም ገባው ባጭር ታጥቆ

When Abay becomes turbid

**Phonetic transcription**

When it looks like *embelia schimperi*

*Abbay sidäfärris simäsül ink’ok’k’o*

The formidable Gojjame-man

*Garet’aw Gojjame gäbbaw batf’f’ir tat’k’o*

treads/enters it wearing a short

The above poem serves as lyrics in many Ethiopian traditional songs. The poem simultaneously praises the flooded turbulent flow of Abay and a brave and tough man entering the river to cross it swimming. Here we can discern that the flow of Abay is possibly the most powerful natural phenomenon in the locality the poem is created. Thus, Abay is depicted as an image of supernatural power that challenging the river's stormy flow is symbolized as man's great courage and resilience.

### **3.6. Abay River as a symbol of national icon, independence and unity**

Abay is one of the entities in which Ethiopia is represented. Abay is arguably the most significant river in Ethiopia, having such a profound impact on people's customs to the extent that many people are named after it. Both genders are identified by the river's name, for instance, *Abay* (for both male and female), *Abayneh* (for male) and *Abaynesh* (for female). This is because, incomparably with other rivers in Ethiopia, Abay is an adored and loved river for its might and holy power. Many of our informants tend to symbolically link Abay to Ethiopia, perceiving the river as a demonstration of autonomy. Ethiopia has never been colonized, and neither has Abay, as it has numerous tributaries, yet remains a tributary to no other river. All the rivers that meet Abay forfeit their names at the point of merging and are renamed Abay.

Flowing northwards from its source at Gish, Abay enters Lake Tana around a locality known as Kunzila. The river then exits from the lake in the outskirts of the city of Bahir Dar. It is widely believed that Abay crosses Lake Tana without mixing with the water of the lake. The river is honored for this mysterious and exceptional character. By the local people living along Abay and Lake Tana, this feature of the river is profoundly associated with a symbol of independence and willpower. During the second Italian invasion of Ethiopia, the Abay gorge served as a vital defensive shelter especially for the patriots of Gojjam and Wollo led by the famous patriot Belay Zeleke. Only individuals with spirit and courage dare to roam in the valley of Abay—a hot and inhospitable deep gorge. Abay with its steep canyon is symbolized with the bravery of the then patriots who sacrificed their lives to defend their territory in the Ethiopian national sentiment. In this way, Abay is simultaneously equated and embodied as a figure of unique national heroism, determination and pride. This portrayal of Abay is also reinforced by several empirical studies

such as Berhanu (2014), Damtew (2016), and Azeb (2023), who assert that peoples' affiliation with Abay and their utilization of the River's significance as a distinctive national symbol and emblem of pride are profound.

For Ethiopians, Abay is both a distinctive cultural and natural legacy and a national symbol. We interrogated our informants, "What would you feel if Abay ceased to exist?" to uncover their deeper sentiments regarding the river. This question was met with astonishment by most of our informants. One of our informants stated:

If Abay ceased to exist, oh! I would feel as if our country no more exists. Abay prevails through its tributaries. If Abay stopped to flow, it would mean all other tributaries dried up. It implies all the waters that flow to Abay including springs dried up. This means all the drainage area would turn to desert. The loss would be physical as well as symbolic. Abay is an icon for Ethiopians. Those who would die would not only be people, animals and the fauna surrounding the river, but also tradition, spiritual connection with the river, pride, etc. Abay is a breath especially for the people living along the river. In the Bible, Abay is one of the holy rivers in the Garden of Eden by the name Ghion; the Bible says Ghion surrounds the land of Ethiopia. Abay is our pride. How can I think Ethiopia without Abay?

Abay is one of Ethiopia's most significant national icons in which all people and politicians of the country seek national accord and solidarity besides their cultural and political differences. The river is a symbol of national harmony. Abay is a unique river that joins Christians, Muslims and the Bete Israel-s (Ethiopian Jewish communities) in the context of venerating the river as holy, as well as for ritual and sacrificial practices along its banks. In this regard, Abay is also a platform where urban and rural people meet for a common spiritual belief and tradition across its banks. Abay attracts the locals living along the river as well as people from afar. Individuals from diverse religious, social, and economic backgrounds are all united in their deep reverence for Abay. Each of them regards the river as sacred, powerful and influential, making it a shared destination for ritual sacrifices, ceremonies and offerings. One of our informants in Wetet Abay town says:

Along the Abay river, you meet persons and families that make pilgrimages from both near and far, and from all social backgrounds. Particularly, on the eve of the New Year, during the month of Pagume, all of us would go to the river at dawn and immerse ourselves in its waters. You couldn't tell who was Muslim and who

was Christian. We were that closely interconnected. Our collective belief and reverence to Abay tremendously added to our unity and harmonious coexistence.

### **3.7. Abay River as place of childhood memory**

Abay is a site of nostalgic childhood past. For the local residents along Abay, it characterizes their birthplace and nurturing, particularly for individuals raised in rural areas alongside the banks of the river. It is a socializing and recreational space where children look after livestock, learn to swim and herd cattle, interact with their peers while spending time along the river. Abay forms a natural boundary for social groups forming among children and youths on both sides of the river. Children and young people sing songs and climb trees in search of wild fruits. They also play traditional hockey on the fields surrounding the river. Outstandingly, swimming is a scenic activity. In the past where modern bridges were rare over Abay, swimmers help transport people and their belongings by guiding them on traditionally made rafts. The river's current becomes very strong through the rainy season, so the swimmers swim alongside the raft just beneath it, pushing it forward and ensuring a safe crossing. One of our key informants who live along the course of Abay recalls his childhood experiences like this:

As children, Abay was our world. We do everything looking after our cattle around the river. We play, swim and wrestle. We spend our day wandering along the river banks. When the harvest season arrives, we climb *dokima*<sup>3</sup> and collect fruit. How sweet was that black fruit! When we go back home, our tongues turn to black because of the fruits we eat. At times we also catch fish in the river. We remove the belly of the fish, wash it and consume part of it sitting on the river side; we eat it with salt that we brought from home given to us by our mothers. My friend and I were powerful wrestlers and skilled swimmers. Many times we were provoked into crossing the river and confronting other shepherds that were on the opposite side of the river. We catch and drown them in the river, it is only to scare them so they are afraid of us; otherwise we don't hurt them seriously. Next time they see us approaching them they scream and run before us. For us, going to Abay and staying there was a source of joy and amusement. The memory remains in our heart forever.

The other informant—the contemporary compatriot of the above key informant shares his youth experience on Abay:

---

<sup>3</sup> A tree abundantly found along the shores of Abay. It bears an edible fruit that turns black when it ripens.

We tend to spend the whole day around Abay. As we are preoccupied with our swim, play and other activities around the river we don't know how fast the time passes. If we are hungry we may eat fish and also fruits, depending on the season. We also used to suck milk from the udder of our cows. In the rainy season Abay is so powerful, it brings much stuff such as tree trunks. We walk upstream towards the river's section we call Fagitaber, find a log, climb onto it and let the strong current carry us downstream. This was a heroic and hilarious event for us. When we reach our intended site, we exit from the river holding the log; we take the log to our village for fuel...Many things, many moments... when I look back to my childhood, it is Abay that comes to my mind.

Swimming was a valued skill not only for individual development, but also for the service of the community. Another informant recalls an incident from his youth on the Abay river:

During the rainy season when Abay is impossible to cross on foot, we were the most wanted. Travelers come with their stuff and cattle and solicit us to get them across the river. It is we who get newly married couples cross the river when they are invited to either the bride's or groom's parents' homes. The travelers give us special food called *guzguzo*. There was lavish feast on Abay. We help people cross the river and their stuff by pushing them on a raft; we also help cattle cross the river by swimming besides them; otherwise they may be swept away downstream. One day during the rainy season, a man from our locality— actually our relative, was returning from a market buying an ox. He carried also other stuff. When he reached Abay, the river was overflowing. We were called. No one, even other notable swimmers were daring to cross the river because it was overflowing with a terrifying current. But, my friends and I were courageous to face it. We took off our clothes and dived into the river! First, we helped the ox cross. My friends led, swimming before the ox, I followed guarding from the rear. This way we swam through the unbearable torrential current of Abay and helped the ox cross safely. In the second round, we let the man sat on a raft together with his stuff and swam. Everyone was amazed; it was an extraordinary bravery. Now I am old. At this stage of my life, I feel a sense of nostalgia for the moments we shared in Abay; they often return to me in my dreams.

As the voices of the informants illuminate, Abay is an intricate part in the physical, social and cultural lives of people along the river. It is a nostalgic site in people's childhood memory. The symbolic ritual practices performed on Abay during Ethiopian New Year and its eve are also a nostalgic memory to many people who grew up along the banks of the river. As revealed from the voices of several informants, annually during the month of Pagume<sup>4</sup> all the residents of Wetet

---

<sup>4</sup> Ethiopian thirteenth month which usually has five days.

Abay, rural and urban, regardless of religion, go to Abay at dawn; they immerse themselves into the river and wash their bodies. It is a ritual bathing conducted days before the New Year that falls on September first; the bathing symbolizes entering the New Year with purification and good wish. Often, local people do this practice during their childhood and young age regularly. Especially in the past, people along the river used to organize a lavish feast on the banks of Abay as a welcoming celebration of the New Year. All these practices have resulted in nostalgic memory of Abay in the minds of people.

### **3.8. The Abay River as an image of yearning desire**

Broadly seen in terms of wistful imagination, the image of Abay as a yearning desire looks similar to the discussions in the aforementioned section—Abay as a place of childhood memory. However, there are also two different ways of wistful thought and feeling. When we refer to Abay as a childhood memory, we are talking about people who have previously had experiences with the river at some time in their lives, but are yearning for the past since they are currently far away from it, either temporally or spatially. But, when we analyze Abay as a yearning desire, we meant the desire of those who have never really seen the river but have a recurring dream to see it. Hence, the former is recalling whereas the latter is seeking. Then, one may ask why individuals living far away from the river seek to see Abay?

Abay is also a yearning desire to see for those who knew the river only in fame. People living in areas farther from Abay are keen to know the river physically. In the minds of these people, the local people living along the banks of Abay are considered to have a special gift for seeing and experiencing the river in their daily lives. In relation to the craving imagination of Abay, there is a folk saying:

*አባይን ያለየ ቀረ እንደተሰየ*      **Free translation**

**Phonetic transcription**    Whoever has not seen the Abay river lives with a yearning to behold it.

*Abayin yalaye kere endeteseye*

Though Abay is a river of national fame, not everyone gets the chance to witness its grandeur and beauty firsthand. Those living farther from the river that cannot travel to experience its true flow and splendor often find themselves lost in a world of longing and imagination. The proverb doesn't merely refer to Abay; it captures a deeper sentiment, suggesting that the river symbolizes dreams and aspirations that remain unfulfilled. This leads to a perpetual state of yearning and desire for what one has not been able to attain.

Another closely related symbolically significant folk expression in this regard is:

*አባይን ተሻግሮ አባይ አለ ወይ?*

**Free translation**

**Phonetic transcription**

After crossing Abay, may there be another Abay?

*Abayin teshagiro Abay ale woyi*

This folk proverb entails both probability and wonder, illuminating symbolic and factual interpretations respectively. The probability is desperation and has a deeper meaning that is used when someone is in profound sentiment after losing somebody or something very important in their life. It is a longing for a lost chance, but still with a fraught emotion of connecting back with what is gone, whereas the wonder tends to have literal meaning, having to do with Abay's twisting natural course. A traveler may traverse Abay multiple times because of its meandering course through various landscapes. This is naturally astounding, but the situation can also reveal a concern about chance and optimism, as mentioned earlier, suggesting that what appears lost forever might be encountered once more. In general, the proverb represents astonishment, despair, and hope—all of which can occur in a variety of situations in people's life.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The research sought to uncover the symbolic importance of the Abay River in the Ethiopian context. Significant patterns in people's popular imagination and symbolic representations of Abay were revealed by the data produced and analyzed from field research and folkloric sources. The comprehensive results of the field data, folkloric sayings as well as some of the most pertinent empirical literatures have shown that Abay plays a crucial role in being a symbol of paternity, mighty power and generosity, an icon

of national representation, nostalgic memory and wistfulness. All such symbolic significances of the river are interconnected and widely entertained in everyday language and people's imagination.

Besides revealing imperative empirical evidence regarding the symbolic importance of Abay, the research has illuminated that such people-river interactions could be a rich interest to anthropological and cultural studies. In the analysis of the symbolic importance of Abay, related issues such as the artistic and spiritual aspects of the river are not sufficiently discussed in the present study; therefore, these issues need empirical studies in their own. Also, apart from examining key folk sayings about Abay to elucidate its symbolic significance, it is essential to remind that the study did not encompass exhaustive lists of folk proverbs related to the river because doing so would require another sort of research and is essentially outside the scope of this study. Overall, the findings of the research reveal that while the state's view of Abay in Ethiopia has shifted to focus on its hydrological, economic and geopolitical dimensions, the Abay River remains to be a significance presence in the symbolic language and cultural recollections of people.

**Acknowledgements:** Ethnographic fieldwork for this study was conducted by the first author, Abraham Genet, with financial support from Bahir Dar University. Our special gratitude goes to all of our research participants for the data they have provided.

**Disclosure Statement:** The authors declare that there are no competing interests.

## **References**

- Anderson, E. P., Jackson, S., Tharme, R. E., Douglas, M., Flotemersch, J. E., Zwarteveen, M., & Arthington, A. H. (2019). Understanding Rivers and their social relations: A critical step to advance environmental water management. *Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews: Water*, 6(6), e1381.
- Antweiler, C., Forster, L., Groschwitz, H., Gunsenheimer, A., & Noack, K. (2013). Congo River: 4700 Km bursting with nature and culture. *African Arts*, 46(1): 85-89.

- Azeb Amha (2023). *Symbolism and power of Abbay (the Blue Nile) River in Amharic popular songs*. Brill.
- Bahrami, F., & Saboonchi, P. (2019). River as a symbol of power; role of the Kamoo River in shaping Kamoo Village. *Journal of Art & Civilization of the Orient*, 7(24): 51-58.
- Beke, C. T. (1844). Abyssinia. being a continuation of routes in that country. *The Journal of the Royal Geographical Society of London*, 14, 1-76.
- Berhanu, E. (2014). A content analysis of Amharic Songs on Nile River. *Journal of Arts and Humanities (JAH)*, 3(7): 92-104.
- Bruce, J. (1790). *Travels to discover the source of the Nile, in the Years 1768, 1769, 1770, 1771, 1772, and 1773 in Five Volumes*. J Vol 3: 633. Ruthven, London,
- Cheesman, E. (1928). The upper waters of the Blue Nile. *The Geographical Journal*, 85,(6): 489-502.
- Damtew, E. (2016). Friend, stranger, enemy: Ethiopian oral traditions on the Abbay (Blue Nile) River. *Ethiopian Renaissance Journal of Social Sciences and the Humanities*, 3(2): 21-37.
- Dahal, K. (2021). River Culture in Nepal. *Nepalese Culture*, 14, 1-12.
- Degarege, M. (2023). *A History of traditional beliefs and practices in Méça Wārāda to the 20th C* (Doctoral dissertation).
- Dein, S., & Illaiee, A. S. (2013). Jinn and mental health: looking at jinn possession in modern psychiatric practice. *The Psychiatrist*, 37(9): 290-293.
- Erlikh, H. (2002). *The cross and the river: Ethiopia, Egypt, and the Nile*. Lynne Rienner Publishers.
- Erlikh, H., & Gershoni, I. (Eds.). (2000). *The Nile: histories, cultures, myths*. Lynne Rienner Publishers.

- Finneran, N. (2009). Holy Waters: Pre-Christian and Christian Water Association in Ethiopia. *Water, Culture and Identity*, 165.
- Firew, G. A., & Oestigaard, T. (2013). *The source of the Blue Nile: Water rituals and traditions in the Lake Tana region*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Gad, A. (2008). *Water culture in Egypt*. National Authority for Remote Sensing and Space Sciences, Egypt. Retrieved from <http://www.iwmi.cgiar.org>. on October 6/2022.
- Genesis 2:11–14 (In the Holy Bible).
- Genet, A., Adem, T. A., & Tesfaye, Y. A. (2025). Aspects of local beliefs, spiritual practices and rituals performed along Abay River in Ethiopia. *African Identities*, 1-17.
- Gill, B. (2016). Can the river speak? Epistemological confrontation in the rise and fall of the land grab in Gambella, Ethiopia. *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space*, 48(4): 699-717.
- Goshu, B. S. (2025). Children of the Nile: A comparative analysis of Egyptian and Ethiopian claims to the Nile River in historical and contemporary contexts. *African Research Reports*, 1(5), 372-383.
- Kumar, D. (2017). River Ganges—historical, cultural and socioeconomic attributes. *Aquatic Ecosystem Health & Management*, 20(1-2): 8-20.
- Martínez, V. M. F. (2019). “What the great Alexander and the famous Julius Caesar wanted so much to see”: A commemoration of the fourth centenary of the Blue Nile Sources discovery by the Spanish Jesuit Pedro Páez Xaramillo (April 21th, 1618). *Culture & History Digital Journal*, 8(1): 135-142.
- McHugh, N. (1994). *Holy men of the Blue Nile: the making of an Arab-Islamic community in the Nilotic Sudan, 1500-1850*. Northwestern University Press.
- Mohamoda, D. Y. (2003). Nile basin cooperation: A review of the literature.

- Oestigaard, T. (2009). *Water, Culture and Identity: Comparing past and present traditions in the Nile Basin region*. BRIC.
- Oestigaard, T. and Gedef, A. (2011). Gish Abay: the source of the Blue Nile. *Water and Society*. WIT Transactions on Ecology and the Environment, Vol 153. WIT Press. Doi:10.2495/WS110031.
- Oestigaard, T. and Gedif, A. (2013). *The source of the Blue Nile: Water rituals and traditions in the Lake Tana region*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Oestigaard, T., & Firew, G. A. (2020). Divine waters in Ethiopia: The source from Heaven and Indigenous water-worlds in the Lake Tana region. In *Sacred Waters* (pp. 141-147). Routledge.
- Østebø, T. (2014). The revenge of the Jinns: spirits, Salafi reform, and the continuity in change in contemporary Ethiopia. *Contemporary Islam*, 8, 17-36.
- Ramakrishnan, P. S. (2012). Human-nature relationships through the ages. *Cultural landscapes: The basis for linking biodiversity conservation with the sustainable development*, 1e20.
- Sutcliffe, J. and Parks, Y. (1999). The hydrology of the Nile. *IAHS special publication no. 5*.
- Wantzen, K., Ballouche, A., Longuet, I., Bao, I., Bocoum, H., Cisse, L., Chauhan, M., Girard, P., Gopal B., Kane, A., Marchese, M., Nautiyal, P., Teixeira, P. and Zalewski, M. (2015). River Culture: an eco-social approach to mitigate the biological and cultural diversity crisis in riverscapes. *Ecohydrology and Hydrobiology*. [Http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.ecohyd.2015.12.003](http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.ecohyd.2015.12.003).
- Wantzen, K. M., Ballouche, A., Longuet, I., Bao, I., Bocoum, H., Cissé, L., Zalewski, M. (2016). River Culture: An eco-social approach to mitigate the biological and cultural diversity crisis in riverscapes. *Ecohydrology and Hydrobiology*, 16(1): 7–18.