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## Emotions in Water Diplomacy: Negotiations on the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper aims to foreground the importance of emotions in water diplomacy in general and in Nile water diplomacy in particular. Water diplomacy does not operate from a clean slate, but in a socio-hydropolitically mediated context which is, in turn, imbued with emotions. The existing water diplomacy approach primarily operates with the assumption that the riparian state is a rational actor. However, we argue that emotions have underpinned water diplomacy, including the ongoing Nile negotiations. These emotions are neither acknowledged nor negotiated but are dismissed as irrationality in both the theoretical understanding and practice of water diplomacy. The Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) has been a bone of contention between, and evoked deep emotions in, Ethiopia and Egypt. Even if they are often unacknowledged by water policy makers, diplomats, and engineers in negotiations on how to fill and operate the GERD, these actors are inevitably negotiating emotions such as fear of water insecurity, anger over water injustice, harm aversion, impact minimisation, and threat diffusion. Conclusions point to the understanding of emotions as one important element influencing the process and outcome of water negotiations in general and on the Nile River in particular. To achieve effective cooperation among riparian states, an assessment of the issues' emotional impacts may be necessary.

**KEYWORDS:** Emotions, water diplomacy, negotiations, Nile River, GERD, Ethiopia, Egypt

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### INTRODUCTION

The late Prime Minister of Ethiopia, Meles Zenawi, laid the cornerstone for the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) on the Nile River on 2 April 2011 in a live televised programme. In his speech, he called the dam a point of national pride for which "the Ethiopian people will pay any sacrifice" (Meles Zenawi Memorial, 2011). Following this speech and the commencement of the construction of the GERD, emotions ran deep in the Nile basin: euphoria in Ethiopia and fear in Egypt. A diplomatic war of words subsequently resurfaced between the two countries (Al Jazeera, 2019). The GERD has become a site of affective hydropolitics – a hydraulic object where emotions are expressed and contested.

There have been a series of technical and political negotiations between Egypt, Ethiopia, and Sudan "on the first filling and long-term operation of the GERD" (Declaration of Principles, 2015). However, negotiations repeatedly stalled, and hopes of cooperation were dashed in several, if not all, of these negotiations. Tensions remain high, particularly between the two key conflicting riparian states – Ethiopia and Egypt – which are the focus of this paper.<sup>1</sup> Ethiopia's determination to construct and fill the reservoir

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<sup>1</sup> Though Sudan played a role in the negotiations as a midstream participant, we believe the emotional dynamics between Ethiopia, as a major upstream contributor, and Egypt, as a major downstream user, have profound implications in the

heightened the water dispute between these two nations. They have been exchanging inflammatory words in the media (Al Jazeera, 2019; Egypt Today, 2019; Belay et al., 2020; The Ethiopian Herald, 2020) and in official statements (Egypt Government, 2020; Ethiopia Government, 2020) that have led to ever-deepening polarisation and hostility at times expressed in military posturing. Egypt warned that its "water share" is a red line that should not be crossed (Ahram Online, 2020a, 2020b). In response to Egypt's threat, Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy said, "If there is a need to go to war, we could get millions readied" (Al Jazeera, 2019). In May 2020, in evocative letters written to the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), Egypt criticised Ethiopia as "obstructionist and disingenuous" (Egypt Government, 2020), while Ethiopia labelled Egypt as "monopolist and disruptive" (Ethiopia Government, 2020).

A closer examination reveals that the Nile River dispute between Ethiopia and Egypt is not solely about allocative water politics but also affective hydro-politics. The question of whose emotions matter and why is of critical importance in negotiations between the two countries. The ongoing dispute over the Nile is not *only* about ensuring riparian states' respective national water security in technical, legal, political, and thus rational terms; it also requires us to understand the hydro-emotional dynamics and the affective value that riparian states attach to the Nile River, the GERD, and to each other, which in turn influences the processes and outcomes of negotiations. In this paper, we argue that diplomatic efforts to resolve and address differences over the GERD are not only about the *filling* and *operation* of the dam, but also about the *feelings* towards the dam. Egypt fears that the GERD will harm its water share and security (Egypt Government, 2020), while Ethiopia views the dam as a project that rectifies water injustice in the Nile basin (Ethiopia Government, 2020). These discrepant emotional terrains have produced an inflated discursive formation of the harms and benefits of the GERD in Egypt and Ethiopia respectively. It is our contention that treating conflict over the Nile as a function of mere technical and rational problems exacerbates disputes rather than brings about solutions. Conflict is likely to persist and intensify if states are only viewed as rational actors (Crawford, 2000; Lebow, 2008). Understanding the limitations of the rationalist model means incorporating the role and significance of emotion-based analytical frameworks in transboundary water diplomacy. This way, a more comprehensive and holistic approach to transboundary water diplomacy can be achieved: one that looks beyond the rational self-interest of states and that recognises the power of emotions in managing and resolving international water conflicts.

This article, therefore, aims to contribute conceptually to the debate by analysing the role of emotions in water diplomacy, with a special focus on negotiation efforts between Ethiopia and Egypt prior to and during the first filling of the GERD in June 2020, since that event evoked strong emotions. This research draws on both primary and secondary sources. We have used official documents such as speeches and agreements as well as non-official ones such as the media and popular culture. Furthermore, we conducted semi-structured interviews with government officials, diplomats, and experts in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, and Cairo, Egypt, between 2018 and 2019. We employed the affective discourse analysis method (Koschut et al., 2017) to locate and capture emotional expressions, terms, connotations, and metaphors in the official and non-official documents, as well as in the interviews. An interpretation and context analysis is also performed in order to capture the sociocultural and hydro-political history of the basin as well as its emotional terrain. Thus, this article is organised into four sections. The first part introduces collective emotions in international relations and diplomacy; it also discusses the interplay between emotions and water diplomacy and sketches a conceptual framework for understanding and investigating emotions in water diplomacy. The second section sets the emotional context of Nile hydro-politics. The filling and operation of the GERD and its potential emotional impacts are presented in the third section. We conclude by emphasising the importance of taking into account the emotional dimension of water diplomacy, including by exploring new avenues in research and practice, such as the emotional impact assessment of large dams.

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negotiations. This paper therefore focuses primarily on the two countries affective hydro-political interactions. Sudan's position has been shifting from initially supporting the dam to opposing it.

## COLLECTIVE EMOTIONS IN WATER DIPLOMACY

Emotions matter. They are everywhere in politics and diplomacy (Hall, 2011; Crawford, 2013). Negotiators are always imbued with some emotions (Shapiro, 2002: 67). Although emotions are always "encoded in the social contexts of world politics" (Bially Mattern, 2014: 590), their contributions have been ignored, if not denigrated as non-scientific (Crawford, 2000; McDermott, 2004; Lebow, 2005). In recent decades, scholars have recognised that emotions play a key role in influencing, shaping, and changing international politics and diplomacy. Hall and Ross (2015) contend that affective processes do "not automatically invalidate the insights of rational choice". Instead, they rather broaden our understanding of theories of international relations. Contrary to the conventional assumptions which regard emotions as irrational, neuroscientific findings show that emotions complement rational thinking (Damasio, 1994; Barbalet, 1998; McDermott, 2004; Barrett, 2017). "Thinking always includes feeling" just as "rationality always includes emotion" (Hutchison and Bleiker, 2014: 509).

It should be noted that emotions are not, as often thought, instant, ephemeral, reflexive, or immediate responses at the sub-conscious level. In this article, the emotions we discuss are not the ones expressed at the moment of or during negotiations or those that are communicated with abrupt vocal and facial expressions. Instead, we are interested in everyday emotions that are deeply institutionalised and collective, embedded in and entangled with the practices, norms, beliefs, and actions of states (Mercer, 2010; Bially Mattern, 2011; Sasley, 2011; Crawford, 2014; Beattie et al., 2019). Emotions are also dependent on their performative use (Ahmed, 2014): for whom and for what purpose they are expressed and instrumentalised (Gustafsson and Hall, 2021). They are constitutive, relational, and "exist as affective forces generated through social interaction and political engagement" (Ross, 2010: 111). For instance, anger towards injustice, exclusion, and oppression can be seen as apt and constructive, while anger over losing one's privileges or as a mere retaliation for past pain is usually considered a destructive and non-productive emotion (Jasper, 2014; Nussbaum, 2016; Srinivasan, 2017). These responses can be routinised and normalised as collective and institutional emotions in everyday practices of the riparian state's water-related institutions, including water ministries, foreign affairs, and hydropolitical interactions.

We hold a constructivist perspective on emotions, which asserts that emotions are not only physical or psychological, but also sociocultural and political (Crawford, 2000; Ross, 2006; Holland and Solomon, 2014). Emotions are constructed, (re-)produced, and constituted within a sociocultural milieu. As in studies of postcolonialism, feminism, and cultural politics of emotions (Jaggar, 1989; Lorde, 2007; Ahmed, 2014), instead of focusing on what emotions *are*, we focus on how they are produced and what they *do*. We thus emphasise the importance of understanding how emotions are contextualised in a social and cultural environment, as well as the power dynamics involved in the creation and expression of emotions.

Emotion, identity, and nationalism are all inextricably linked (Gustafsson and Hall, 2021). "Who we are is what we feel. Identity and emotion depend on each other. Identification without emotion inspires no action for one does not care" (Mercer, 2014: 522). Through national narratives, collective emotion constructs "affective communities" (Hutchison, 2016) and "we-ness" (Ross, 2006). A state's behavioural dispositions are entangled with its national identity and interest, which is influenced by emotional factors (Lebow, 2005). Identity can be embodied, embedded, and constructed through the performativity of the everyday affective interactions. National identity creates what Denzin (1984: 148) calls "fellow feelings" (cited in Ahmed, 2014: 8). Such 'we-feelings' reflect discursive and narrative collective emotions, i.e. they could create mainstream and dominant socio-cultural and political atmosphere in a nation through the convergence of views and affective resonance between members of a nation against 'the emotional other'. For instance, consider the discursive construction of the immigrant or stranger 'other' as a "fearsome object" (Ahmed 2014) in a nation. It is important to note that, while collective emotions are shared feelings, they do not represent the feelings of all members of the nation equally; rather, they represent the feelings of the dominant group or nation (Ahmed, 2014). These feelings are capable of

becoming a particular "emotional stance or demeanour" of the state in diplomacy (Hall, 2015: vii). Thus, the projected collective emotions of the nation may serve as a reflection of the nation's identity.

Hall (2015) argues that states use emotional diplomacy to influence political processes and to pursue their national interests. By discussing the diplomacy of anger, sympathy, and guilt, he demonstrates how states use emotions to shape political outcomes. But it should be noted that "emotions mix, mingle, and compete with numerous other factors and considerations in any given foreign policy decision making process, frequently leading to outcomes that in themselves do not appear particularly emotional" (Hall, 2015: vii). We should not "ignore the effects that displays of anger may have on the perceptions, choices, and behaviours of (other) state actors" (Hall, 2011: 522). Moreover, psychological issues like (mis)perceptions (Jervis, 2017) and beliefs (Mercer, 2010) are important in influencing state behaviour in international relations and diplomacy. Therefore, understanding the dynamics of emotions in international diplomacy is key to recognising how they can shape the decisions and behaviour of state actors. Similarly, in the empirical section, we try to capture the complex relationships of emotions in water diplomacy without making universal claims.

Emotions do things by energising and orienting action (Ahmed, 2004; Kleres and Wettergren, 2017). Collective emotions such as fear, anger, pride, trust, and hope have discursive performative power to construct and influence the processes and outcomes of transboundary water diplomacy. For instance, fear of global warming may induce anger toward polluters and galvanise global, regional, or national collective actions in hopes of mitigating and adapting to climate change (Kleres and Wettergren, 2017). Emotions thus have the potential to make conflicts more intractable – or more manageable (Bar-Tal, 2000). Conflicts are often exacerbated by emotions like fear, anger, or hatred and could be more effectively managed through empathy, hope, and trust-building (Head, 2012). Similarly, emotions affect threat impact assessments, which "normally involve some ambiguity" (Kaufmann, 2004: 8). Threat inflation makes "claims that go beyond the range of ambiguity" and involves "a consistent pattern of worst-case assertions over a range of factual issues that are logically unrelated or only weakly related" (ibid).

Water diplomacy, just like any diplomacy, is permeated with emotions. We understand water diplomacy – in particular by differentiating it from transboundary water management – as "the use of diplomatic instruments to existing or emerging disagreements and conflicts over shared water resources with the aim to solve or mitigate those for the sake of cooperation, regional stability and peace" (Schmeier, 2018; see also Molnar et al., 2017). Water diplomacy includes, very prominently, negotiations between states in order to address disagreements that emerge due to different national interests in the use of a shared watercourse. Very often, such disagreements are related to the development of large-scale water infrastructure (Wolf et al., 2003). Our understanding of water diplomacy – and of negotiations over water-related disagreements in particular – includes both formal state-to-state negotiations (often referred to as 'track 1 diplomacy') as well as informal avenues of negotiation (often referred to 'track 2' but also 'track one and a half') (Mapendere, 2005). In fact, we perceive these two tracks of diplomacy as being highly interdependent. Therefore, emotions developed by actors in one track most likely also shape the emotions of those in other tracks.

A critical water study has questioned the orthodox engineering and masculine approach to understanding water (Zwarteveen, 2009) by expanding conceptualisations of water from a purely technical standpoint to a broader perspective that encompasses both social (Linton and Budds, 2014; Krause and Strang, 2016) and cultural (Erlich and Gershoni, 2000) aspects. Water diplomacy should not be the prerogative of rationality. While the traditional rational water diplomacy approach has acknowledged the intersection between "science, policy and practice" (Klimes et al., 2019: 576), it has failed to see the role of emotions in water diplomacy. As Wolf (2008: 60) argues, "Rationality simply often does not hold sway if the conflict involves even a modicum of real emotion". Similarly, allocative water politics should not overlook "silent and invisible" (Allan, 2005) processes (like emotions) that influence the outcomes of water diplomacy. Frey (1993: 64) argues that the "emotional salience" of hydraulic

projects is rampant in conflict-prone river basins like the Nile. One of the goals of diplomacy is therefore "to render transboundary water arrangements more equitable and sustainable" (Zeitoun et al., 2019: 1) by addressing the transboundary water injustice and power imbalance (Zeitoun et al., 2014). This requires us to "critically evaluate the processes that establish and maintain the arrangements" (Zeitoun et al., 2019: 1) and explore the extent to which affective dispositions are reflected in these processes and how that impacts the behaviour of the riparian state.

National riparian emotions are formed in the context of a shared affective social and cultural identity. Hence, we argue, emotional water diplomacy encompasses all actors, levels, and types of diplomacy through the discourses of feeling-in-common. It should be noted that emotional water diplomacy does not necessarily contradict rational water diplomacy; it rather complements and enriches it. Emotional approaches to water diplomacy may provide an additional toolkit for solutions to transboundary water problems. We also suggest ways of advancing the research agenda on water diplomacy as an integrated understanding of rational and emotional water diplomacy, which may increase the analytical purchase and practical application of water diplomacy.

### SETTING THE EMOTIONAL STAGE

The Nile River is the longest river in the world. It has two sub-basins: the Blue Nile, which starts from the highlands of Ethiopia, and the White Nile, which originates from Lake Victoria (NBI, 2012). The two rivers join at Khartoum, Sudan, forming the main Nile that heads to Egypt before flowing into the Mediterranean Sea. The Nile is shared by eleven riparian states, and the basin is home to more than 300 million people that rely on the Nile to curb their increasing water demand for irrigation, water supply, hydropower, and various livelihoods (NBI, 2012). Although the Eastern Nile River basin constitutes Ethiopia, Egypt, Sudan, South Sudan, and Eritrea, the Ethio-Egyptian hydropolitical relationship has remained a defining characteristic of the basin.

The Nile River is considered one of the most conflict-prone river basins in the world (Rüttinger et al., 2015: 51-56). Several possible water war scenarios have been predicted by water scholars (Bulloch and Darwish, 1993; Kundzewicz and Kowalczyk, 2009; Serageldin, 2009) and media (BBC, 2013, 2018; The Times of Israel, 2019), though these predictions have also been debated and rejected by various scholars (Wolf, 1998; Sadoff and Grey, 2002; Cascão et al., 2018; Biswas and Tortajada, 2019). In fact, the concept of hydropolitics was first conceptualised by using the Nile as an empirical case study (Waterbury, 1979; Collins, 1990) specifically because the Nile had been a major source of tension between Egypt and Ethiopia for decades. Although there have been cooperative attempts along the Nile River, it has also been marked by long-standing conflict and intense emotions. Transboundary water diplomacy along the Nile basin has contributed to the establishment of the Nile Basin Initiative (NBI) in 1999, the Cooperative Framework Agreement negotiations from 1997-2010, the various Eastern Nile Technical Regional Office (ENTRO) investment projects such as the Joint Multi-Purpose Project development, and several other technical consultations. The Nile, as a series of hydro-social territories (Boelens et al., 2016), flows with and embodies emotional, socio-cultural, spiritual, symbolic, and national values (Oestigaard, 2009; Krause and Strang, 2016).

Upstream Ethiopia provides the most water to the Nile flows through its three main rivers: the Blue Nile, the Baro-Akobo, and the Tekeze-Atebara (NBI, 2012). The Blue Nile is the most important one as it contributes the lion's share of the flow (ibid). By contrast, the Nile River receives almost no flow from Egypt and Sudan, but they – and particularly Egypt – have been using the lion's share the Nile's waters. This stark contrast between contribution and utilisation has constructed emotive hydropolitical interactions, which among other things have underpinned Nile hydropolitics in general and the GERD negotiations in particular. As the highest contributor and largest user respectively, Ethiopia and Egypt have always had polarised affective interactions whereby the former has developed a sense of water injustice and anger, while the later exhibits fear and anxiety from being entirely reliant on a single lifeline

that comes from more than 6000 km beyond its border. This total dependence, together with other historical and political factors, has led Egypt to feel like a hostage of hydrology and geography and develop a sense of anxiety and existential fear. "Blockage or diversion of the Blue Nile has been an enduring fear in Egypt and a persistent threat by Ethiopia" (Waterbury, 1982, cited in Guariso and Whittington, 1987: 105).

On the other hand, for Ethiopia, the inability to use the Nile for hydropolitical, technical, and financial reasons (for example, Egypt's alleged diplomatic clout to block funds from international institutions) (Ethiopia Government, 2020: 10) has long fomented and triggered Ethiopia's hydro-emotional anger, which has finally galvanised and mobilised internal funds to launch the largest dam in Africa: the GERD Project. This has created a great sense of national pride in Ethiopia whilst inducing fear in Egypt. Egyptians have seen the timing of the GERD's launching, three months after the Egyptian Revolution (commonly known as the Arab Spring), as a quintessentially Machiavellian tactic, a deceitful move that exploited Egypt's disadvantageous situation to advance Ethiopia's agenda. It is worth noting that these hydro-emotions are not simply a top-down affair, but historically and collectively etched into the affective communities of upstream and downstream riparian states (Shitie, 2013; Mossallam, 2014; Ayenalem, 2020). For instance, before the first filling of the GERD, the social media campaigns #ItsMyDam in Ethiopia and #SaveTheNile in Egypt evoked and sedimented the respective collective hydro-emotions in the basin. This may also represent the "clash of emotions", to use Fattah and Fierke's (2009) phrase, over the GERD.

For Ethiopia, technically speaking, the GERD is a major hydropower dam on the Blue Nile with a total storage capacity of 74 billion cubic meters (Bm<sup>3</sup>) (Ethiopia Government, 2020). Psychologically, it is a hydro-pride dam that is restorative of the past and current water imbalance and injustice in the Nile basin. It is portrayed in contestation against an age-old Egyptian adage: If the Nile is a gift to Egypt, then the GERD is the gift or pride of Ethiopia. It is this projection that enables Ethiopia to amass local funds by selling bonds, collecting monthly salary contributions, lotteries, cash and in-kind assistances, diaspora contributions, and the like in its effort to build the dam (Haile, 2017: 112, 159). The emotional investment of the public in the dam is of greater significance than their monetary contributions. Through the GERD, Ethiopia has attempted to live up to its name as the Water Tower of the Horn and North Africa, not only through its contribution to the Nile but also through its utilisation of its water resources. For Egypt, however, the GERD is a fearsome hydraulic infrastructure that interferes with the natural flow of the Nile waters and causes significant harm.

Emotions have sources and reflect past experiences (Marcus, 2000: 224; Ahmed, 2014). Egypt's "ancient fear" (Erlich, 2002: 9) may have its origins in Ethiopia's golden era (1270-1540), during which Ethiopian medieval emperors such as Lalibala (1172-1212), Zar'a Ya'qob (1434-1468), and Lebna Dengel (1508-1540) threatened to divert Nile flows to the southern part of the country or to the Red Sea whenever they perceived that the Christians in Egypt were being mistreated (Erlich, 2002). This has contributed to the reproduction of "Egypt's old fear that Ethiopia might one day block the Nile" (Erlich, 2002: 79). From the days of the Fatimid rulers of the 11th century until the present day, the possibility that Ethiopia might "inflict a major disaster on Egypt" has been "at the top of Egyptian agenda" (Erlich, 1998: 65). Egyptian fear also has roots in the British colonial era, when Britain was ruling over the territories of the whole of the Nile basin save Ethiopia. While Britain's primary objective was to control the Nile and provide uninterrupted summer irrigation for the cotton production that dominated global trade (Tvedt, 2011: 173-176), the British administration used to have the Nile issue in its "diplomatic bag" (Tvedt, 2004: 295) to use as a carrot and a stick to control Egypt's anti-colonial resistance struggles (Tvedt, 2004: 310-312). For instance, although these plans did not materialise, at various points in time Britain planned to build a series of dams on Lake Tana, on the Blue Nile in Ethiopia, and on Lake Victoria and Lake Albert on the White Nile, in Uganda, to threaten Egypt in the case of any anti-colonial upheavals. It also signed a memorandum with Uganda entitled Use of Owen Falls Dam to Deny Water to Egypt (Tvedt, 2004: 310). It is no wonder that Egypt developed, to use Allan's (2001: 40) word, "hydro-paranoia" towards the upstream riparian states, particularly towards Ethiopia. Such historical affective experiences

are deeply ingrained in the national psyche and memory of Egypt and have reproduced what is referred to as "downstream complex" (Tvedt, 2004). President Nasser of Egypt signed the 1959 bilateral agreement with Sudan without informing, and thereby deliberately alienating, Emperor Haile Selassie of Ethiopia, with whom he previously had fraternal relations, especially with regard to their position on decolonisation struggles in Africa and in the establishment of the Organisation of African Unity in 1963 (Erlich, 2002). However, it appears that fear trumped fraternity when it came to the Nile. Egypt went ahead with constructing the Aswan High Dam (AHD), a multipurpose dam that holds 162 Bm<sup>3</sup> of annual water, without notifying or consulting Ethiopia.

These two key hydropolitical events – the 1959 bilateral Nile Agreement and the unilateral construction of the AHD – have instilled anger in Ethiopia and created resentment towards Egypt. In Ethiopia, popular literature like music (Ayenalem, 2020) and folklore (Shitie, 2013) have created a collective emotion of *quchit* – an Amharic term that translates as a deep-seated burning regret buttressed with rage. This sense of water injustice has given Ethiopia, in Muldoon's (2008) words, "the moral legitimacy of anger", and collective *quchit* is used as a productive force to build the GERD as a national hydro-pride dam. This has now translated into a "diplomacy of anger" (Hall, 2015) that affects the GERD negotiation processes. Given the emotional value of the first filling of the GERD as scheduled, it is not surprising to note that the impoundment of the reservoir was awaited with national pride and triumph in both mainstream and social media. It was a celebration filled with car horns and ululation in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. In Egypt, this event created a surge of trepidation and a wave of wrath, including suggestions to bomb the dam. Egypt sent letters to the UNSC, asking global powers to intervene on its behalf. Egyptian Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry, speaking with Italian, Russian, and Chinese (Ahrum Online, 2020c, 2020d, 2020e) counterparts, stressed the need to reach a comprehensive agreement before Ethiopia started filling the dam. Failure to do so would be tantamount to causing "a material breach of the Declarations of Principles (DoPs)", and, indirectly, the 1959 agreement and the AHD (Egypt Government, 2020). For Ethiopia, however, it is very problematic to accept the legitimacy of the 1959 agreement, which reserves the "full utilisation" of the waters of the Nile for Egypt and Sudan. The hydrological reality of the AHD is also at the very root of Ethiopia's anger about the unjust water agreement and the unilateral construction of the AHD as a hydraulic structure. In an interview conducted with Ethiopian media outlets, Ethiopia's chief negotiator argued that Egypt has indirectly tried to "legitimise" the 1959 agreement through technicalities (ESAT Television, 2020) to secure its self-allocated annual 'water share' from the Blue Nile flows. On the other hand, for Egypt, the 1959 agreement remains sacrosanct and "not negotiable" (Casção and Nicol, 2016: 19), since it is projected as a key instrument that protects Egypt's "historic right and current use" (Salman, 2013).

### **STALEMATE IN THE GERD NEGOTIATIONS: THE UNDERLYING EMOTIONAL TENSION**

Negotiations have been intense in recent years, notably following the signing of the Declaration of Principles (DoPs) in 2015. This included the various tripartite technical, political, and legal platforms of consultations such as the International Panel of Experts (IPoE), the Technical National Committee (TNC), the National Independent Studies Research Group (NISRG), the Six Party Meeting (the ministers of Water and Foreign Affairs of the three countries), and the Nine Party Meeting (the ministers of Water, Foreign Affairs, and Directors of Intelligence) (Ethiopia Government, 2020: 5-9). The emotive atmosphere deemed it necessary to include regional and international observers and 'mediators' such as the African Union (AU) and its legal and technical experts, UNSC, the United States of America, the World Bank, the European Union, South Africa, Madagascar, Mali, Kenya, and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

However, Ethiopia and Egypt have remained in intense disagreement throughout the GERD negotiations. Although there are different explanations for the stalemate, we argue that their contrasting emotions may undergird, if not foreclose, the negotiations. Thus far, Ethiopia and Egypt were and still are in disagreement on the following: setting a baseline scenario for the GERD's impact assessment study

and approving its inception reports; the number of years of stage-based filling of the dam (Ethiopia wants to fill the dam in 4-7 years while Egypt has insisted on filling it in 12-21 years (Addis Fortune, 2020); what exactly they are negotiating on or for (Egypt negotiates on the Nile river, while Ethiopia for the GERD project); the mechanisms of operating the dam (who operates it, how, and when, and the definition and management of drought, prolonged drought, and dry seasons and their coping mechanisms); and dispute settlement mechanisms (Tekuya, 2020). Our informants indicated the two countries could not even agree on signing the minutes of their consultations (Ethiopian interviewees). They also failed to attend consultation meetings and thus were not able to finish the scheduled technical discussions (for example, only five out of nine of NISRG's scheduled meetings were conducted). For this, Ethiopia blames Egypt for its deliberate "contradictory positions", which impede negotiations so as to postpone the first filling of the dam (Ethiopia Government, 2020). Similarly, Egypt sees Ethiopia's move as an attempt to have "unrestrained, unfettered and unregulated" power over the Nile flows by making the GERD a fait accompli (Egypt Government, 2020). This has remained the most contentious issue between the two countries.

### **First filling and operation of the GERD**

This section discusses the first filling and operation of the GERD in relation to its emotive impacts on Egypt and Ethiopia: 'harm inflation' in the former and 'benefit exaggeration' in the later. As shown below, Egypt and Ethiopia are not only technically, politically, and legally negotiating the GERD, but also mediating their emotional dispositions and experiences, which have been influencing their behaviour, dialogue, and the outcomes of their negotiations.

The DoPs was signed in Khartoum on 23 March 2015 by Egypt, Ethiopia, and Sudan to negotiate the "first filling and annual operation" of the GERD. It is the most important joint document in the Blue Nile River basin, which has provided a platform for cooperation and negotiation. By acknowledging the "rising demand" of "the upstream and downstream water needs in its various aspects", the DoPs asserts the need to build trust and confidence to ensure optimal utilisation, win-win opportunities, and mutual benefits. The DoPs can also be seen as a platform to regulate the emotional dynamics of the riparian states. With this in view, we suggest an affective reading of the DoPs to get a fresh angle and understand the current stalemate on the filling and operation mechanisms of the dam. Following the 1997 UN Water Convention and the objective of the NBI, the DoPs advocates for the principles of 'no significant harm' and 'equitable and reasonable utilization'. Egypt and Ethiopia have emotional attachments to these key principles. For Egypt, the no-harm principle can address its entrenched fear of harm and helps it to maintain its share – a water quota allocated by the 1959 Agreement that assigns 55.5 Bm<sup>3</sup> for Egypt and 18.5 Bm<sup>3</sup> for Sudan with no amount apportioned to Ethiopia. On the other hand, the equitable and reasonable principle is expected to rectify the historical water injustice Ethiopia has suffered as a result of the 1959 Water Agreement. In this regard, the DoPs may also be seen as a mechanism that tries to address these contradictory emotional encounters.

Harm-aversion and water (in)securities for Egypt and water justice and anger-deflation for Ethiopia have been among the main issues complicating the GERD negotiations. Although there is no open acknowledgement of these emotional dynamics, negotiation as well as impact analysis of the GERD are saturated with emotive sentiments. This has created an ever-deepening emotional polarisation between the two states, which constructs the circulation of emotions in the basin, which, in turn, leads to emotional entrapment. A number of informants from both countries have indicated that the inclusion of intelligence directors in the negotiation process has not been constructive. However, some experts contend that the key decision-makers are the security apparatus in both countries, and therefore 'real' negotiations cannot take place without them (interviewees in Ethiopia and Egypt).

Ethiopia began the first phase of filling 4.9 Bm<sup>3</sup> of water in July 2020. Ethiopia argued that "the filling of the Dam is part of [the] construction" of the dam (Ethiopia Government, 2020). Egypt has contested

this argument as "a disingenuous and distorted reading of the DoPs, it is wholly inconsistent with the any scientific understanding of the concepts of construction and filling of the dam" (Egypt Government, 2020). Egypt insisted that the first phase of filling should not be started without a technical and legally binding comprehensive agreement. However, Ethiopia has noted that it has neither a legal obligation nor a hydrological responsibility to inform Egypt, considering Egypt's unilateral actions on the Nile (Ethiopia Government, 2020). Thus, Ethiopia has insisted on proceeding with the filling of the dam. Ethiopia argues that Egypt neither informed nor consulted Ethiopia when it built and filled the AHD. Additionally, once Ethiopia officially declared that it would unilaterally fill the dam, not doing so would be tantamount to weakness and submission to Egypt's pressure. This put the Nile River basin on the highest level of confrontation.

We need to examine these positions, not by disregarding emotions, but by recognising that hydrology may not be devoid of psychological influences. When Egypt and Ethiopia try to interpret the DoPs' filling and operation of the dam, they are not only negotiating the hydrology but also the "hydropsychology" (Sivakumar, 2011). That is why the times proposed by these two countries for filling the GERD differ significantly: 4-7 years by Ethiopia and 12-21 years by Egypt (Addis Fortune, 2020). However, this may not always be clear to negotiating parties as underlying emotions are subsumed by scientific hydraulic explanations. Lebow (2005) reminds us that conflicting states may perceive themselves as being involved in one conflict when they are actually engaged in another.

One of the main disagreements in the Washington-led negotiations from November 2019 to February 2020 was that Ethiopia and Egypt have stark differences over what they are negotiating for. Ethiopia has been negotiating for the GERD, a single water project, while Egypt has been negotiating for the Nile waters, all the Blue Nile flows. For the former, the GERD is not equal to the Blue Nile, but for the latter, the Blue Nile is the GERD. Ethiopia's negotiators and diplomats assert that the negotiations are not about water allocation per se, but dam filling and management mechanisms. For Egypt, however, the two are the same. Ethiopia's negotiators assert that what should be negotiated is not the Blue Nile water flows, but specifically the filling and operation of the dam (Ethiopian interviewee). The former Ethiopian Foreign Minister Gedu Andargachew notes that the "Egyptians want us to offer a lot, but they are not ready to offer us anything. They want to control everything. We are not discussing a water-sharing agreement" (Al Jazeera, 2020a).

Emotive infrastructures like the GERD may lead to threatening conflict if the parties to the negotiations have "ambiguity" (Fischhendler, 2008) on what they are negotiating about. What they are negotiating is not only the flow of the Nile waters, but also the differing emotions they attach to those Nile waters; it is not solely about water security, but also about what Kinnvall and Mitzen (2017) call "ontological (in)security", a consistent quest for existential security for the riparian states (Gebresenbet and Wondemagegnehu, 2021). The Nile has intrinsic values with symbolic and emotional significance and socio-cultural meanings (Oestigaard, 2009); the Nile is not a mere identity marker but has become an identity *itself*. The Egyptian identity cannot be separated from the Nile, and neither can the Nile be separated from that of the Ethiopians (Erlich, 2002). It could be said then that the Nile conflict is emotionally embedded in national battles of identity and so are negotiations over the Nile itself.

Another point of contestation is the operation of the dam. For Egypt, addressing its fear through a "guaranteed release" of 40 Bm<sup>3</sup> of water annually to maintain the AHD at the 165 m water level is a cardinal point (Tekuya, 2020). This requires Ethiopia to maintain "the natural average flow" of the Nile (Addis Standard, 2019). It is only the status quo that ensures Egypt's historic rights and current water share (Waterbury, 1987, 1997) and thus that averts the "existential threat" that Ethiopia allegedly poses (Ahram Online, 2020b; Al Jazeera, 2020b). Ethiopia sees this demand as being asked to continue being a mere contributor to the Nile without any right to its use. "We are not building a white elephant", the Ethiopian then-Minister of Water noted. "The GERD is our source of development" (Walta Television,

2020). According to the former Minister, Egypt's demand, both in its August 2019 proposal<sup>2</sup> and during the last round of meetings in Washington, was nothing but a ploy to make Ethiopia a water bank, "serving as second backup reservoir to AHD" (Addis Standard, 2019). This is an Egyptian fantasy of making the upstream as its "hydrological colony" (Ethiopian Television, 2020). Ethiopia cannot accept such demands and still have every right to the current and future use of the Nile. The Minister further argued that Egypt's request has an implicit demand to foreclose any future water development projects, be it hydropower or irrigation dams in Ethiopia.

Furthermore, Egypt requested the establishment of a Joint Permanent Coordination Mechanism comprising Ethiopia, Egypt, and Sudan to monitor the long-term operation of the dam in Guba, where the GERD is located. Ethiopia got infuriated and rejected it outright on the basis of a breach of sovereignty and disrespect to its peoples (Tekuya, 2020). The Ethiopian then-Minister of Water responded to this as a sheer wish list of Egypt: "An Egyptian expert can't control our dam" (Reuters, 2019). Whether this request emanated from historical mistrust or from Egypt's perennial fear of upstream water infrastructure, it is apparent that the demand as well as its rejection by Ethiopia has demonstrated the extent to which emotions constitute these countries' hydro-political interactions. The emotional symbolism of the dam can hardly allow an Egyptian engineer to be placed on the very site – not when Ethiopians see the dam as a hydraulic project that ensures water justice and national hydro-pride. This request appears to be in contradiction with the dam's existence, which is considered a site of national affective investment.

### GERD's emotional impacts

Emotions are one of the driving forces in the interpretation of the GERD's impact evaluations, which in turn affect Nile diplomacy by shaping the behaviours and beliefs of the negotiators. Though there have been several studies on the social, environmental, legal, political, and hydrological impact of the GERD (Casção and Nicol 2016; Wheeler et al., 2016; Yihdego et al., 2016; Zhang, 2016; Hamada 2017), none of them have tried to see how emotions underpin water diplomacy by downplaying or exaggerating its impact. Affective assessment of the impact of the GERD by the riparian state can inflate its social, economic, and environmental impacts. By (re)framing and priming emotional evaluations (Marcus, 2000), riparian countries can construct exaggerated harm for Egypt by the GERD – and exaggerated benefits for Ethiopia. It is argued that Egypt has an 'apocalyptic' imagery of the GERD, while Ethiopia portrays it as a 'silver bullet' for its developmental problems.

The discrepant affective attachments to the dam have resulted in the production of inflated threats of harmful impacts and exaggerated benefits in Egypt and Ethiopia, respectively. Hence, these countries engage in their own, to use Eslan-Ziya et al.'s (2019) words, "emotional echo-chamber", which leads to emotional entrapment by (re)enforcing overwrought hydro-political interactions. Ahmed (2004) calls the circulation and investment of emotional values on an object such as a dam "affective economy" and argues that it may inflate or decrease the value or harm of objects saturated with emotions. In this regard, what a hydro-pride dam is for Ethiopia may become a hydro-phobic object for Egypt. The exaggerated threats and benefits constitute the riparian states' affective narrative by constructing emotions in the discursive realm. This is mainly a product of the riparian states' emotional impact assessment of the GERD, constructed in ways that favour either the worst-case threats or the elevated benefits of the dam. This kind of interpretation of impacts can make the negotiations on the filling and annual operation of the dam arduous, if not impossible, by strengthening a belief and making "possible a generalization about an actor that involves certainty beyond evidence" (Mercer, 2010: 2). Emotions have shaped and influenced beliefs by constructing and generating feelings like fear, anger, and pride. These discursive

<sup>2</sup> On 1 August 2019, Egypt submitted a proposal to Ethiopia: *Technical Aspects of the Agreement on the Filling and Operation of the GERD*.

threads of emotions have become the lens by which the riparian states' frame their impact assessment of the GERD as well as their water diplomacy over the Nile.

### Harm and benefit inflations

Fear of water insecurity could be considered the quintessential Egyptian national sentiment and emotion with regard to the waters of the Nile. Egypt persistently tries to avoid harm from upstream water infrastructure. Given the fact that the majority of Egypt's water comes from Ethiopia's highland, Egypt has persistently expressed its vulnerability to water infrastructure development undertaken in Ethiopia. It has been repeatedly reported that the GERD is not only a threat to water security but also creates existential insecurity for the Egyptian state itself. For instance, in his interview with France 24, Mahmoud Abu-Zeid, Egypt's former Minister of Water Resources and Irrigation, portrayed the GERD "as a *tap* Ethiopia can open and close at *its whim*. This gives them a very dangerous power. This will impact on Egypt's water security" (France24, 2015, emphasis ours).

Egypt's Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry notes in a statement given before the UNSC session on the GERD on July 8 2021 that "the harm that the GERD might inflict will affect *every* aspect of the lives of the Egyptian people like a malignant *plague*" (Egypt Government, 2021, emphasis added). Similarly, in its letter to the UNSC in May 2020, the Egyptian government characterised the impact of the GERD as "catastrophic" and expressed its vulnerability as follows:

Millions of jobs would be lost, thousands of hectares of arable land would disappear, cultivated land would experience increased salinization, the cost of food imports would increase dramatically, and urbanization would sky-rocket due to rural depopulation, which will lead to an increase in unemployment, crime rates and transnational migration. Indeed, a decrease of only a million cubic meters of water would lead, in the agricultural sector alone, to 290,000 people losing their incomes, a loss of 130,000 hectares of cultivated land, an increase of \$150 million USD in food imports, and a loss of \$430 million USD of agricultural production. As water shortages increase and continue over an extended period, the ripple-effects on every sector of Egypt's economy and its socio-political stability are inestimable (Egypt Government, 2020).

Ethiopia, on the other hand, worries that through these assertions of vulnerability, Egypt wants to maintain the status quo. Narratives of vulnerability can be strategically constructed (Ahmed, 2014). Egypt has instrumentalised a meta-narrative of water crisis and vulnerability by constructing harm and fear of water loss. In no way does this mean Egypt is immune from upstream harm, but rather it reflects the extent to which the discursive fetishisation of harm has complicated the hydropolitical relationship between the two riparian countries (Ethiopian interviewee). Hence, Egypt's fear of harm can hardly be taken seriously by Ethiopia, as there is an assumption that Egypt's anxiety over water scarcity is more of a strategy to reproduce the existing monopolistic water use regime in the Nile basin (ESAT Television, 2020). However, Ethiopia's challenge to the hegemonic water monopoly of Egypt (Cascão, 2008) through the hydropolitics of anger primarily calls this norm into question and downplays the vulnerability narrative of Egypt. The then-Ethiopian Foreign Minister Gedu Andargachew blamed Egyptians for "exaggerating their propaganda on the dam issue and playing a political gamble. Some of them seem as if they are longing for a war to break out" (Associated Press, 2020).

The GERD troubles Egypt deeply. The Egyptian identity is enmeshed with the Nile River. The adage goes that "Egypt is a gift of the Nile", and now the 'Gift' has faced the GERD. That is why 'sharing' the Nile waters with others or losing its 'water share' may seem like losing its ontological identity. As Butler (2003: 12) aptly argues, when we lose something imperative to who we are, we not only mourn the loss, but we become inscrutable to ourselves. Is Egypt not right to ask who they are without the Nile? When we feel that we are losing what constitutes us as a person and a nation, we may not know who we are. This frightens us. It reminds us that psychological identities are as important as hydrological realities. Like water, identity and nationalism can run together (Allouche, 2005; Wessels, 2016). We do not want to claim that water insecurity produces a loss of identity, but it may create a sense of national ontological

anxiety that has the potential to justify water conflict, if not water war. As Thucydides argued, "People go to war out of fear, interest and honour" (Kagan, 1996, cited in Saurette, 2006: 495; see also Lebow, 2008). It is not only the impacts of the GERD they are fighting over, but also who they are and what they feel as the Nile's affective community.

On the other hand, the GERD is sacralised in Ethiopia. According to Ethiopia's letter to the UNSC, in May 2020, there are several ways in which the GERD will benefit Ethiopia and other downstream countries. The dam will, Ethiopia says:

- i) Improve Ethiopia's energy availability
- ii) regulate water flow that will enhance water management for irrigation and other water uses in Egypt and the Sudan
- iii) allow enhanced sediment management thereby reducing cost of dredging irrigation canals and increase the life of downstream dams
- iv) enable water saving and avoidance of water loss due to seepage and evaporation
- v) uplift energy of existing power stations at Roseries, Sennar and Merowe dams in the Sudan
- vi) serve as a buffer against climate change induced extremes, including flooding and drought, and net reduction in Green House Gases emission
- vii) strengthen regional socio-economic integration
- viii) increase regional water storage capacity by 60 billion cubic meters and increases the installed capacity of power by 5150 MW
- ix) increase the safety of the High Aswan Dam against major consecutive floods (Ethiopia Government, 2020: 2).

The ideals of the dam can easily be seen from its affective title. It is projected to be a 'grand' national, iconic endeavour that aspires to Ethiopia's 'Renaissance' and the restoration of its "glorious past" (The Reporter, 2015a). GERD is a source of national pride. Its national significance cannot be emphasised enough. Metaphorically, the GERD is not in Ethiopia; rather, Ethiopia is *in* the GERD. Its affective vibe is everywhere, and it is embedded in everything that Ethiopia has yet to become. The media sees the dam as "the stupendous project", a combination of "eco-museum, technology park, musical fountain, refugium" (The Reporter, 2015b). As we suggested earlier, the dam is, among other things, the outcome of Ethiopia's collective anger; the angst and fury that the Nile invokes in Ethiopia is expressed through its popular culture. The construction of the dam is associated with lessening this feeling of *kuchit*, and the filling of the dam is associated with the building of the country's national pride. So the emotional significance of the dam cannot be overstated. However, its economic benefits might be exaggerated. Even if the dam could extricate millions of people from darkness by providing electricity, the economic miracles that depict the dam as a silver bullet solution that will resolve the development challenges of the country have been inflated to boost the national significance of the dam's construction. This means that the national emotional investment in the dam could make the benefits of the dam uncountable.

## CONCLUSION

Negotiations over the GERD have been permeated with emotions. Until and unless the role of emotions in the GERD's filling and operation is acknowledged and investigated, the challenges of the ongoing Nile water diplomacy may continue to elude the negotiating parties. Yet neither water scholars nor policy makers and negotiators explicitly acknowledge the role of emotions (such as fear, anger, pride, hope, and trust) in negotiations over the GERD. We argue that any negotiations that fail to address Egypt's fear of water reduction in combination with Ethiopia's hydro-pride and anger at water injustice will not only be ill-equipped to resolve the diplomatic stalemate between Ethiopia and Egypt but could even exacerbate mistrust between the parties. To date, there is no cooperative mechanism nor fertile ground to develop collective hopes and trust that could dispel Egypt's fear and Ethiopia's anger.

The technical, political, and legal aspects of water diplomacy over the Nile and negotiations over the GERD are incomplete if they continue to disregard the emotional terrain on which these negotiations occur. This is not the replacement of rationality by emotion. It is rather probing into the application of emotions to water diplomacy. As Waltz (2000: 5) notes, "New times call for new thinking". Some problems need non-traditional and novel affective approaches to broaden water diplomacy and policy options. The emotional dynamics engulfing the GERD and its negotiations need to be regulated and

managed. Otherwise, the riparian states will continue to negotiate in an emotionally charged context, where the outcomes could be not only predetermined but also counter-productive. This is mainly visible in the affective impact assessment of the GERD, where Ethiopia's anger and pride exaggerates the GERD's benefits, hence glorifying the dam, while Egypt's fear inflates the harm, hence vilifying the dam.

This analysis also helps us to strengthen our argument about the emotional dimensions of water diplomacy. We confirm our initial hypothesis that water diplomacy is more than the perceived rational behaviour of states as unitary actors over shared water resources. Instead, water diplomacy is also shaped by emotions. This seems to be particularly the case when major rivers – such as the Nile – and/or large-scale infrastructure projects that represent more than just technical structures are at stake.

Based on this concept, moving beyond the Nile River basin and trying to generalise our results towards other contested water basins in the world, we argue that in many – if not in all – of the world's transboundary basins, emotions shape negotiations over the use, the management, and the protection of shared water resources alongside the many other elements of water diplomacy. From the perspective of policymaking, our research suggests the need to develop instruments to explicitly address and manage the emotional dimensions of hydraulic infrastructures: for example, a mechanism for the emotional impact assessment of large dams, as is already the case for their social and environmental impacts. In terms of research, further studies on the role of emotions in water politics in transboundary basins could reveal interesting insights. This could also contribute to better understanding what actually drives water diplomacy and its outcomes. Such insights could contribute to our understanding of why countries continue to engage in conflict instead of pursuing a cooperative strategy towards their co-riparian areas despite the obvious benefits of cooperation.

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