

# The Source of the Blue Nile



The Source of the Blue Nile:  
Water Rituals and Traditions  
in the Lake Tana Region

By

Terje Oestigaard and Gedef Abawa Firew

**CAMBRIDGE  
SCHOLARS**

---

P U B L I S H I N G

The Source of the Blue Nile:  
Water Rituals and Traditions in the Lake Tana Region,  
by Terje Oestigaard and Gedef Abawa Firew

This book first published 2013

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

12 Back Chapman Street, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2XX, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data  
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Copyright © 2013 by Terje Oestigaard and Gedef Abawa Firew

All rights for this book reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the copyright owner.

ISBN (10): 1-4438-4601-5, ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-4601-1

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements .....	vii
Chapter One.....	1
Search for the Sources of the Nile	
Chapter Two .....	21
Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity and Holy Water	
Chapter Three .....	45
Abay: The Blue Nile from its Source to the Waterfalls	
Chapter Four .....	71
Lake Tana and the Island Monasteries	
Chapter Five .....	91
New Year, Meskel and Timkat	
Chapter Six .....	113
Indigenous Groups and Traditional Beliefs	
Chapter Seven.....	131
The Almighty Father	
About the Authors .....	145
Notes.....	147
Bibliography .....	155
Index .....	161



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Firstly, we would like to thank all the friendly people we met over the course of this project and the informants who shared their knowledge and spent time with us. Most of the fieldwork was conducted in August/September 2009 and in January and March 2010, with additional follow-up inquiries in 2011 on specific topics being pursued during the process of writing. Academically, we would like to thank Prof. Randi Haaland, Prof. Terje Tvedt, Dr Tore Saetersdal and the Nile Basin Research Programme at the University of Bergen, Norway. We would also like to thank Prof. Yacob Arsano at Addis Ababa University and the members of the History Department at Bahir Dar University, Ethiopia. Finally, we would like to thank the Nordic Africa Institute, Uppsala, Sweden, in particular Prof. Kjell Havnevik and Sonja Johansson, and lastly, Peter Colenbrander, who commented upon the language. Unless otherwise stated, the photos are taken by the authors and we are of course solely responsible for the presentation and the interpretations in this book.

Terje Oestigaard  
Gedef Abawa Firew

Uppsala/Bergen, January 2013





## CHAPTER ONE

# SEARCH FOR THE SOURCES OF THE NILE

### **Context and objectives**

The Nile, the longest river in the world, has been seen by many as the most important river in the world and as the father of African rivers. Its length is 6,671 kilometres<sup>1</sup> and it drains a basin of 3,349,000 square kilometres, the equivalent of about one-tenth of the African continent. The Nile Basin catchment area is today shared among 11 countries: Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Egypt, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Rwanda, South Sudan, Sudan, Tanzania and Uganda. (Fig. 1.1). The White Nile has its headwaters in Lake Victoria and Lake Albert and the Blue Nile, called the Abay in Ethiopia, has its headwaters in Lake Tana.

The White Nile flows through large parts of equatorial Africa where there is a considerable rainfall throughout the year, and it not only runs through Lakes Victoria and Albert, two large lakes, but also the Sudd. Consequently, the White Nile has an almost constant volume throughout the year, whereas the Blue Nile and the Atbara River are highly seasonal and dependent on summer rains. This difference between the White and the Blue Nile is important for the distribution of water. The Blue Nile and its Ethiopian tributaries provide Egypt with the floods during the summer, while the White Nile provides most of the water for the Nile during the winter. The White and the Blue Nile meet in Khartoum in Sudan, where they join and form the Nile, which flows northwards into Egypt. The last principle water source for the Nile is the Atbara, which also rises in the Ethiopian highlands and joins the Nile some 300 kilometres north of Khartoum. From here, the Egyptian-Nubian Nile is unique among rivers in the world because for 2,700 kilometres it passes through desert without receiving any substantial inflow of water. The White Nile provides approximately 15 per cent of the water to the Nile whereas the Ethiopian tributaries (Abay, Sobat and Atbara) together contribute approximately 85 per cent of the Nile's waters as measured at Aswan in Egypt.

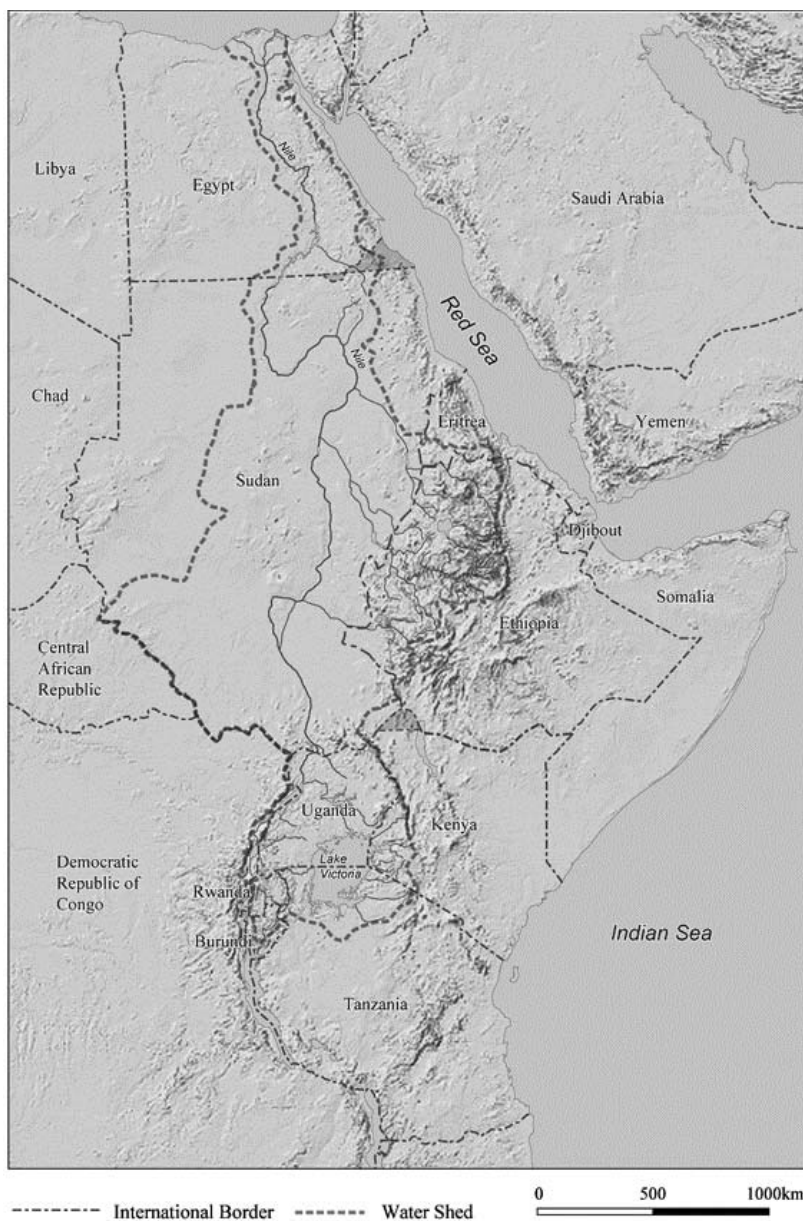


Fig. 1.1. The Nile Basin catchment area. Source: Nile Basin Research Programme, University of Bergen, Norway.

Since the river flows from south to north, unlike any other river known since antiquity, it has been seen as mysterious throughout history. Not only were the river's sources unknown, but when the heat was at its most intense during the summer, the Nile started flooding in an arid desert. The secrets of and mystery surrounding the Nile's sources have from the dawn of civilisation attracted both philosophers and emperors. The Blue Nile has been described as 'the Everest of rivers' and 'the last unconquered hell on earth.'<sup>2</sup> 'From the very dawn of history, the secret of the Nile sources attracted the attention of the dwellers in its valley. Every conquering race ... fell under the spell of this mystery and sought to solve it ... They saw a great river, rising they knew not where, and traversing many hundreds of miles of desert unassisted by a single tributary,' Garstin writes:

They saw that it delivered an unfailing supply throughout the entire year, and – greatest marvel of all – they saw that, at the time when the sun's rays were the most powerful, and the intense heat scorched and shrivelled up every green thing, its water rose, overflowing their channel, saturating the adjacent lands, and converting tracts that would otherwise have been arid wastes into the most productive agricultural areas in the world.<sup>3</sup>

The source of the Blue Nile is usually seen as either the Gish Abay spring or the river's outlet from Lake Tana. Despite the importance of the River Nile since antiquity, very little research has been conducted into the cultural and religious aspects of the Blue Nile in general or into its sources in particular. One reason is that, apart from the scientific quest to find the source itself, later the main aim was hydrological, to find out how much water the river provided Egypt. Thus, after the source of the Blue Nile was discovered in 1618 (or 1613) by Portuguese missionaries, there were only some minor reports on the rituals and beliefs regarding this most famous river. James Bruce (1790) did give a detailed account of the religious practices and Charles Beke (1844) continued this tradition. As Major Robert Cheesman noted in 1935 (Fig. 1.2), 'When I was first appointed to North West Ethiopia, in 1925, as His Majesty's Consul, I found that very little was known of the Blue Nile in Abyssinia, and determined to see and survey the whole valley from its source at the Sacred Spring at Gish Abbai, through Lake Tana, and down to Roseires in the Sudan, a distance of about 600 miles.'<sup>4</sup> However, his documentation of the source<sup>5</sup> was not followed by other systematic, ethnographic fieldworks focusing on the beliefs and rituals from Gish Abay down the Blue Nile to Lake Tana and Tis Abay.

Our study, by contrast, emphasises and, based on ethnographic research, empirically documents rituals, beliefs and traditions along the Blue Nile

and analyses and discusses the role of water in the history of the Lake Tana region in past and present contexts. We also discuss the knowledge systems of this region.

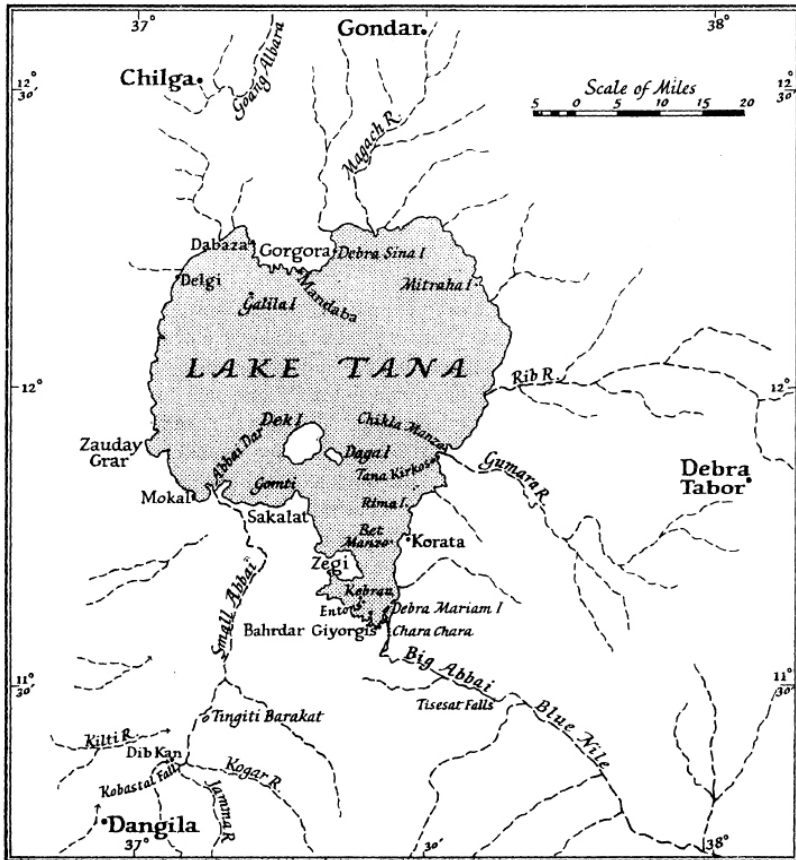


Fig. 1.2. Lake Tana. Source: Cheesman 1935:490.

Discourses about the Nile have formed part of Western history since antiquity. From the dawn of civilisation, the sources of the Nile have been a meeting place for different knowledge systems and have shaped history. In an African context, Ethiopia is in a special position because the country has never been colonised, apart from the Italian conquest in 1935-41. This has had implications for knowledge systems, since there has not been a

long-established Western academic tradition compared to other African countries. Moreover, in Ethiopia there is an extremely rich cultural and religious diversity which, comparatively speaking, has not been documented and studied. It is therefore of utmost importance to the cultural heritage of Ethiopia to address these issues before they disappear in the face of modernity.

We further analyse how the role of water has structured society and religion throughout history in the Lake Tana region, and how the Abay, with its associated beliefs and traditions, has transcended religions such as Christianity and Islam. It has been said that ‘in transcendental religions such as Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, where the omnipotence of a single god renders that god’s existence totally independent of his creation, sacrifice becomes merely a token of individual and collective human gratitude for the deity’s favours.’<sup>6</sup> This is in contrast to cosmogonic religions. Thus, prayer is the fundamental act of worship in the former and sacrifice in the latter.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, even these world religions have incorporated the animist water-world of the Blue Nile and Lake Tana, where sacrifices are crucial. Moreover, in both Christian and Muslim belief, the source of the Blue Nile is the very source of the Gihon River flowing from Paradise. In this region, the mythology of Lake Tana defines important parts of Christianity, and the most holy festival – Timkat – is a celebration of the importance of baptism: all rituals and beliefs are within a cosmological water-world.

Structurally, the book is divided into seven chapters. This chapter addresses the Nile quest and the search for the river’s sources from antiquity onwards, presenting a picture of the extent to which the Nile and the importance of finding its sources have been part of European intellectual history. Chapter 2 provides a short historical introduction to the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, with a particular emphasis on water. Chapter 3 presents in historical context new ethnographic evidence on the source of the Blue Nile – Gish Abay – before following the river to Tis Abay, the spectacular waterfalls. Chapter 4 focuses on Lake Tana and the island monasteries where, according to the church, events occurred not only important in the history of Ethiopia, but also of Christianity. Chapter 5 analyses the three most important festivals in Ethiopia, New Year, Meskel and Timkat, all of which are related to water, in particular Timkat, which is truly unique in a water perspective. Chapter 6 examines the only indigenous group still living along the shores of Lake Tana and around the headwaters of the Blue Nile, and how their lives and beliefs are intimately connected to the Nile. Chapter 7 concludes with a brief discussion of the importance of the Blue Nile and its water and also raises the question of

whether its source was known outside the Lake Tana region before the Portuguese came. This directly relates to the overall theme of the first chapter, namely the search for the sources of the Nile.

## The Nile Quest

It seems the Ancient Egyptians may have known the course of the Blue Nile up to Lake Tana. They exercised a form of rule over parts of northern and western Abyssinia and allegedly sent criminals and political exiles in the Samien Mountains to die of cold in the snow. With regard to the White Nile, on the other hand, it seems they had no idea where it originated.<sup>8</sup> The Egyptian sources are unclear and diverse, and the Egyptians obviously knew about the Nile upstream of the First Cataract at Aswan, but this place had a special cosmological role in their religion. Although the river flowed hydrologically from the south further upstream, mythologically the source of the Nile was at Elephantine Island at Aswan. This belief may be the reason the Egyptians were not interested in the source of the White Nile and may, while perhaps knowing about Lake Tana and the Blue Nile, have not afforded this information any significance.<sup>9</sup>

Still, finding the source of the Nile was a major quest in antiquity. The Greek historian Herodotus wrote:

With regard to the sources of the Nile, I have found no one among all those with whom I have conversed, whether Egyptians, Libyans or Greeks, who professed to have any knowledge, except a single person. He was the scribe who kept the register of the sacred treasures of Minerva in the city of Sais, and he did not seem to me to be earnest when he said that he knew them perfectly well. His story was as follows: 'Between Syene, a city in the Thebais, and Elephantine, there are,' he said, 'two hills with sharp conical tops; the name of the one is Crophî, of the other Mophî. Midway between them are the fountains of the Nile, fountains which [it] is impossible to fathom. Half of the waters run northward into Egypt, half to the south towards Ethiopia.'<sup>10</sup>

When Herodotus visited Elephantine, he learnt from the locals that the river continued at least 40 days further southward, but he concluded that '... of the sources of the Nile no one can give any account...'<sup>11</sup>

Ethiopia has had a special place in this quest. According to Father Balthazar Tellez, who wrote *The Travels of the Jesuits in Ethiopia* in 1710, 'it was said of Alexander the Great that the first question he asked when he came to Jupiter Ammon was where the Nile had its rise, and we know that he sent discoveries throughout Ethiopia without being able to find out this

source.<sup>12</sup> Alexander is said to have searched for the waters of life and even to have tried to fly up to heaven.<sup>13</sup>

Approaching the source of the Nile from another perspective and continent, it is commonly agreed that Alexander never crossed the Ganges, but it seems that the river had a mythical grandeur that attracted him. The king insisted on proceeding to the Ganges, but had to return. According to Plutarch, 'he felt that unless he could cross the Ganges, he owed no thanks to his troops for what they had already achieved; instead he regarded their having turned back as an admission of defeat.'<sup>14</sup> This obsession may have been tinged with ideological and religious considerations as well. It is said that Alexander the Great believed he would reach one of the Nile's tributaries when he got to the Ganges.<sup>15</sup>

For a time, Alexander also believed he had found the sources of the Nile in the rivers Hydaspes and Akesines, which are tributaries to the Indus and are located in ancient India and today's Pakistan. Explorations demonstrated that the Hydaspes was not the source of the Nile, but Hellenistic geographers continued to connect the two rivers, since both had a summer flood. Agatharkhides noted that shortly after the rains had swelled the Hydaspes, the heavy summer rains began in Egypt. Moreover, the mud of both rivers was also taken as an indication of their being linked.<sup>16</sup> Artaxerxes Ochus thought there was a lake that connected India and Ethiopia and that the Indus was the Upper Nile.<sup>17</sup> This was a conventional association of the time, as evidenced by Procopius in *Wars* 1.19: 'the Nile River, flowing out of India into Egypt, divides that land into two parts as far as the sea.' It was further believed that the Ethiopians had previously lived in India before migrating to Ethiopia, as Philostratos notes in his *Life of the Apollonius*. The Ethiopians were sons of the River Ganges and the subjects of King Ganges. However, they murdered the king and were compelled to migrate, and Heliodorus perhaps suggested that they accepted the sovereignty of another river-related ruler similar to their former overlords: in other words, connecting the Hydaspes and the Nile flood.<sup>18</sup> This alleged link between India and Ethiopia survived a long time. Ansel Adorno, for instance, who travelled in the East in 1470-71, wrote that the Nile, which was Gihon,<sup>19</sup> originated in India and flowed to Egypt through Ethiopia.<sup>20</sup>

The source of the Nile was a quest that interested philosophers, geographers and emperors alike. It is said of Julius Caesar that he 'was so desirous of knowing this spring that, discoursing in Egypt with that grave old man Achoreus, and enquiring where the Nile had its origin, he went so far as to tell him it was the thing he most coveted to know in the world ... adding that he would quit his country Rome for the satisfaction of

discovering that source.<sup>21</sup> Emperor Nero sent two centurions to discover the source, but they failed.<sup>22</sup> The soldiers seem to have reached the Sudd, according to Seneca:

I have heard the narration of two centurions whom Nero, that great lover of all good things, but above all of truth, had sent to discover the Nile's sources. After a long journey, directed by the help of the King of Aethiopia and with his recommendation to neighbouring princes, they penetrated into the beyond. There, they declared, they came on vast marshland. Its inhabitants had no idea of its extent and despaired of ever finding out. Plants and water were so entangled that any passage on foot or by boat was impossible. Scarcely could a very small boat, made to carry one person, make its way here. And there, they said, they saw two rocks from which burst out a huge force of water. Whether this was the source of the Nile or a tributary, whether it was born there or came up after a long subterranean course – can you doubt that a great lake under the earth feeds it, whatever it is? Waters, scattered about in various places, must come together, forced into the depths, in order to jet out with such violence.<sup>23</sup>

A Greek merchant named Diogenes on his return from India landed on the East African coast around 50 AD. He is said to have 'travelled inland for a twenty-five days' journey, and arrived in the vicinity of the two great lakes and the snowy range of mountains whence the Nile draws its twin sources.' Since nothing is reported of his return journey, it seems more likely that he came into contact with Arab traders who informed him of the lakes a 25-day journey away. He was also told that the Nile united its two headstreams north of the lakes and flowed through marshes until it reached the River of Abyssina (the Blue Nile). The Syrian geographer Marinus of Tyre learned of this story, and in the 1st century published his geographical works. Although these were lost, they are quoted extensively by Ptolemy, who is credited as the first person to identify the origin of the Nile in Lakes Victoria and Albert and the Mountains of the Moon (Ruwenzori).<sup>24</sup> Ptolemy also mentions a Lake of Koloe, which subsequent geographers have debated as a possible reference to Lake Tana.<sup>25</sup> It has further been suggested, based on analysis of old maps, that Ptolemy's lakes were in Abyssinia – Lake Tana and probably Lake Ashangi – and that the source of the Nile and the Mountains of the Moon are associated.<sup>26</sup> Ptolemy was the authority on the sources of the Nile until the end of the 15th century and the most recent edition of his map was published in 1485.<sup>27</sup> Ptolemy's map of the Nile was, despite its many errors, the first to display a degree of accuracy, and it marks a great development in the geography of the Nile (Fig. 1.3). When English 19th century explorers uncovered the source, many of Ptolemy's assertions were vindicated.<sup>28</sup>





Fig. 1.3. The Nile according to Ptolemy. This is the oldest existing map by Ptolemy from about 930 AD, and is preserved in Mount Athos Monastery. From Johnston 1903, face page 26.

After Ptolemy, the sources of the Nile continued to be a matter of discussion. Cosmas Indicopleustes, which literally means he ‘who sailed to India,’ was a 6th century Greek traveller and merchant. In describing Axum, he adds: ‘the sources of the Nile lie somewhere in these parts, and rain falls in torrents, and there are many snakes, and a multitude of rivers that all flow into the Nile.’<sup>29</sup> Among Muslims, as well, the topic was discussed. Al Hamadhani, a 10th century geographer, compiled a book on the towns and countries of the Arab empire. With regard to the source of the Nile, he wrote:

Behind the country of Alwa [Aloa] there is a nation of blacks called Takina. They go naked, like the Zang [slaves]. In this country gold grows or sprouts, and in their country the Nile forks, and they assert its rising is there, and behind the rising [the source of the Nile] there is darkness, and behind the darkness there is water in which gold grows, in the land of Takin and Ghana.<sup>30</sup>

### **Pedro Paez and James Bruce**

Rumours circulating among the Crusaders about a pious Christian monarch, Prester John, prompted the Portuguese to mount expeditions to find this Christian kingdom in Abyssinia. Here they arrived in 1520 and stayed for six years. Father Alvarez was part of this embassy.<sup>31</sup> Later, the Christian rulers of Abyssinia were forced to appeal to Portugal for help against the famous general Mohammed Gragn and the Muslim Moors. Gragn’s Arabic name was Imam Ahmad Ibn Ibrahim, but he is commonly known as Ahmad Gragn, *gragn* meaning ‘left-handed.’

Four hundred and fifty Portuguese went with Christopher de Gama to assist the Christian Abyssinian rulers against Gragn in 1541.<sup>32</sup> Da Gama commanded an army of 12,000 badly armed Abyssinians together with the Portuguese musketeers whereas Mohammed Gragn had 1,000 horsemen, 500 more men on foot and 50 Turkish musketeers. Da Gama won the first battle in 1542, but was bested in 1543. The defeated Portuguese were brutally treated by Gragn, and da Gama himself was beheaded. Three hundred of the Portuguese escaped the fatal battle, and fled to Jew’s Mountain in Semien province.<sup>33</sup>

The first Europeans to visit the source of the Blue Nile were probably the Portuguese sent to Ethiopia with Christopher de Gama in 1541. Exactly when they initially set eyes on the source is uncertain, since they did not document the event. However, some of the Portuguese remained in Ethiopia and finally settled at Nanina, which is only about 50 kilometres from the source.<sup>34</sup>

The first European to visit and document the source of the Blue Nile was the Portuguese Jesuit priest Pedro Paez. The date of his visit is variously given as 21 April 1618 or 1615 or 1613. In the book by the Portuguese Jesuit, Father Lobo, the year 1613 is given, but James Bruce argues with reference to native Abyssinian chronicles that Paez's visit was probably in 1615. The Jesuit Athanasius Kircher, who in 1652 published the *History of Ethiopia*, a Latin version of Paez's journal account of his travels, gives the date 21 April 1618.<sup>35</sup> Whatever the exact date, Paez was the first European to describe the source.

The river, at this day, by the Ethiopians is called the Abaoy; it rises in the kingdom of Gojam, in a territory called Sabala, whose inhabitants are called Agows. The source of the Nile is situated in the west part of Gojam, in the highest part of a valley, which resembles a great plain on every side, surrounded by high mountains. On the 21<sup>st</sup> of April, in the year 1618, being here, together with the king and his army, I ascended the place, and observed everything with great attention; I discovered first two round fountains, each about four palms in diameter, and saw, with greatest delight, what neither Cyrus king of the Persians, nor Cambyses, nor Alexander the Great, nor the famous Julius Caesar, could ever discover. The two openings of these fountains have no issue in the plain on the top of the mountain, but flow from the foot of it. The second fountain lies about a stone-cast from the first ...<sup>36</sup>

Father Lobo also visited the source in around 1629, and he described it thus:

This spring, or rather these two springs, are two holes, each about two feet in diameter, a stone's cast distance from each other. The one is but about five feet and an half in depth ... Of the other, which is somewhat less ... we could find no bottom, we were assured by the inhabitants that none ever had been found. It is believed here that these springs are the vents of a great subterranean lake.<sup>37</sup>

Lobo's manuscript was translated into English and published by the Jesuit Father Balthazar Tellez in London in 1670.<sup>38</sup>

Another Jesuit, the Portuguese Father Manoel de Almeida, wrote the *History of High Ethiopia or Abassia* between 1628 and 1646. Almeida does not state that he actually visited the Nile's source, but his description is more precise and differs from Paez's, so it is likely that he was there and saw it with his own eyes.<sup>39</sup>



Fig. 1.4. James Bruce. From Johnston 1903, face page 86.

This [is a] pool ... where one sees clear and limpid water. The people who live near say that they are unfathomable and some of them have tested this by putting lances in up to 20 spans without finding the bottom. The water flows from this pool underground but the course it takes can be told from the grass. First it flows eastwards for a musket shot and then turns to the north. About half a league from the source the water comes to the surface in sufficient quantity to make not a very big stream, but others soon join it,

which lose their own names when they do so, while the Nile begins to have that of a river.<sup>40</sup>

Almeida then describes how the water becomes muddied with black earth before it runs into the great lake named Dambeâ. He then proceeds to elaborate on the different flows of the Nile.

The travellers to the source of the Blue Nile did not follow the Nile from Egypt to Sudan and further into Ethiopia because of the difficulties presented by the canyons in the mountainous areas. With one exception, all the Portuguese visitors journeyed to the highlands from the shores of the Red Sea, arriving first at Massawa before reaching their headquarters close to Axum. However, the old Greek road from Adulis to Axum, reputedly the best along with the route from Halai and Dixá, seems not to have been used by the Portuguese en route to Abyssinia.<sup>41</sup> Following the Portuguese expulsion in 1633, no Europeans were present in Abyssinia, with the exception of the physician Poncet, who visited in 1699, prior to Bruce's visit in 1770.<sup>42</sup>

James Bruce, who was born in 1730 at Kinnaird in Scotland, was an explorer who travelled from Cairo to the source of the Blue Nile (Fig. 1.4). When Bruce finally reached Gish Abay on 4 November 1770, he believed – or at least claimed when he published his accounts – that he was the first European to visit the spring. Bruce published his *Travels to discover the source of the Nile: In the years 1768, 1769, 1770, 1771, 1772, and 1773*, in five volumes in 1790.<sup>43</sup> Bruce claimed that Paez's account of his visit to the source was a modern interpolation, and he dedicates a number of pages in his third volume to disprove that Paez ever visited the source.

One may assume that Bruce became aware that Paez and Lobo had seen the source before him and that he became very bitter when he learned of this and hostile to the memory of the two men. As we have seen, Bruce travelled between 1768 and 1773. In 1772, the French geographer D'Anville published a map of the Nile based on the Portuguese descriptions (Fig. 1.5). When Bruce met D'Anville in Paris on his way back to Britain, the geographer informed Bruce that the source of the Nile had been made known to Europe from the journeys of Paez and Lobo. D'Anville also tried to convince Bruce that the Blue Nile was not the main source of the Nile, and that at least two-thirds of the Nile mystery remained unsolved.<sup>44</sup> Thus, 'not being aware that he had been forestalled, [Bruce] thought he had discovered the source of the Blue Nile, and not only that, but of the White Nile as well, and was much disappointed when, on his return to Europe, he was disillusioned by Monsieur D'Anville in Paris on both points.'<sup>45</sup> Bruce suffered from ill health after his expedition,



but this information may account for the 17-year delay in the publication of his *Travels*.<sup>46</sup>

He really wanted to be recognised as the explorer who had discovered the source of the river, of life itself, after more than two millennia of Nile quest. In his own words:

Far in antiquity as history or tradition can lead us, farther still beyond the reach of either ... begins the inquiry into the origin, cause of increase, and course, of this famous river. It is one of the few phenomena in natural history that ancient philosophers employed themselves in investigating, and people of all ranks seemed to have joined in the research with a degree of perseverance very uncommon; but still this discovery, though often attempted under the most favourable circumstances, has as constantly miscarried; it has baffled the endeavours of all ages, and at last come down, as great a secret as ever, to these latter times of bold and impartial inquiry.<sup>47</sup>

Bruce is here expressing his feeling of taking part in history, and indeed of defining it by accomplishing a marvellous act that he believed no one before him had succeeded in doing:

It is easier to guess than to describe the situation of my mind at that moment – standing in that spot which had baffled the genius, industry, and inquiry of both ancients and moderns, for the course of near three thousand years. Kings had attempted this discovery at the head of armies, and each expedition was distinguished from the last, only by the difference of the numbers which had perished, and agreed alone in the disappointment which had uniformly, and without exception, followed them all. Fame, riches, and honour, had been held out for series of ages to every individual of those myriads these princes commanded, without having produced one man capable of gratifying the curiosity of his sovereign, or wiping off this stain upon the enterprise and abilities of mankind, or adding this desideratum for the encouragement of geography. Though a mere private Briton, I triumphed here, in my own mind, over kings and their armies ... ‘Strates, said I, faithful squire, come and triumph with your Don Quixote at the island of Barataria where we have wisely and fortunately brought ourselves; come and triumph with me over all the kings of the earth, all their armies, all their philosophers, and all their heroes.’<sup>48</sup>

At the source, Bruce made a number of toasts to the good health of King George III and a long line of princes, as well as to ‘a more humble, but still sacred name – here is to Maria!’ Strates, his assistant, was hesitant about all the toasts Bruce proposed, and asked if the last was to the Virgin Mary. Bruce replied, ‘In faith, I believe so, Strates.’<sup>49</sup> Strates responded:

... as for king George I drank to him with all my heart, to his wife, to his children, to his brothers and sisters, God bless them all! Amen; – but as for the Virgin Mary, as I am no Papist, I beg to be excluded from drinking healths which *my church* does not drink. As for our happy return, God knows, there is no one wishes it more sincerely than I do, for I have been weary of this beggarly country. But you must forgive me if I refuse to drink any more water. They say these savages pray over that hole every morning to the devil, and I am afraid I feel his horns in my belly already.<sup>50</sup>

Bruce accused Strates of being peevish, but Strates replied: ‘Peevish, or not peevish, a drop of it never again shall cross my throat ... there is no jest in meddling with devil-worshippers, witchcraft, and enchantments, to bring some disease upon one’s self here, so far from home ... No, no, as many toasts in wine as you please, or better in brandy, but no more water for Strates.’<sup>51</sup> Bruce then proposed a toast to Empress Catherine of Russia, which Strates also drank while defying the Devil and keeping trust in St George.

In fact, the Mary Bruce toasted was not the Virgin, but a Scotswoman he had become engaged to before he started his journey. It seems Bruce seriously expected that she should wait for him, even though she had received no letters or news from him. On his way back to Europe, he learned she had married an Italian aristocrat, Marchese Filippo d’Accoramboni, and was living in Rome.<sup>52</sup>

Bruce’s *Travels* enjoyed less popularity than he had expected. As Moorehead points out, even if it was true ‘that from Cyrus to Julius Caesar the kings of the ancient world had occupied themselves with this matter in vain,’ ‘who really cared about this discovery of a remote spring in Ethiopia?’<sup>53</sup> Apart from that, Bruce’s dishonesty in claiming he was the first European to visit the source of the Blue Nile was completely exposed in 1796 by Professor Hartmann in his *Edrisii Africa*. Dr. Charles T. Beke wrote in 1847: ‘The attempt made by our contryman to deprive Paez of the merit of having anticipated him in the discovery and description of the source of Abâi, or supposed *Nile*, must ever remain a sad blot on the fame to which he had sufficient legitimate claims, without seeking to appropriate to himself what justly belonged to others.’<sup>54</sup>

Moreover, Bruce faced incredulity back in England with regard to his descriptions of Abyssinians eating raw meat cut from living cows: critics claimed this was mere fancy.<sup>55</sup> In fact, he was utterly ridiculed and viewed like Baron Münchhausen as a fabulist, and literary London went to great lengths to make a laughing stock of him. When a new edition of Baron Münchhausen was published, it was entitled *Gulliver Reviv’d: The Singular Travels, Campaigns, Voyages, and Sporting Adventures of Baron*



*Munnikhouson, commonly pronounced Munchausen; as he relates them over a bottle when surrounded by his friends. Or the Vice of lying properly Exposed.* The book was dedicated to James Bruce.<sup>56</sup>

After Bruce visited Abyssinia, Lord Valentia and Henry Salt went there in 1805, and then Salt alone in 1810, this time as envoy of the British government. In 1830, Mr Gobat was the first European since Bruce to visit the capital Gonder. A few other travellers reached the Abay. Altogether, 42 European travellers visited Abyssinia during the first 40 years of the 19th century. Most entered Abyssinia from the north, although some approached it from the south.<sup>57</sup> Of all these travellers, it was Dr. Charles T. Beke who undertook the most thorough investigation. Indeed, he compiled a map of some 70,000 square miles of the country, including areas hardly explored or documented by others. Moreover, although Arnault and Bell visited the source of the Nile, they left no account of their travels, and it was Beke who was the first traveller since Bruce to visit and document Gish Abay.<sup>58</sup>

The Nile quest was not only the result of personal ambition and rivalries, but was also a manifestation of the Victorian urge to travel and explore.<sup>59</sup> While the source of the Blue Nile had been discovered, the source of the White Nile remained unknown. Beke noted in 1847 that ‘the position of the source of that celebrated river remains as unknown as it was in the earliest ages ... its head is still enveloped in the clouds of mystery which have in all ages concealed it from our sight.’<sup>60</sup> Thus, the Nile quest was not over.

It was the British explorer John Hanning Speke who discovered the source of the White Nile. On 30 July 1858, he reached a great lake, which he named in honour of Queen Victoria, and he believed this to be the source of the Nile. Back in England, this caused a controversy because he had not seen the outlet. In 1862, on a second trip aimed at confirming his discovery, he found the Nile’s exit from Lake Victoria and named it Ripon Falls. Nevertheless, the Nile quest was only finally settled in 1875-1876, almost 20 years later, when H.M. Stanley (Fig. 1.6) proved that Speke’s claim to have found the source was fully justified.<sup>61</sup>

Then, in 1888, the Congo Nile was discovered. It rises in the Ruwenzori Mountains, six mountain massifs over 4,500 metres in height, with Mount Stanley (5,109 m) the highest. The rivers from these mountains drain into Lakes George, Edward and Albert. Henry Morton Stanley described this watershed by citing a 17th century Arab geographer: ‘From the Mountains of the Moon the Egyptian Nile takes its rise. It cuts horizontally the Equator in its course north. Many rivers come

from these mountains and unite in a great lake. From this lake comes the Nile, the most beautiful and greatest of the rivers of all the earth.'<sup>62</sup>

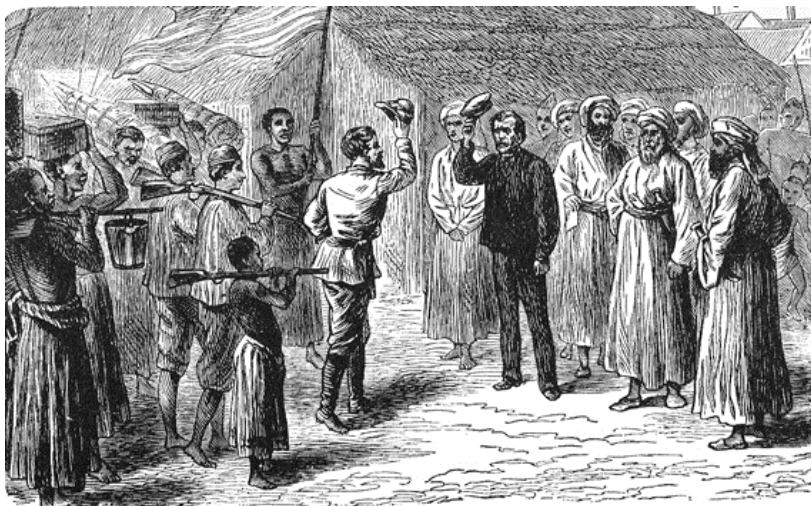


Fig. 1.6. In 1871 Henry Morton Stanley meets David Livingstone and presumably utters his famous words: 'Doctor Livingstone, I presume?' Source: *How I found Livingstone*. Illustration for French edition: *Comment j'ai retrouvé Livingstone*. Hachette, Paris. 1876.

With the discovery of the sources of the Nile, hydrological knowledge of the river developed. The White Nile has its headwaters in Lake Victoria and Lake Albert, and the Blue Nile in Lake Tana. Even so, the river posed many challenges. 'The usual and most methodical mode of describing a river is to commence at its source, and to follow its course down the entire stream, noting its various tributaries as they consecutively join in,' Beke wrote in 1847. But, he commented, 'this method is ... forbidden us in the case of the Nile.'<sup>63</sup> Although he was in this case describing the White Nile, his observations also hold true of the Blue Nile: it has proven extremely difficult to follow it from its source to Sudan or the other way around. In 1936, William L. Langer wrote: 'It has been estimated that five-sixths of all water of the Blue Nile enters that river between its outlet in Lake Tana and its crossing of the frontier into the Sudan. In that region the river flows through a tremendous canyon which has never been explored by white men, but which is known to drain a very large mountain area. Engineers agree that nothing man can do could in any way check this torrential flow.'<sup>64</sup>

The first attempt to navigate the Blue Nile to Ethiopia from Sudan was initiated by a rich American big-game hunter named W.N. Macmillian. He hired the Norwegian B.H. Jessen in 1903 and 1905 to undertake the exploration, but Jessen was unsuccessful.<sup>65</sup> In the late 1920s, Cheesman tried to follow the course of the river on foot, but was soon forced to continue on the plateau. Herbert Rittlinger, a German, together with a small party tried to canoe down the river in 1955, but numerous attacks by crocodiles forced him to give up. In 1962, an expedition by the Canoe Club of Geneva consisting of six men travelled from the Blue Nile Bridge in Bahir Dar to a point near the Sudanese border, where they were attacked by bandits while sleeping on an island. Two of them died, while the others escaped in one canoe. Arne Rubin, a Swedish canoeist, became the first to travel from the Blue Nile Bridge to the Roseires in 1965, and he did it alone.<sup>66</sup>

Thus, the quest for the source of the Blue Nile has had a long and eventful history, and even after the source was discovered, following the river from there to the Sudanese border has proven extremely taxing. And even though the source has been uncovered and hydrological knowledge of the flow of the river has been documented, the cultural and religious dimensions of the source and the rituals, beliefs and traditions of the Lake Tana region regarding water have hardly been studied. This gap we will try to partly address by first giving a short introduction to the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, with a particular focus on water, and then proceed with an empirical and ethnographic presentation and discussion of water rituals and traditions in the Lake Tana region.



## CHAPTER TWO

# ETHIOPIAN ORTHODOX CHRISTIANITY AND HOLY WATER

### **Holy water**

In order to understand the religious role of water, one should distinguish between ‘holy’ and ‘sacred.’ In general, ‘holy’ and ‘sacred’ are often seen as identical and used interchangeably, but the terms imply different relationships to the divine. Most people say ‘holy water,’ but not ‘sacred water,’ and this difference is important. Theoretically, ‘holiness’ refers to the divinity and what is derived from the divinity as attributes, whereas ‘sacredness’ points to consecrated items, ‘respected or venerated objects but not the divine itself and not to persons as individuals.’ Moreover, it is ‘the holy Bible,’ but the ‘sacred books of the East.’<sup>67</sup> The difference lies in whether the scriptures are truly seen as divine revelations or as being compiled and written by sages and priests at a later stage.

‘Holy water’ thus implies a special and particular relationship to the divine. In Hinduism, Mother Ganga is truly a holy river encompassing everything in the religion, and the water itself *is* the goddess. This perspective is fundamental to understanding the role of holy water in religions. The water may be the very divinity itself and Hinduism is a water religion *per se*. On the other hand, holy water may take numerous forms, even in Christianity. As will be discussed below, in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church water is seen as holy. The beliefs in the holiness of water among the vast majority of the people in the study area may be linked to Gihon as the divine river in heaven and in the baptism by John the Baptist of Jesus in the Jordan River. Gihon as a divine river is mentioned in both the Bible and the Quran. When Jesus was baptised, he transferred holiness to the water as a substance, and hence, all water is holy. Gods and divinities may transfer holiness to any kind of substance, but water is the most common form. Such water, although holy, is different from, for instance, Ganga, which is solely a water goddess, and

not all divine powers and qualities are embodied in water in Christianity. Nevertheless, the actual baptism of Jesus and the role baptism has made water holy in Christianity, because the sacrament was institutionalised by Jesus through his immersion in water.

The importance is thus that the water, which is partly embodied by Jesus, contains his divine powers, and consequently it is holy and can be used by humans in rituals to partake in God's grace and divine mercy. As will be evident later, the use of holy water may take place in the church's liturgical ceremonies, where this divine gift is blessed by the clergy, but people may also use it by themselves because they believe in the divine power of the holy water. The different uses of holy water are also a matter of controversy, because before the introduction of Christianity, there were numerous water cults and beliefs in the power of water, which the church, then as today, viewed as pagan. However, throughout history there has also been syncretism in the various beliefs and uses of holy water. Thus, certain uses and beliefs with regard to holy water may be seen by the church as diabolical unless they are sanctioned by the clergy and performed within the liturgy, at which point they become truly Christian devotional acts and praises.

## **Ethiopian Orthodox Church**

Samuel Johnson's *A Voyage to Abyssinia* (1735) was an English translation of Joachim Le Grand's French manuscript on the Portuguese Jesuit Father Jerónimo Lobo.<sup>68</sup> Johnson wrote: 'No country in the world is so full of churches, monasteries, and ecclesiastics, as Abyssinia; it is not possible to sing in one church or monastery without being heard by another, and perhaps by several.'<sup>69</sup> This description, although exaggerated, does give an idea of the importance of religion in Ethiopia in general and in Abyssinia (the highlands) in particular.

Since this study is primarily about water rituals, beliefs and traditions, this presentation of the Ethiopian Church will be short and incomplete. The emphasis is on the religion as it is perceived and performed by the believers themselves. Specifically, local practices structured around water that have defined central parts of Christianity as it is perceived and observed by commoners – even though the Orthodox Church may oppose these practices as pagan – is the main focus.

Ethiopian Christianity has many resemblances to Jewish traditions, and the question of how, when, and, some might say, even if, Jewish influences came to Ethiopia has been discussed for decades. Steven Kaplan argues that these influences do not appear before the first centuries