

RESEARCH ARTICLE

**FRIEND, STRANGER, ENEMY
ETHIOPIAN ORAL TRADITIONS ON THE ABBAY
(BLUE NILE) RIVER**

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ABSTRACT

Ethiopians communicate to their immediate environment through various dimensions of oral traditions. Music, proverb, poetry and sayings are the cultural instruments which bring together Ethiopian societies and one of Africa's main rivers, the Abbay or Blue Nile. This paper studies the historical and cultural values that Ethiopians attribute to the Abbay River. The study is based on traditions gathered in the districts of Dembya, Fogera Libo kemkem (Addis Zemen), Farta and Estie in the Amhara National Regional State in 2013 and 2014. The study of songs and oral traditions on this river, including the local genres known as kererto, fukkera, and menzuma, as well as spiritual practices, serves to understand how local societies have identified themselves with it and embedded images of the river in the course of their daily lives. The analysis of oral traditions confirms the people's attachment to this river, their sense of identification with it, and their use of the river's might as an emblem of pride. Yet, paradoxically, oral traditions also reveal the presence of a popular feeling of resentment and disapproval towards it.

Keywords: Nile river, Abbay, proverbs, songs and sayings, Dembya.

INTRODUCTION

The river Abbay also called 'Giyon', the "father of all rivers" and a symbol of the Nation in Ethiopian tradition, is the major tributary of the Nile River (Bairu, 2000, pp. 154-156). The spring of Abbay is found in a place called Geshe Abbay (Geshe mountain), Seqela *woreda*, North Western Ethiopia, west Gojjam zone (Hailu Woldeghiorgis, 2007 A.M, p. 7). The river is believed to have over ninety tributaries in Ethiopia (Tafari, 1994, pp. 24-37). Major tributaries of the river include the Dabus, Beshilo, Didesa, Guder, Jama, Muger, Beles, Fincha, and Walaqa as well as many other smaller streams (Erlich, 2003, pp. 27-28; Tafari, 1994, p. 28). As to the sources on the drainage system of the Abbay in Ethiopia, the river and its tributaries overrun one-fifth of the total area of the country. The length of the river from its head water in Lake Tana, the largest lake in the country, to its confluence with the White Nile near to Khartoum is estimated to be 1,500 kms approximately. The Nile is also fed from other large rivers that have their springs in Ethiopia, such as the Atbara and the Sobat. It is estimated that these rivers contribute with 86% of the waters in the Nile system

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(Erllich, 2003, pp. 27-28). The figure can reach up to 95% during the rainy season in Ethiopia, from June to September. The Abbay also supplies the thickest alluvial soil taken yearly from the Ethiopian highland to the Sudanese desert. It is estimated that between 60 to 110 million tons of rich alluvial soil is transported to Sudan and Egypt annually from the Ethiopian highlands. The rich alluvial soil having been transported from Ethiopia to Egypt throughout millennia has been estimated to have reached a deposition depth of up to 9-10 m along the banks of the Nile (Hailu Woldeghiorgis, 2007 A.M., pp.11-15; Tafari, 1994, pp. 28-37).

The Abbay encounters various climatic and ecological zones in the Ethiopian region all the way to Sudan and Egypt. As it flows downstream from the upper stream basin the vegetation cover, rainfall distribution and amount of water sharply declines. Thus, the Ethiopian highlands enjoy a comfortable climate for the fauna and flora, registering approximately 1700 mm rainfall while the arid areas of Egypt have an estimated annual rainfall of 25 mm. Similarly, the evaporation rate varies dramatically between the Ethiopian region and that of the downstream countries.

To its credit, the Abbay holds the greatest respect and admiration in Ethiopian tradition with regard to other important rivers like Tekeze (Atbara), Wabishebele and Baro. In Ethiopia popular traditions assume that all rivers and streams, be they big or small, flow downstream to join the Abbay. This tradition is captured in the following poem:

ውሃ ወርዶ ወርዶ ማረፊያው አባይ
እናት ወልዳ ወልዳ ለሰው አገልጋይ
Water of all kinds flow and rest at river Abbay
A mother gives birth that goes for servitude
(informant Mulat Desie)

The first verse is an indication of the recognition given by Ethiopians for the river that accommodates all streams as a 'father' who brings together his children (see also Bairu, 2000, pp. 155-168). Even the grace and imagination given for the Abbay overshadow that of other similar big rivers. Hence, tradition has it in such a way that any flowing water is assumed to join the Abbay as its tributary. The second verse, in its turn, emphasizes that a generational duty for the man is to be born to serve his kind, a simulation which smaller rivers do for Abbay.

Paradoxically, Ethiopia has benefited little from the waters of the river (Tafari, 1994, pp. 24-45; Tesfay, 1993, pp. 1-128). A popular saying comments ironically on this fact:

የአባይን ልጅ ውሃ ጠማት
የላጭን ልጅ ቅማል በላት
Oh! the daughter of Abbay suffered in thirst,
Similarly, the daughter of a barber sucked by lice

The saying manifests Ethiopians' resentment and failure to harness the river for their own economic advantage. It expresses the feeling that the Abbay failed to serve the people with fairness and equity. Yet, for the people of the study area the river is primarily figured as a symbol of identity, pride, splendour as well as prestige. As such, Ethiopians for ages have composed songs, satirical verses, poems and folk stories and also held ritual practices in honour of the river.

THE HISTORICAL EPISODE

Throughout times, various travellers, adventurers, and scholars have striven to explore the 'mysterious' sources of the Abbay river. In their heyday of power, the Greeks and the Romans attempted to discover the sources of the Abbay. Such great political and military figures of the past like Alexander the Great showed an interest in the Abbay but were unable to find its sources. Other ambitious rulers such as Julius Cesar and Nero followed a similar purpose, but both attempts ended in failure (Bairu, 2000, p. 154; Wuhibegezer, 2016, pp. 50-57; Yewulsew, 2012, pp. 11-13). During modern times, the first European who—convincingly—claimed to have visited and documented the sources of the Blue Nile at Sekela was the Portuguese Jesuit Pedro Páez in the early seventeenth century (Páez, 2011, vol. 1, p. 244 et passim). Later on, during the age of the explorations other Europeans took an interest in the sources of the mighty river. The Scotsman James Bruce, for instance, would claim in the 1770's that he, not Páez, was the first foreigner to have visited the site (Bruce, vol. 3, p. 621 et passim; also Petros, 2010, p. 28; Yewulsew, 2012, p. 13). After him, the French Antoine Thompson d'Abbadie visited the area in 1838 (Tereje & Gedef, 2013, pp. 13-14; Yewulsew, 2012, p. 14).

For the local populations, however, there has never been the need to claim a discovery of the sources of the river. Locals have been well aware on the Abbay, which is born in their land. Yet, they were also not sure where it found its end (Getachew, 2003 A.M., p. 76; Yacob, 2007, p. 70). It is perhaps from this ambiguous status that the following popular saying, which has been passed from generation to generation, comes: አባይ ማደረጎ የለው ግንድ ይዞ ይዞራል ("Abbay the traveller, moves with debris here and there without knowing where to rest").

Ethiopians seem also to have been conscious of the benefits of the river for the wider African continent. Thus, the laureate poet Tsegaye Gebre Medhin wrote in his *Issat Woyi Ababa*:

“...It is the blood of Ethiopia,
the mother of Cush,
The introducer of civilization to the world...”
(Tsegaye Gebre Medhin translated in Yacob, 2007)

The verses can be seen as summarizing the feelings of Ethiopians for the river. Tsegaye added Abbay as the property of Africa as a whole. Probably, he was thinking of the ancient glorious past of the land of Kush and the Biblical reference to four rivers that flow out from the Garden of Eden. Gi-

yon the Biblical name given to Abbay flows in the land of Kush. In support of the poem above, the informants told that the people living along the course of the Abbay are considered the sons and daughters of the river and the offspring of Kush (*sheikh* Mohamed Aman and Worku Gessesse; also Hailu Woldeghiorgis, 2001 A.M., pp. xiv-xv).

Tsegaye also wrote on the paradoxical relationship the river has particularly in Ethiopia with poverty and climate change:

... forgotten your goodness and history,
We live in misery,
Yesterday, by outcries of aliens,
And today, by ignorant violence,
If this persists unresolved,
Your *dream about Abbay is far ...*
(Tsegaye, in Yacob translation, 2007)

Here too, the poet underlined the need to work, beyond the admiration and pride, with the Abbay for the development. The Abbay is seen as a natural and historical source of spiritual captivity. All the way from its sources in Ethiopia down to its destination in the Mediterranean, the river crosses different lands, cultures and peoples.

On the other side, however, the Abbay seems to be perceived as an enemy of the Ethiopian people. The following poem extracted from Yewulsew (2012) translated by Bayleyegn, (1998) from the work of the renowned poet Hailu Gebreyohannes *Innatkin Belulign* ('May you call his mother for me'; 1989 A.M) seems to convey this message:

If you have eyes, you, Abbay-the idle,
Please see that man, that man for a moment,
Burnt with thirst, exhausted, such like this,
For you have deserted him to go to other places.
Please see the land screaming in pain,
Yelling to receive your favour,
Begging for your mercy,
Begging you for a drop of water.
When your land cries out to tell the tale of her woes,
With her throat dried up,
So, what happened to your ears?
For they seem to be deaf to her cries.

Indeed, as already noted above the Abbay washes away the fertile topsoil of the highlands and the lowlands towards the desert. This fact has left peasants bare hand tilling the hillsides of the plateaux for centuries (Yacob, 2007, p. 74). Because of this the peasants have been unable to drive economic benefits from such a mighty river (informant Mihretie Endeshaw; Getachew, 2002, pp. 1-112).

THE NAMES OF A RIVER

Throughout history and across the cultures, the Abbay has been given several names in Ethiopia and elsewhere. In Egyptian tradition, Hapi is the name given for the Nile which has been the source of life and beauty in their land. In addition, in Egyptian civilization the river has received several epithets: “god of gods”, “god of vegetation”, “source of life”, “creator of grain”, “reason for the prosperity of Egypt” and so on. Still today the Coptic Orthodox believers in Egypt call this river Piyaro or Fiyaro. The Greeks used to call it Nilos, while modern Arabs called it Neel, which means a gift to others (Biruk, 2003 A.M., p. 52; Gebretsadik, 2003, p. 18).

Bairu Tafla, using King Ba’ede Maryam’s (1468-1478) chronicle as evidence, argues that the present name of Abbay evolved from the Ge’ez term *abbawi* (‘father’), that is ‘father of rivers’, as the river has many tributaries which can be similar with the children gathered by their father (2000, p. 168; see also Hailu Woldeghiorgis, 2007 A.M., p. xiv). Haggai Erlich described Abbay as an Ethiopian name for the Blue Nile. For him “the name Abbay revolved mainly around the myth that by controlling the river Ethiopia could deprive Egypt of its life blood” (Erlich, 2003, pp. 27-28).

The Abbay river in the study area context is associated with traditions that go back several generations in time. Thus, the name Gesh Abbay, where the spring of Abbay is found, is derived from the local language and people who historically inhabited the area. Traditions ascribe this name to the Awi (Agaw) meaning “digging or dig”, paving the way for flowing water (Abebe Fentahun, 2012, p. 12). Foreign travellers did not enquire into the origin of the term Abbay, but they confirmed that the local residents were Agaw language speakers (Tereje and Gedef, 2013, pp. 13-17). Another tradition on the name Abbay associates it with the hagiographic lore of the Christian orthodox religion. It begins with the experience of a certain *abun Zera Biruk*. The holy man once upon a time stored seven sacred religious books in the waters at the source of the river and left the area for another place. After seven years the *abun* returned and prayed to bring out the holy books from the water. The holy books were found without any sign of damage. The pleased *abun* asked his old disciple *abba Zerufael* to look at the miracle, saying him: *abba iyi yihinin gedil* “look father, look this miracle”. So it was after this miracle that the Amharic term Abbay was coined. Alternatively the Abbay is also known by its Biblical name Giyon.

In both Christian and Muslim traditions Giyon, together with Euphrates, Tigris, and Epheson, is one of the four blessed rivers that flow from paradise (Bairu, 2000, p. 167; Yewulsew 2012; informants *sheikh* Mohamed Aman, *hajji* Abdela Osman and Zemzem Yassin). The Abbay is personified and deeply inculcated in the minds of the Ethiopian society and it is a syncretistic element in the culture and world view of the people (informant Yeneta Teshome Mulatu and Eshite Ahmed). The Abbay denotes greatness, strength and splendour. In Ge’ez language the word Abbay can also be related to the term big or great (*memhir* Sitotaw Tafla as cited in Yacob, 2007, p. 78; informant Abbaynesh Alemu).

People also named their children after the Abbay. Thus, common names given to children in north and central Ethiopia are Abbayneh ('you are Abbay' for male) and Abbaynesh ('you are Abbay' for female). These usages shows the people's respect for the river and their will to see themselves as part of it. It is also common to see such names even in the northern provinces (see Bairu, 2000, p. 155) In Dara *woreda*, South Gondar Zone, a local resident, *ato* Mersha Desalew, summarized in these words the people's association with the river:

አባይነህ/ ሽ / ብለን ስም ስናወጣ ዝምብለን አይደለም አባይ የፈጣሪ ረድኤት በመሬት ላይ የምናየው ስለሆነ በእርሱ መመሰል ኩራት ነው። ቢያመን ፀበሉን እንጠጣለን እንሸራለን ረድኤቱ አያልቅበትም ይህንን ለመዘከርና ለክብሩ በስሙ እንምላለን ስለትም ለአባይ አምላክ እናስገባለን ሃሳባችንም ይፈፀማል።አባይ ውሃ ብቻ ሳይሆን ሃይማኖታችንም ነው።አባይ የጀግናመዋያም ነው ። አባይ ገባ ከተባለ ማንም ሰው አይነካውም

We are not ignorant when we give names to our children as Abbay for a male and Abbaynesh for a female. It is our tribute to the river, for being named after it is a spell of pride and glory. Lest we are sick, we drink the water and we are healed. We swear after the Abbay, sacrifice in the name of God that created it. It is not a mundane value in the water of it that we value. It is our religion. Once you are religious, once you join the plains of the Abbay, it means that you have a strong fence against your enemies (informant Mersha Desalew).

CHANTS ON THE ABBAY

Given the Ethiopians' strong attachment to the Abbay, it is not surprising that popular imagination has this river as a privileged subject of the country's rich lore of songs, poems and chants. Ethiopians have a strong tradition of composing verses for various social, political, economic and cultural circumstances (informant Teshome Yimam; Hailu Woldeghiorgis, 2001 A.M.; Levine, 1965). The Ethiopians' songs, poems and chants associate the river with different values, topics and situations. The following pieces of oral poetry were collected during different field research carried out in 2013 and 2014 in the districts of Dembya, Este and Fogera, and South Gondar Zone. The interviewees were chosen among the *shemagle* group ('elders'), both female and male. The interview method was that of 'snowball' interview and the questions unfolded according to the disposition, interest and knowledge of the interviewees. It bears mention that in general interviewees were cooperative and eager to share their art and knowledge on the Abbay as this is not a politically-tainted topic.

Poems conveying pride, respect and hope

The poems and songs related to hope, respect and prestige associated with the river are numerous. Below follows a selection of Amharic couplets collected from different areas of North Gondar and South Gondar Zones:

Couplet 1

አባይ ጉደል ጉደል አይባ ሙላሙላ

የከፋው ወንድ ልጅ ተሻግሮ እንዲበለ
Please, Abbay may you empty your water, but Ayiba
A resented brave man has to cross your gorge to make a living.

Couplet 2

አባይ ስደተኛ አባይ የከፋው ሰው
ባልንጀራ ሁነው ሙጣልሀ ይኸ ሰው
Yeah Abbay, you migrant, you the dissident,
be friend to the dissident man coming for you.

Couplet 3

ቢገድልም ገደለ ባይገድልም ገደለ
አባይ ከበረሀው ብቻውን የዋለ
Whether he killed or he did not kill,
he, who spends the day [lives, resides] alone in the lowlands of the
Abbay.

Couplet 4

ኢትዮጵያ ሀገራችን ወንዞችን አባይ
ሴቱ ቀጭን ፈታይ ወንዱ ተጋዳይ
Ethiopia is our country, Abbay is our river,
the women are fine spinners [and] the men are brave warriors.

Couplet 5

ታረባ ዳደኛ ይሻላል አባይ ይሻላል ተከዜ
በየት እንሻገር ያሰኛል ሁል ጊዜ
It is better to trust Abbay and Tekeze as friends than someone,
they always help to see other ways to cross.

Couplet 6

አባይን አረሱት ዘቅዝቀው በይ ለበይ
አባትየው ቢሞት ልጅየው የለምወይ
They tilled the Abbay upside down
Isn't the son alive if the father dies?

Couplet 7

በሰማይ ገነቱን ከምትመኝው
ያባይን ልጅ ወደሽ አለምሽን እይው
Rather than dreaming his paradise in the sky
Taste heaven falling in love with the son of Abbay

Couplet 8

ሻረ አባይ ንጉሱ ሻረ አባይ ንጉሱ
አንተን በታች አርገው በላይገሰገሱ
Oh! Abbay the king!, Oh! Abbay the king!
Putting you under (below) [...] they marched above you
(informants Bekele Beshah, Kebede Mersha and Mersha Desalew)

In the above verses several themes are treated. We can infer that the people in the study areas associated bravery with the river Abbay in their day to day world view. But the river is also the source of charisma and prestige. Even people who knew it from hearing from the distance were amazed by its glory and always dream of visiting it. This seems the meaning conveyed in the proverb አባይን ያለየ ቀረ እንደ ተሰየ (“He, who failed to see Abbay suffered in an imaginary longing”).

We can also understand the extent of the influence of Abbay for the identity formation of the local people. Local societies perform music such as heroic recitals that intertwine with the mighty Abbay. Thus, couplets 1-6 convey similar messages with slight difference associated with the Abbay. They refer to the generosity and honour that throughout times the public have attributed to the Abbay. The river, for instance, appears personified as a hero or heroine. In Couplet 1 the epithet used is የከፋው ወንድ ልጅ (‘the disappointed boy’) while Couplet 2 speaks of አባይ ስደተኛ አባይ የከፋው ሰው (“Abbay the migrant, Abbay the sad person”); the latter verse capitalizes on the sadness for the Abbay since it deserted to Egypt and Sudan, becoming thus a ‘migrant’ river. Other terms also elaborate on the public attachment with the Abbay. One sees the Abbay as a symbol of national pride of Ethiopia, as it can be seen in Couplet 2. Couplet 3 in turn attributes blood feuding as one of the dominant traditions in the study area: ባይገድልም ገደለ (“even though he doesn’t kill he becomes a killer”). The meaning is that if you kill anyone it will not be socially sanctioned but if you kill with a noble purpose it will be seen even as a honourable act. Indeed, Abbay has been traditionally the shelter of such ‘heroes’ (informants Kebede Mersha, Bekele Beshah and Mersha Desalew).

Couplet 5 deals with the dependable partnership with the Abbay valley for people discontent with their home society or community. It also underlines the presence of friends with lesser value that may not keep secrets. The verse figures the river Abbay as the best choice for friendship, particularly for banditry. So, the public owes allegiance and respect to the Abbay and to its valley for the protection they offer. In Couplet 6 the verse አባትየው ቢሞት ልጅየው የለም ወይ (“Isn’t the boy alive when the father dies”) tells of the importance of descent in order to defend the family interests with the father. This tradition is clearly associated with Abbay as it is the natural home of heroes and heroines.

Couplets 7 and 8 speak of the mightiness of the Abbay. The first one compares life along the banks of Abbay to life in heaven. It narrates that the Abbay represents local people who are hospitable and peaceful for friends. We can also infer there the idea that the Abbay is seen as the source of hope that alleviates scarcity with happiness (አለምሽን እይው, “Enjoy your life”). But the river seems also to be perceived as a medium to alleviate personal frustrations, such as a non corresponded love. Couplet 8 chants the grandness of the river but pointing out that this has dismissed since the bridges crossing it were built (from the early twentieth century onwards), so today people are able to cross it on foot or by using a modern transportation system. Thus, Abbay the bountiful remains beneath while the public fly over it.

The poem could have been first composed following the construction of the great bridge in the 1950s (informants Kebede Meshesha, Bekele Beshah and Mersha Desalew).

As indicated above, the lowlands of the Abbay have been traditionally the shelter for *shifita*, i.e. bandits or rebels. Popular poems have also reflected on this issue:

Couplet 9

ሳጋ አይባ ዱራዱሩ
የቸገረን ለታ መጠጊያችን ስሩ
Oh! Saga and Ayiba the bush and the grass
Build the shelter in times of difficulty
(informants Teshome Yimam and Ahmed Mohamed)

Couplet 10

መነጠሩት አሉ አባይ ዱራዱሩን
ካረባባ ጎበዝ የሚሸለውን
The banks of Abbay are deforested
Which for ages were used as shelter for local heroes
(informant Mulat Desie)

Couplet 11

አባይ ገመገሙ ታየኝ ወዳ ማዶ
የሚሸገርበት ወንድ ልጅ ተናዶ
Yeah! Yonder I see the cliff of the Abbay
Where heroes would cross at times of anger
(informant Teshome Yimam)

Couplet 9 capitalizes on the sense of familyhood the public has with regards to the Abbay and its smaller tributaries the Saga and the Ayiba, both in the Begemdir regions of Estie and Farta. These areas have been important for the public livelihood and shelter during the times of trouble when *shifinat* (banditry) thrived. Individuals in trouble or crisis due to various reasons migrated to the valleys of the mentioned rivers and found there their own ways of subsistence. The popular saying ስትቀረድ፣ አባይውረድ (“when defame, go and join Abbay”) could be also recalled here.

Couplet 10 expresses the environmental degradation widely prevalent along the lowland areas of the Abbay in the last one hundred years due to population pressure vis-à-vis the quest for farmland. In some aspects of Ethiopian history, banditry was part of the political experiences of several political leaders who later ended up bearing the title of king of kings (*niguse negest*). Thus, such emperors as Susinyos, Tewodros II and Yohannis IV famously started their political career as *shifita*. Dissidents of the court also tended to establish secessionist military desperado in an attempt to show their refusal as well as to overthrow the established system. In the past the *shifita*'s strategy was to put pressure on his/her opponents in order to negotiate a better position in land holding or power. Thus, banditry can be the source of social mobility and capital (informant Teshome Yimam; Teshale,

1995, p. 71). It is in this sense that the second verse of Couplet 10 attributes a prestigious position for Abbay as the home of bandits in its bushes and valleys. Indeed, the Abbay as a shelter has long been chosen as a favourite haven for banditry life. The river was thus also feared and respected since it hosted the angry, 'rebel' segments of the society.

Similarly, Couplet 11 also expresses the view of an individual who was mistreated by his countrymen and decided to leave his locality. He inaugurated his final decision to join the Abbay or just to go to other areas crossing the Abbay valley. According to informants, during the old days someone who had a blood feud in Mota, East Gojjam, could chose to cross the Abbay and thus live in peace without fear, thanks to the shelter provided by the river.

The rituals and beliefs associated with the river Abbay have been described by western travellers and explorers. According to Terje and Gedef (2013, pp. 1-30) water plays an indispensable role in religious practices of the study area along Lake Tana, both for the Christian and Muslim communities. It is thus popularly believed that the river has possessed healing powers for millennia. Couplet 12 emphasizes such traditions. My informants at Mekane Iyesus, in Andabet, Estie *woreda* told me that there is a *tsebel* (holy water spring) that is believed to reach down to the Abbay. The holy water is used for healings of various illnesses such as deafness and other diseases.

Couplet 12

የአባይን ውሃ ተጎንብሶ ጠጣው
ህመሜን ፈውሰኝ ብሎም ተማፀነው
He drunk the water of Abbay being bowed
They believed in him, as the water heals my illness
(informant Mihretie Endeshaw)

Concerning the healing powers of the river, one of my key informants, *azmari* Berie, who was around the banks of the Abbay fifteen years ago, shared with me an interesting story. He said that a certain person once argued against the popular belief saying that the Abbay had no powers to cure and that it was a river like any other. He further added: "If Abbay has the power to do wrong on myself, let me wash my face with the water of Abbay." Having said this, the person walked towards the river and washed his hand and his face. Immediately when he turned his face his eyes became blind and in consequence he lost his sight. *Azmari* Berie keeps chanting about his incredulity at such experience (informants Mihrtie Endeshaw, Berie Fule, MuluWorku and Ahmed Mohamed).

Concerning the same issue, Getachew further wrote:

Abbay or Giyon is a belief [for the locals]. It is believed that its outflow starts from the Garden of Eden like the other three rivers, namely, Euphrates, Tigris and Ephison and it has a holy name and holy water. There are so many who wish to be healed from disease, poverty, and other misfortunes. Abbay is their *adbar* and their *qolle* (2002, p. 75).

We can relate these popular beliefs on the Abbay's healing powers with the rich lore of Greek mythology (Yacob, 2007). Thus, Yacob cited passages from Greek mythology referring to the healing power attributed in ancient times to the Abbay or Blue Nile and to the land of Ethiopia. Prometheus sent to the distant Ethiopia, Abbay Io, a princess who had fallen sick, to restore her into a beautiful human creature. He sent her with the following advice: please, know this you should go to Ethiopia where the Nile water flows. The Nile water works wonders to end your misery. Go and wash your body there. It will be extremely good and have a miraculous effect. The princess travelled to Ethiopia and was healed by the action of the river. She felt happy and honoured and later gave birth to the greatest of all heroes, Hercules. The restoration of Io's health and sanity expresses the redeeming powers of the Ethiopian Nile.

Poems of disappointment

As opposed to the glorification commonly shown by Ethiopian poets towards the Abbay, the imagination of Ethiopian peasantry has also expressed its resentment for the misery and cruelty the river shows for its people and region of origin. As it was discussed above, the river erodes fertile plateaus and deposits rich alluvial soils to the arid environments of Sudan and Egypt at the expense of the local peasantry. Several satirical and condemnatory verses have thus been composed and transmitted throughout times accusing, sometimes even defaming the river:

Couplet 13

አባይ በጣና ላይ ቀለደበት ከቶ
መሄጃ አደረገው ላንድ ቀን ነው ብሎ
Abbay is joking over Tana
Reduced it to a cross line promising it for a day

Couplet 14

አባይናጣና ተጣልተው በድንበር
አባይ ተሸንፎ ሲያገረመርም ነበር
Abbay and Tana quarrelled over a boundary
Meanwhile Abbay lost in the battle, that is why it roars loudly (angrily)

Couplet 15

አባይ ንፋስ መሳይ
መሄድህን እንጅ መውሰድህን አታይ
Abbay! You are like the wind,
You care only for your journey, and not what you take away

Couplet 16

አባይ ለኢትዮጵያ ምን አድርጎላታል
አፈሯን ውጭ ሃገር ወስይ ደልድሎታል
What after all Abbay did for Ethiopia?
It takes her soil and brings it abroad
(informants Berie Fulie, Destaw Mersha, and Abebe Ayele)

Couplet 17

አባይ በጣና ላይ ሲሔድ ባይኔ አይቸው
 ሰው ለሰው አያዝንም ጊዜ ከተመቸው
 I see that Abbay is travelling over Tana
 If time allows to do so man may act dishonestly for another
 (informants Worku Gessess and Mihirete Wubie)

The verses above articulate the deep-rooted resentment against Abbay, a river that is seen as failing to serve its country of origin. Couplets 13, 14 and 17 refer to the strong relationship between the river Abbay and Lake Tana. Accordingly, people blame Abbay for not respecting Tana, its main water source. The second line of Couplet 17 also draws from Abbay's 'treacherous' nature and ponders on the unpredictable nature of man.

Couplets 15 and 16 deal with issues of dispossession. Thus, Abbay does not travel alone in his journey away from Ethiopia but it takes along the fertile soil and water of the highlands to the desert. Both verses seem to resent this fact and recur to strong words: መውሰድህን አታይ ("you haven't imagined what you take") and አፈሯን ውጭሃገረ ("her soil taken to a foreign land").

Couplet 18

አባይ አልሰማም ወይ ሚሌ፣በሽሎ የሰራውን
 ወስደው ያንን ዛፍ አብሮት የኖረውን
 O Abbay haven't you heard what Millie and Beshilo did
 May I tell you the news, they washed away the oldest tree you lived for
 long with

Couplet 19

አባይና ጣና አንድ ላይ ሲኖሩ
 አይነጋገሩም ጉድ በሉ ጉድ በሉ
 The Abbay and Tana live side by side
 You may wonder, both don't talk to each other!
 (informants Kamal Mustefa and Beyan Gebeyaw)

In Couplet 18 the message is controversial and satirical. Why to bother with Abbay? Abbay is the father of Beshilo and Milie (this one is actually a tributary to the Awash river) and is highly involved in eroding many hill-sides of the highlands.

Islamic religious songs have showed their recognition and mightiness of Abbay as an *awliya* ('father') to honour the role of elders in the society to mediate injustice. Couplet 19 is taken from such a tradition, belonging to the *menzuma* literary genre. My informants, who performed in my presence, told me about the secrets of God in the waters of Abbay and Tana. The two waters are not dissolved each other particularly in the rainy season. Such insight is represented by the second verse, አይነጋገሩም ጉድ በሉ ጉድ በሉ ("Surprisingly, never have they talked each other", i.e. they are together but they don't have communication). It might have the meaning that Abbay has

been flowing down to other lands but Tana remains loyal to its origin. The verse thus seems to blame Abbay (informants Kamal Mustefa and Beyan Gebeyaw).

To substantiate the above popular explanations, we may refer to the following poem:

Abbay went out of sight,
While there are many natives at home
It took all of our produce from our field
The teff, wheat barley and millet,
The beans, peas and the chickpeas
The oranges, mangoes and lemons from our garden,
to give it to the Egyptians.
(Tadele, 1993 A.M., cited in Yewulsew, 2012)

Abbay has been of little use in Ethiopia and conversely it was, and still is, a source of life for others. As such the river has been ridiculed as evil and further insulted and criticized (Ayele, 2003, pp. 62-63).

CONCLUSIONS

In this study an attempt has been made to present and analyze the message conveyed through poems belonging to the rich oral traditions collected and selected from the Ethiopian highlands. These poems, including *fuk-kerera*, *qererto*, war chants, Muslim *menzuma*, are used by the local people in their day to day life in association with the river Abbay. The society in the study area has old traditions of composing poems and proverbs to address feelings towards their environment. Culturally the poems witness to the deep-rooted creativity and advanced curiosity and intellect of the peasants and the way they educate each other using such traditions. Traditions on the river Abbay are strong parts in the literary culture of the people of the study areas.

The research shows that the lives of the local societies and the river Abbay have been interwoven for ages. In the analysis two issues have emerged. One is the reverence with which the river Abbay is held by locals, who describe it with an aura of glorification, pride and respect. The other is a more critical attitude of the local societies towards the Abbay. Local traditions indeed reveal grievances and bitter-loaded views ascribed to the river. In summary, the people living along its banks and beyond have deep-rooted cultural and historical attachment to the river. Public views are full of passion towards the Abbay river, which is perceived as it belongs to the people. Locals praise it at times and other times they criticize it not as outsiders but almost as the river's relatives. A curse and a gift, the Abbay has been part of the societies' imagination before and after the introduction of the monotheistic religions. Naturally, it has also been subsumed into the big narratives of the Bible and in the Qur'an. Studying such traditions can help us to understand the psychological makeup and identity formation of the societies residing in the lowlands and highlands crossed by the Abbay and their sense of belongingness towards the river.

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LIST OF INFORMANTS

Name	Age	Date of Interview	Place of Interview	Remarks
Abebe Ayele (ato)	55	12/11/2013	Woreta	A religious father, well informed of traditions related to Abbay and its tributaries.
(Sheikh) Abdela Yesuf	67	3/10/2014	Debre Tabor	A Muslim cleric originally from Wallo well informed of <i>Menzuma</i> tradition in Wallo and Gondar. He shared his deep knowledge on Islam and <i>had-dith</i> in association to <i>Menzuma</i> Islamic religious song. He has also shared his view on <i>awliya</i> in general.
Abateneh Abitie (ato)	63	13/10/2014	Birbuax	He is knowledgeable in analyzing traditions related to Abbay river. He gave data with detail explanations on that.
Abbaynesh Alemu (woyzero)	65	23/1/2014	Debre Tabor	An informed housewife who shared her experience on Abbay river
Ahmed Muhamed (ato)	70	3/1/2014	Addis Zemen	A merchant who shared his knowledge of traditions on Abbay river and the people he has grown up
Aweke Guadu (ato)	72	4/12/2013	Andabet	A farmer with personal experience in the valley of river Abbay and river Ayiba. He shared his traditional knowledge on the river.

Name	Age	Date of Interview	Place of Interview	Remarks
Bekele Beshah (<i>ato</i>)	63	2/3/2014	Hamusit	A merchant well informed between river Abbay and the surrounding people. He is a native of Hamusit and Ambasame, South Gondar.
Berie Fulie (<i>azmari</i>)	68	2/4/2014 2/3/2014	Gondar	An <i>azmari</i> and a knowledgeable person who shared his experience on the spiritual power of Abbay river.
Beyan Gebeyaw (<i>ato</i>)	58	5/2/2014 3/4/2014	Chuahit (Dembya)	A weaver with tremendous capability in historicizing traditions.
Kebede Mersha (<i>ato</i>)	47	6/4/2014	Aykel	A farmer in Gelediba, who informed about public perception towards Abbay
Kemal Mustofa (<i>ato</i>)	85	7/5/2014	Aykel	A weaver and a merchant who shared his knowledge of menzuma / Islamic religious chanting/ and river Abbay.
Mersha Desta (<i>ato</i>)	67	2/12/2013	Nifas Mewucha	A retired teacher well informed of culture and history from the land of historic Begemdir.
Mihretie Endeshaw (<i>ato</i>)	78	3/11/2013	Koladiba	A farmer and former member of Derg committee in his locality.
Mihiretie Wubie (<i>ato</i>)	86	13/4/2013	Aykel	A member of the imperial army, originally from Gojjam and well informed of the traditions related to Abbay.
Mohammed Aman (<i>sheikh</i>)	82	8/6/2014	Gondar	A merchant well informed of religious traditions on the Abbay river.
Mulat Desie (<i>ato</i>)	48	5/3/2014	Debre Tabor	A farmer with critical traditional knowledge on the river Abbay
Mulu Worku (<i>woyzero</i>)	60	9/8/2014	Gondar	A housewife well informed of river Abbay.
<i>Sheikh</i> Nuru Ahmed	57	10/5/204	Aykel	A native of Chilga and well informed of Islamic tradition in Gondar along the historical trade route dominated by Muslim merchants called <i>Jabarti</i> . He shared his experience on Islam in the region.
Teshome Yimam (<i>ato</i>)	70	2/9/2013	Nifas Mewcha	A farmer who shared his knowledge on Abbay.

Name	Age	Date of Interview	Place of Interview	Remarks
Worku Gessesse (ato)	89	2/3/2014	Birhala (Dembya)	A veteran of the Italian time, knowledgeable on cultural issues, native to Dembya and Seqelt.
Zelalem Asfaw (ato)	65	3/2/2014	Addis Zemen	A merchant who shared his father's memories on the Abbay.
Zemzem Yassin (woyzero)	69	4/5/2014	Enfranz	A merchant with greater knowledge of Abbay river and other traditions of the area.