

A satellite photograph of the Mississippi River delta region. The river is a prominent, winding green line that flows from the top center towards the bottom right, eventually emptying into the Gulf of Mexico. The surrounding land is a mix of light brown and tan, indicating arid or semi-arid conditions. The Gulf of Mexico is visible in the top right corner, showing a dark blue color. The text is overlaid on a semi-transparent dark grey band across the middle of the image.

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# PARADOXES OF WATER

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The cover image is of The Nile River, July 19 2004. To the right of the Nile is the Red Sea, with the finger of the Gulf of Suez on the left, and the Gulf of Aqaba on the right. In the upper right corner of the image are Israel and Palestine, left, and Jordan, right. Below Jordan is the northwestern corner of Saudi Arabia. Jacques Descloitres, MODIS Rapid Response Team, NASA/GSFC.

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FEATURE

# THE SOURCES OF THE NILE AND PARADOXES OF RELIGIOUS WATERS

By Terje Oestigaard

The River Nile has long been a subject of study and veneration.

From the earliest times the Nile has presented problems upon which men have speculated. Two of the most important which have been discussed since the time of Herodotus,

the position of the sources of the Nile and the origin of its annual flood, were solved during the last and at the beginning of the present century.[1]

While these questions were geographical in the nineteenth century, in the preceding centuries



*Timkat, Ethiopia, 2010. Image courtesy of Terje Oestigaard.*

and even millennia they were also religious quests, and the religious dimensions are still fundamental. This article will discuss and compare the qualities of the divine waters in the different water cosmologies at the source of the Blue Nile in Ethiopia and at the source of the White Nile in Uganda. Based on empirical fieldworks and participation in rituals, it will also enable theoretical discussions of the role and function of holy water and how various water cosmologies work in broader cultural and societal contexts, and the relation between river and rain ideologies in different hydrological environments.

Gish Abay, or the source of the Blue Nile in Ethiopia, is seen as the direct outflow of the River Gihon from Paradise. The source is considered to be exceedingly holy and to have a direct link to heaven, which needs to be protected from defilement. In practice, this excludes everyone except the devotees belonging to the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. The historic source of the White Nile in Uganda, on the other hand, has a very different character. The water is not holy, but the forces of the waterfalls testify to the powers the river spirits possess. These river spirits embody particular healers who can solve anything and everything in this and the otherworldly spheres. Since different forms of religious waters can be holy, sacred, and neutral, it is the differences and changing divine powers and consequences that are central in the different water cosmologies, as well as how they have different religious origins or sources defining ritual uses among humans.

*Hydrologically*, a source is the remotest spring or discharge point of a river in terms of ultimate length. Historically, there are sources found in the history of ideas or places where specific historic significance has been ascribed. *Religiously*,

a source can originate at any place along the river's course, but most often it is a fountain, a waterfall, or some subterranean source, which may also be a link in one way or another to flows of cosmos in the celestial realms. Hence, these different types of sources may not coincide, although the source of the Blue Nile in Ethiopia is both a hydrological source (giving the Blue Nile its longest length), a historic source (being a legendary place visited by explorers throughout the centuries), and a religious source (coming from paradise). The source of the White Nile, on the other hand, is primarily the outlet of Lake Victoria and hence a historic source, but it is also a hydrological and religious source in the local cosmology. Lastly, the ultimate sources are the rains falling from the sky directing the attention to the divinities and rainmaking practices (Fig. 1).

Oxford Dictionaries define a paradox as “a seemingly absurd or contradictory statement or proposition which when investigated may prove to be well founded or true.”[2] Water in general and religious water in particular may fit well with such a definition, since water is a unique element in the sense that it is always both *universal* and *particular* at the same time.[3] By comparing religious belief systems associated with the specific waters at these sources—the sources of the Blue and the White Nile, but also the sources in heaven as rain—the aim of this article is to shed new light on how and why various forms of religious waters shape beliefs and rituals. It will also address seeming paradoxes of religious waters, including why it is ritually and religiously acceptable to pollute holy water and why water may have a greater importance in indigenous traditions and cosmologies when it is not holy compared to world religions' consecrated or holy water in rituals and devotional practices.

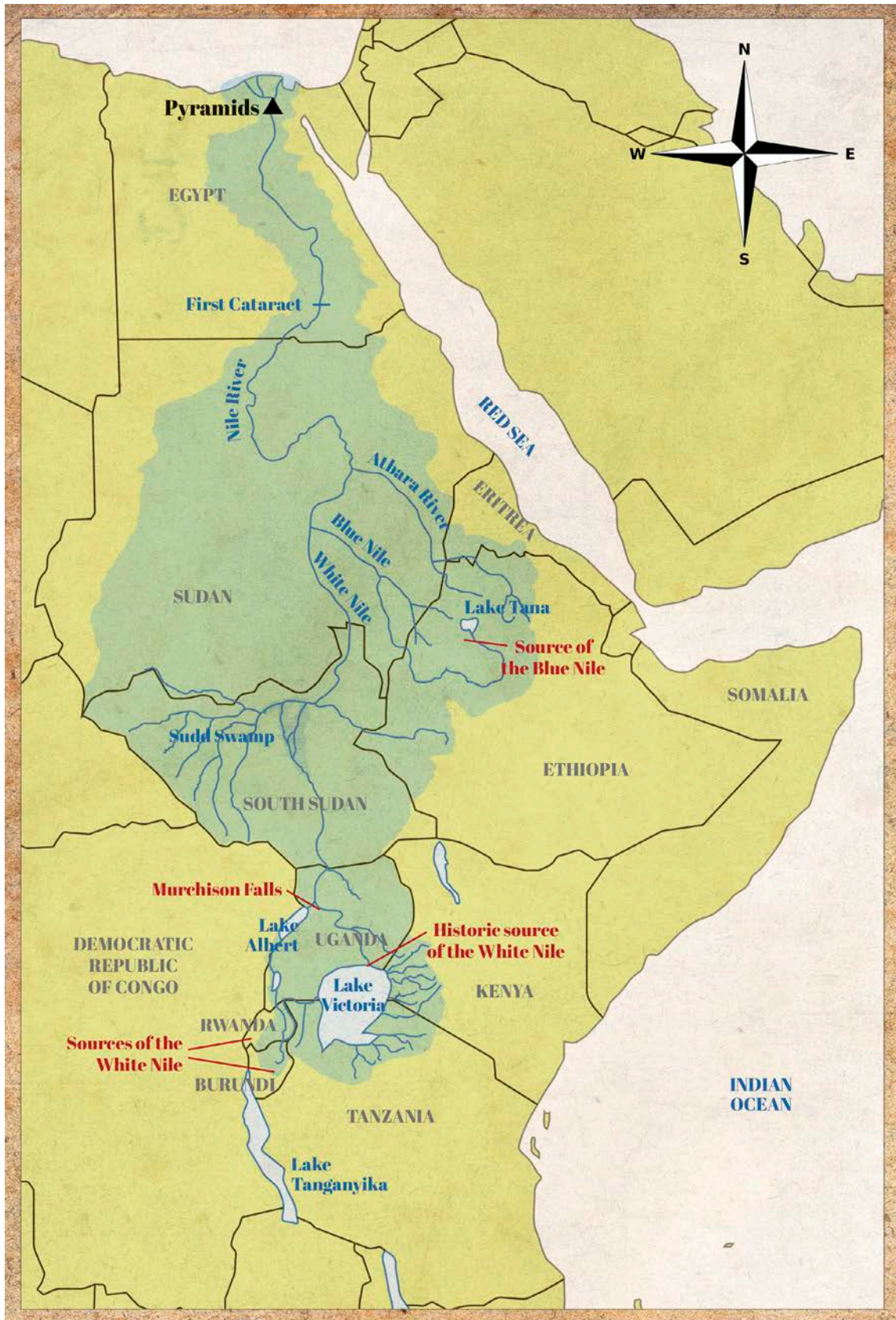


Fig. 1. Map of the religious Nile. Made by Henrik Alfredsson, the Nordic Africa Institute, Uppsala. Used with permission.

# The Divine Sources of the Blue and White Niles

The Gish Abay spring in the Lake Tana region in Ethiopia is believed to be the source of the Blue Nile coming from Paradise. The holiness of Gish Abay has its origin in both Old and New Testament contexts. In Genesis, it is written:

A river watering the garden flowed from Eden; from there it was separated into four

headwaters. The name of the first is the Pishon; it winds through the entire land of Havilah, where there is gold. The name of the second river is the Gihon; it winds through the entire land of Cush. The name of the third river is the Tigris; it runs along the east side of Asshur. And the fourth river is the Euphrates. (Genesis 2:11–14)



*Fig. 2. Gish Abay or the Source of the Blue Nile in Ethiopia. Image courtesy of Terje Oestigaard.*



There is also another mythology giving the name to the very source—Gish Abay. The story is about the introduction of Christianity to this area.

Abune Zerabruk, born at the end of the eighth century AD, was a man of religious character from his early days. According to the legend of the church, the abune (an honorific title given to an Ethiopian Orthodox bishop) received from God the power to cure people of their physical diseases and spiritual sins by using water. Due to political and religious opposition, he was eventually imprisoned for five years by the local king. Before he was taken to jail, he consigned his seven sacred books to the source of the river. He preached for two years after his release, and he came back to the source seven years after he gave the books to the water. At the spring, he prayed devotedly to God and asked him to bring forth the books he had deposited in the water. He called out *Gish*, which means “bring forth,” and like a miracle, the source brought forth the books, which were in splendid condition. Astonished by the miracle, he turned to his old disciple, Aba Zerufael, to behold the miracle. He said *Aba Eyi* in Amharic, which means “Father, look.” Aba Eyi became *Abay*, which is the Ethiopian name for the Blue Nile. Thus, the name of the river and the source come from this divine intervention.[4] After this miracle, the river’s name changed from Gihon to Abay and the river got a masculine character, indicated by the term Aba Eyi, or Father, look. Lobo later wrote that the natives called the Nile Abavi, “that is, the Father of Waters.”[5]

*See the video Holy Water in Ethiopia.*

Being the source directly from heaven, the water is exceedingly holy, and Gish Abay is believed to be the source of both secular and spiritual life (Fig. 2). It is generally believed that people who are baptized or sprinkled with water from the Gihon River are cured of sins, sicknesses, and misfortunes. On behalf of Abune Zerabruk, it is also believed that God bestowed his mercy on up to 70 generations of the descendants of the

devotees who made a pilgrimage to the source, prayed, and used the water in rituals.

If this source is today seen as the holiest of the holy water since it comes from Paradise, it was anything but a heavenly haven in the past. 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 April 21, 1613 or 1615 or 1618.[6] When James Bruce came to the source in November 1770, he referred in particular to the cult of sacrificing oxen: “The Agows of Damot pay divine honour to the Nile; they worship the river, and thousands of cattle have been offered, and still are offered, to the spirit supposed to reside at its source ... all the tribes ... meet annually at the source of the river, to which they sacrifice, calling it by the name of the *God of Peace*.”[7] At the time of Bruce’s visit, the church had established itself at Gish, but the pre-Christian practices and traditions were still alive and present, and it seems that Christianity incorporated what they called “pagan practices” and re-interpreted them in a cosmology fitting the Biblical world and the Bible: the River Gihon coming from Paradise.

The historic source of the White Nile has an opposite history; it was originally interpreted in Biblical terms while it was a fundamental part of the indigenous cosmology among the people in the Busoga Kingdom living along the Nile at the outlet from Lake Victoria in Uganda. The Victoria Nile, or the Nile flowing from Lake Victoria, separates the Buganda Kingdom to the west and the much smaller Busoga Kingdom to the east. The water cosmology discussed here will focus of the beliefs and practices among the Busoga, since the cosmological role of waterfalls and the Nile as a river is most prominent in this kingdom. When coming to the outlet of Lake Victoria on July 28, 1862, the British explorer John Hanning Speke concluded, in his *Journal of the Discovery of the Source of the Nile*: “The expedition had now performed its functions. I saw that old Father

Nile without any doubt rises in the Victoria N'yanza, and, as I had foretold, that lake is the great source of the holy river which cradled the first expounder of our religious belief.”[8] He continued: “I now christened the ‘stones’ Ripon falls ... the N'yanza is the great reservoir that floated Father Moses on his first adventurous sail—the Nile.”[9]

Postcolonial criticism of these Western explorers is important. “It seems absurd to continue to credit European explorers with the ‘discovery’ of African peoples, rivers, lakes, waterfalls, mountains, and creeks,” Nwauwa says, “when Africans themselves knew about the existence of these things.”[10] However, in particular with regard to the source of the White Nile, Western explorers like Speke established religious connections along

the Nile’s flow of water and without external interventions and interpretations the local traditions would not have become part of Christianity or world religions. One hundred fifty years later, a Catholic priest in Uganda made the connection between the source and Christianity’s salvation history even stronger: The River Nile is a history of salvation in Christianity. Moses and all the other Biblical figures like Abraham and Jacob drank of the waters from the Nile, including Jesus with his family. Uganda in general and Busoga in particular have therefore a special role in Christianity and the salvation history. The Nile connects the religious beliefs since, without the waters from Lake Victoria and the historic source of the White Nile identified by Speke, the Biblical history could not have evolved and unfolded in Egypt as it did. Nevertheless, priests emphasized



*Fig. 3. The Source of the White Nile in Uganda and the river spirit Kiyira. Image courtesy of Terje Oestigaard.*

that the water at the source in particular or the Nile in general is not holy. Moreover, while Christianity first came to Uganda in 1877,[11] the traditional water cosmology in the Busoga kingdom was structured around the actual source, which Speke did not see when he was there, and the successive waterfalls Bujagali and Itanda, respectively 8 and 30 kilometers north and downstream of the outlet of Lake Victoria.

There are innumerable spirits and divinities along the course of the Nile and its lakes in Uganda, and they are in particular living in waterfalls. Among the Busoga, the water in the falls is not holy—in fact, no water is holy—but the waterfalls are the true testament of the spirits' powers. The cascading thunders are testimonies of the powers the river spirits living there possess; the more

raw and brutal water-powers are in nature, the stronger the river-gods are believed to be.[12] At the historic source at the outlet of Lake Victoria (Fig. 3), there is a subterranean source in the middle of the river creating a counter-current seemingly rising from the Ripon and Owen Falls. According to those still believing in the traditional Busoga cosmology, this unnatural or supernatural phenomenon was a testimony to the force of the river spirit Kiyira. The most powerful spirit was living in the next waterfalls, the Budhagaali spirit in the Bujagali Falls. The force and sound of the Bujagali Falls give testimony to the powers of the Budhagaali spirit and it is truly a river spirit. Still, it moves freely around on land and wherever it wants; after all, gods are gods, spirits are spirits, and humans are humans; but unlike transcendental gods like God or Allah



*Fig. 4. Itanda waterfalls. Image courtesy of Terje Oestigaard.*

who "live everywhere," the Budhagaali spirit has its "home" in water. And although he too is "almighty" in his local context, this is not because the water is holy as such, but because he is a powerful spirit. The forces of the waterfalls prove the power of the spirits, but the spirits' powers are not dependent upon physical materialization, since spirits are spirits. In the next and the slightly smaller waterfall, the Itanda or Kalagala Falls, reside yet another pantheon of innumerable spirits, of which Itanda is the most powerful. The mighty rain and thunder-god Mesoké also lives here (Fig. 4).

Based on the natural forces as they are manifested in the powerful waters, the hierarchy of the water and river gods is: Budhaagali, Kiyria, and Itanda. In some mythologies, Budhagaali is seen as the father of the two others, who are like brothers. These spirits or gods have chosen one particular earthly representative or medium each—a healer who is an intermediary between humans and gods. In 2017, these representatives—Jaja Bujagali, Jaja Kiyria, and

Mary Itanda—were respectively 100, 44, and 47 years old. Christianity, and in particular the new churches, oppose the traditional African religion, and these healers centered around the forces of the water have often been accused of indulging in witchcraft.

Thus, at the source of the Blue Nile, the water came originally from a spring where lavish sacrifices took place, but today it is part of the Christian cosmology where the River Gihon from heaven is believed to have its earthly outlet. The source of the White Nile and the successive waterfalls, on the other hand, although having an important role in Christianity today because of the religious history made by the early explorers and the later missionaries, has a whole cosmology structured around the forces of the water, which testify to the powers of the gods, but the water itself is not holy. This directs the attention to religion and water, why water works and in what ways, and what the differences are between religious waters that are neutral, sacred, and holy, all forms of water within the divine spheres.

## Religious Water as Function or Substance

"The great river-valleys played an essential part in the rise of civilisation: in Mesopotamia, India, China, as well as Egypt. But no other river had quite the character of the Nile with its regular summer-flow and its narrow strip of fertile land between two desert expanses. That the Nile should dominate Egyptian life and thought in many ways was natural," Linsay says. "Few aspects of Egyptian life were unrelated to the great river....In turn, efforts to understand the universe and man's place in it were linked with a continual brooding of the mysterious waters." [13] Egypt's water came from unknown sources in Africa's interior, and since the dawn of civilization it was clearly different from all other waters in the world. Seneca, for instance, wanted to separate

"the Nile from ordinary rivers [since] it is unique and exceptional." [14]

In 1790, James Bruce summed up more than five thousand years of history when he remarked:

It is not to be wondered, that, in the long course the Nile makes from its source to the sea, it should have acquired a different name in every territory, where a different language was spoken; but there is one thing remarkable, that though the name in sound and letters is really different, yet the signification is the same ... Among the Agows ... it is called Gzeir, Geefa, Seir; the first of these names signifying God; it is also called Abba, or Ab, Father ... with a fervent and

unfeigned devotion, under these, or such like appellations, they pray to the Nile, or the spirit residing in that river.[15]

Following Catholic historian Christopher Dawson, “The great civilizations of the world do not produce the great religions as a kind of cultural by-product; in a very real sense, the great religions are the foundations on which the great civilizations rest.”[16] His approach is fruitful also for other societies and not only the great civilizations, because “African thought,” cultural anthropologist Victor Turner says, “embeds itself from the outset in materiality, but demonstrates that materiality is not inert but vital.”[17] Spirituality is embedded in materiality, but also active and transcending the materiality, or in the words of religious historian Mircea Eliade: “The prototype of all water is the ‘living water’... Living water, the fountains of youth, the Water of Life...are all mythological the same formulae for the same metaphysical and religious reality: life, strength and eternity are contained in water.”[18]

Water is a medium for religious and divine interaction; some water has spiritual qualities, and yet other forms of water are a distilled substance or entity of a divinity. “All around the world people have at all times attached a wide variety of religious meanings to water and the permanent uncertainties and flux of the hydrological cycle,” Terje Tvedt says. “The paradoxical natures of water – it is a life-giver and life-taker, alluring and fearsome, creator and destroyer, terrible strong and very weak, always existing and always disappearing – means that it easily can be, and often has been, ascribed all sorts of different and conflicting symbolic meanings of fundamental importance at a number of shifting levels.”[19] Importantly, there is a fundamental ontological difference whether a river is a divinity or if a divinity transfers power to the water.[20] There is yet another category of divine agencies; the water’s visible forces like torrential waterfalls illustrate the divinities’ powers, but the water is not holy or the power is not in the water itself.

Lastly, rain comes from the divine realms, but it is neither holy nor sacred (or consecrated); but it is a gift that comes with conditions.

While there is no generally accepted definition of what religion is, the problem of trying to define religion has nevertheless played a central role in developing the sociology of religion as a discipline.[21] In 1913, Henry S. Nash struggled with defining “religion”: “To attempt in these days a definition of religion may seem like taking a wanton risk of intellectual confusion. Even a rough classification of religions is difficult. The mass of data is so vast, the varieties of religion so manifold, that no sooner has a scheme of classification been established itself than it begins to sag under the weight of material thrown upon it,” he writes.[22] One century later, defining religion was as difficult as before, and in his 2013 book, *Religion Without God*, Ronald Dworkin defines religion without god.[23] Water may dissolve some of these paradoxes such as religion with or without god, and how and why religion works.

Broadly, religion can be analyzed from approaches emphasizing function or substance. Functional or pragmatic approaches see cultural phenomena as religious when some challenges or problems have divine origins and solutions, or they may be solved by direct divine intervention in one way or another. Sociologist Émile Durkheim, for instance, belongs to this category. The functional approach focuses on what problems religion can solve and what people get out of religion. Substantive approaches, on the other hand, emphasize the divine substance in whatever form. They focus on the ontological realities, like the existence of gods, divinities, and ancestors. This approach puts emphasis on rituals and the interaction between humans and the other world. Numerous scholars belong to this category, like Augustine who said that religion means “worship of God,”[24] Edward Tylor when he defined religion as “belief in spiritual beings,” and also Otto and Eliade, among others. Although heatedly debated by scholars for more than a

century, it is possible, as Kevin Schilbrack argues, to combine these two positions, not because of convenience but because it grasps the religious dimension in a better way.[25] The use (function) and beliefs (substance) of the way water works may illustrate how functional and substantive approaches are intertwined and dependent upon each other (Fig. 5).

In order to understand the religious role of water, it is preferable to distinguish between the “holy” and “sacred” as analytical categories. From this perspective, “holiness” refers to the divinity and what is derived from the divinity, whereas “sacredness” refers to consecrated items. [26] Thus, there is a fundamental difference between “holy water” and “sacred water.” The

holy water in Ganges in India is the Mother Goddess in Hinduism; the river is the goddess and the water is divine and her body. The water used in the Protestant baptism, on the other hand, is not a divinity, but consecrated and, hence, sacred water. Both holy and consecrated waters are within the religious realm, but the qualities and divine capacities and powers differ. Moreover, even within the category of truly holy water, or water embodying divine substance or qualities, there are differences; some waters have specific functions, whereas other types are more omnipotent and work for all kinds of purposes everywhere, or so it is often believed.

Thus, with water at the center, it is possible to combine functional and substantive approaches



*Fig. 5. Who controls the life-giving rains – God, ancestors or spirits? Usagara, Tanzania. Image courtesy of Terje Oestigaard.*

to religion, not only from an academic perspective, but also from a religious one as perceived by the believers in faith and rituals. It is indisputable that gods and divinities are believed to work and interfere in this world among humans for better or worse, like blessing farmers and fields with the life-giving rains or penalizing sinful communities with devastating floods, so the functional approach is obviously correct on certain premises. However, these divine engagements are

dependent upon the substantive approach, or one in which the gods and spirits exist and can intervene in the human world. In short, a substantial approach can exist without a functional approach (gods may choose not to engage in the human world), but a functional approach cannot work unless the spirits and divinities exist (without gods, rainmaking rituals cannot affect the weather).

## Polluting Purity and Purifying Pollution

Compared to most other religious practices, the use of water in general and holy water in particular represents particular and peculiar paradoxes, since the most holy is often severely polluted (physically or spiritually) in ritual use. As a result, some of the holiest rivers worldwide are also the most polluted, like the holy Jordan River. However, despite the river being highly polluted, the Latin Patriarch Vicar General of Jordan explained in 2013: “There is a distinction between the physical state of water and the sacred realm. From a religious perspective it does not matter whether the water is dense or light, clear or cloudy, polluted or not polluted. This does not touch upon the aspect of faith. [...] Pollution is a Western concern, it is Cartesian. Descartes’s influence stopped on the northern shores of the Mediterranean.”[27] Another famous and highly polluted river is the holy Ganga—the very water body of the goddess herself.[28]

While polluting other holy substances or places, like an altar, is a sacrilege and a heinous sin, cosmologically speaking, polluting holy water *in the right way* is not, which probes to the core of the rationale and ways holy water is believed to work. Worldwide, erasing pollution and impurity—sin as a bio-moral phenomenon and substance—is *the* most general and omnipresent capacity of holy water. Religiously, holy water *transmits*

*purity* and holiness, but in practice, this involves divine processes where the water is invested with supernatural powers *transferring, transporting, and transforming impurities*. Thus, in the very process of obtaining spiritual purity, devotees dispose of their impurities in the holy water either symbolically or physically. The devotees transfer the impurity to the water and the river, which transports it away—a process similar to what mundane rivers do. But if pollution and impurities were only transported away, sin and defilement would accumulate as happens with physical defilements polluting rivers. Therefore, the holiness of water and the divine agency not only accept the transference of pollution from the devotees, but the water transforms the pollution to purity. Consequently, even the most polluted holy rivers from a profane point of view are still in the religious process of transforming impurity to purity. Following this logic, holy rivers should cleanse themselves of physical pollution. If the rivers are unable to cleanse themselves, it is a sign that they have lost part of their holiness. If a river cannot transmit purity by transferring, transporting, and transforming impurities, its water is unfit for ritual practice. The holy water does not work anymore. It may still be in the realm of divinities and religious water, but it has not the qualities and capacities of functioning as holy water.[29]

While rivers like the Ganges or Jordan are highly polluted, and devotees pollute the waters spiritually and physically by their ritual activities, the source of the Blue Nile is distinctly different, although the same principles regarding holy water work at an overall level. The purity of the waters at Gish Abay has to be protected from any defilement by all means, which was also a prohibition reported by the early travellers.[30] Not only have the devotees to be Ethiopian Orthodox Christians, but even the pilgrims approaching the source must be in a pure condition despite that the aim is to use the holy water to cleanse off sins and impurities. In practice, this means that devotees purify themselves by fasting the very morning they visit the source, basically eschewing breakfast or any food before the visit. Although the Gihon River is important for Muslims and Christians from other denominations, such as Protestants, these devotees are in general seen as too impure and forbidden to approach the source.

Polluting the holy water coming from heaven is a triple sin. First, it will pollute God's holy water or basically defile the divine substance *before* it is ritually or religiously used. Second, and as a consequence, it is offending God and therefore the Almighty will punish the sinner for doing so deliberately. In fact, to sin is to act against God and his will (and this is also a sign of free will). [31] Lastly, and perhaps most important, desecrating the source will reduce the holiness of the water for other pilgrims, ultimately jeopardizing their purity and salvation. Since the effects of drinking and using the waters may work miracles for up to 70 generations, and severely sick patients attacked and demolished by the Devil use the water in exorcisms, the purity and holiness of the divine waters is not something to be taken lightly.

The beliefs and practices at the source exemplify several structural premises of the ways holy water is believed to work in religion on a general and cross-cultural level. The water from Paradise certainly *transmits purity* and holiness by

*transferring, transporting, and transforming impurities*, including chasing away Satan and his demons as well as working miracles for generations, erasing all kinds of different sins. This is truly holy water and perhaps it is difficult to get holier water in Christianity, perhaps with the exception of the waters at Lourdes in France. It is easy to understand why it has been of utmost importance to protect this holy water from impurities inflicted by, so to speak, contaminated faith; not that the water itself could not purify itself or that God could not penalize the perpetrator, but it *is* the source. Gish Abay is the closest one may get to heaven and it is an open connection flowing directly from paradise, and subsequently polluting the source will affect everyone downstream. If God is believed to demand protection of this one-way gate from heaven, so be it.

The extreme holiness and closeness to Paradise—and by definition everything in Heaven has to be holy and eternal—illustrate another aspect that limits the use of holy water and the role and importance this water may have in the overall cosmology in a religion like Christianity. The creation water or baptism is of course important in Christianity,[32] but holiness implies restriction and inclusiveness by exclusions. If there is one thing that characterizes life on earth and among people, following religious logic, it is that it is sinful and anything but holy.

In short, holy water is like a pilgrimage sanctuary in an otherwise polluted and sinful world. Herein are also the strength and limitations of holy water in ritual practice. It is extremely efficient and practical since it can be carried away in bottles and used elsewhere, but since it is holy it cannot be omnipresent everywhere at all times; a holy world would be a kind of divine existence. This is also in line with Weber, who said the natural world of religion is *differentiated*, [33] or in the words of Hocart: “Ritual would be utterly pointless if everything were charged with power. It is based on the belief that some things have power and others have not.”[34] The latter statement



is valid for world and indigenous religions alike, and it directs the attention to the even greater encompassing and total role of water in tradition and cosmos when it is not holy. Since a holy totality on earth is not possible and holy water cannot be everywhere in this world, another alternative

is that no water is holy although the water is still within the divine realms or has religious origins. Although sounding like a paradox at the outset, holiness restricts and limits the use and omnipresence of water compared to uses and beliefs of non-holy water in water cosmologies.

## Sources of Powers from Waterfalls and Rains from the Sky

From a human perspective here and now, an eternal life or existence is not possible because we will die. Hence, following Hocart, immortality is rather “freedom from premature death and the diseases that cause it and the renewal of this vigorous life hereafter.”[35] Hence, it is no wonder that the healers along the Nile from the source of the White Nile are also traditional doctors employing water and medicines, given that rituals and medicines traditionally work in very much the same ways. “Ritual has appeared throughout as a method of achieving life. Ritual has at the bottom the same end as medicine, but medicine has a more specialized purpose,” Hocart says. “Ritual promotes life by promoting everything on which life depends: crops, cattle, children – and also what these depend on: rain and sunshine. Medicine confines itself to what directly affects the body and concentrates on curing illness.”[36] Water, on the other hand, is more total and encompassing than anything else, and it represents and gives life to everyone. Those controlling these forces, or those who are the intermediaries between humans and gods, are hence extremely powerful.

A fundamental part of African traditional religions and their cosmologies is power; neither good nor bad, but both. “Power is both spiritual and material and often explicitly so. Spiritual power is believed to lead to material power – political influence and wealth....Overall, spirit power

is assumed to permeate the material world, which makes this world both something to be wary of and something that can be used in interaction with the spirits.”[37] The source of the White Nile and the Bujagali and Itanda Waterfalls are such places where the spiritual powers are strongest, and like going to a pilgrimage site such as Gish Abay where the power is available in the form of holy water, the powerful healers are believed to enable even mightier and more powerful outcomes than the effects of the Gish water from heaven. Of course this depends on whom one asks.

Thus, from one perspective it is possible to argue that one may better grasp the significance and importance of water in society and religion by emphasizing cosmologies where water is not perceived as holy if the most powerful spirits and deities are associated with or reside in different forms and types of water. As Hocart pointed out with regard to stones a long time ago, it is “the spirit in, not of a stone.”[38] It is similar with regard to the water spirits in Bujagali Falls or Itanda Falls; they live in the water, but they are not spirits or gods of water (like Ganga in Hinduism), and the water itself is not a spirit or holy. The different and varying water-worlds matter, precisely because they are the ultimate source for all life and well-being. Hence, what matters most for believers is within the realm of god or the ancestors as perceived by the devotees.

Humans, and in particular farmers, are to a large extent at the mercy of benevolent or malevolent divinities. Gods or ancestors, and in any given combination, are believed to procure the annual rains or life-giving floods, or to withhold the precious water for life as penalty for individual and communal sins.

Jaja Bujagali is perceived to be an “archbishop” in the traditional Busoga religion, and there is literally nothing in between heaven and earth he cannot request of Budhagaali spirit, with some few exceptions. It is Mary Itanda living in the next waterfalls who may incarnate the rain-god Mesoké, who also resides in these waterfalls. Although Budhagaali is the strongest and more supreme than all the other gods, including

Itanda, a fundamental aspect of the water-world such as rain is the domain of another divinity and its healer as an intermediary medium. In March 2017, when a drought was announced and dried up the land with projected harvest failure and human suffering, a goat was sacrificed to the rain-god (Fig. 6). I participated in the ritual and sacrifice aiming to provide and procure the life-giving rains at the right time and in the right amount. When I was back in October conducting other fieldwork, I visited Mary Itanda, again curious to know if the rainy season had been good. She could tell that god had been very pleased with the sacrifice; Mesoké had given the good rains and society avoided a major disaster.

*See the video [Sacrifice to the Nile River](#).*



*Fig. 6. Blood sacrifice to the rain-god Mesoké in the Itanda Falls. Photo: Terje Oestigaard.*

The importance of rain cannot be emphasized enough. “When the weather is everything – when it determines, in ways nothing else can, what will grow and how much, whether and how long time people will do migrant labour, whether it will be a feast or famine year, whether some will live or die – it is unwise not to take such things very seriously,” Todd Sanders said with regard to a case-study in Tanzania. “That the rain begins promptly and falls regularly each season – indeed, that it arrives and falls at all – is, quite literally, a matter of life or death. Without rain nothing grows. And

without growth, people and animals will wither and die.”[39]

Although commonly described as rainmaking, no human or rainmaker can make rain; the rains belong to the gods in their divine spheres. The gods can withhold the life-giving rains as penalty for sinful behaviour or bless people and land with the good rains at the right time. But people can ask their medium to request the rain-god to give the precious life-giving rains.

## A Rainmaking Ideology

From a functional approach to religion, one may thus identify at least two structuring parameters for the development and resilience of a rainmaking ideology. First, there has to be a variability in precipitation, and cross culturally it seems that the greater the variability the more likely it is that a rainmaking cosmology may evolve; this relates to the second aspect, namely dependency on the rain. For many urban dwellers in modern cities, rain is primarily a reason for putting on rubber shoes and using an umbrella, and life continues more or less the same whether it rains in February or July. For subsistence farmers living in dry areas, the annual rains in the right amount at the right time are a matter of life and death. Together, great variability of the life-giving waters and the total dependencies of these unpredictable rains, or the agro-water variabilities,[40] have historically favored religious beliefs and rituals where humans engage with divinities in various ways to ensure the arrival of the precious waters, or in more general terms, wealth and health for all.

Still, a functional approach to religion and the development of rainmaking ideologies comes short without including the substance of religion – ancestors, spirits or gods – or the divine spheres in one way or another. Moreover, although the

life-giving rains are in god’s hands and are truly a divine gift, the water itself securing and enabling life is not holy. Even in Christianity, there are also waters controlled by God that he can use benevolently or malevolently, but strictly speaking, not holy as such. In the Bible, God’s powers and uses of water are made explicit. The Lament over the River Nile is described in Isaiah:

The waters will fail from the sea, And the river will be wasted and dried up. The rivers will turn foul; The brooks of defense will be emptied and dried up; The reeds and rushes will wither. The papyrus reeds by the River, by the mouth of the River, And everything sown by the River, Will wither, be driven away, and be no more. The fishermen also will mourn; All those will lament who cast hooks into the River, And they will languish who spread nets on the waters. Moreover those who work in fine flax And those who weave fine fabric will be ashamed; And its foundations will be broken. All who make wages will be troubled of soul. (Isaiah 19:5–10)

The Lament of the River Nile is part of a longer oracle against Egypt. It describes a drought causing the Nile to dry up with subsequent social

and political unrest, and all is seen as a consequence of a judgment of YHWH.[41] Moreover, in the book of Deuteronomy the lands of Egypt are described as “a God-forsaken country” because of the particular ways it is watered while, in contrast, the Promised Land is hailed as a land of hills and valleys, “which drinketh water of the rain of heaven.” Israel was a country of benevolent waters. In Deuteronomy (11:10–13), it says: “The land you are about to cross into and possess, a land of hills and valleys, soaks up its water from the rains of heaven. It is a land which the Lord your God looks after, on which the Lord your God always keeps his eye, from year’s beginning to year’s end.”[42] In fact, rain is seen as more precious than the Torah and the creation itself, following other Hebrew scriptures: “The sending of rain is an event greater than the giving of the Torah. The Torah was a joy for Israel only, but the rain gives joy to the whole world....The day of rainfall is greater than resurrection; [...] than when the heaven and the earth were made.”[43] When God intervened in the hydrological cycle as a “rain-god,” the importance and consequences were absolute encompassing everyone and everything. Or, in other words, the Almighty’s omnipotent powers impacting everyone are clearly visible for believers when the life-giving waters turn into death and decay.

Religiously, as Weber points out, “rain was one of the awards promised by Yahweh to his devotees, who were at that time agriculturalists... God promised neither too scanty rain nor yet excessive precipitation or deluge.”[44] In other words, God controls all aspects of life through water, and although this water was not holy, it was within and from the divine sphere. From this perspective, when God worked as a traditional

water divinity, the true power and omnipotence were revealed when the water was not holy, but everywhere in the presence or absence of rains. Moreover, if the life-giving rains were holy water, all people and land would have been consecrated, and as a paradox, if this was the case and holy water was so available for everyone everywhere, it would have reduced the importance of water in other rituals.

While the latter observation is rather theoretical, abstract or theological, the more fundamental aspects of water and religion are the always localized and specific adaptations and notions of various forms of life-giving waters, even in a world religion like Judaism or Christianity. If God penalized the Egyptians with a devastating flood, the rains had, hydrologically speaking, their origin in the “water-tower” of Africa or the Abyssinian highlands, where also Gish Abay is located—the very River Gihon flowing from Paradise. Thus, even within a river basin, along the same river and based on the same scriptures in the same religion, God may apparently withhold the rains in Ethiopia causing drought in Egypt, while at the same time the source of the Nile at Gish Abay comes from heaven (and he may send the precious rains to Israel instead). These are not contradictions or paradoxes, but rather highlighting the fundamental role of water in religion: it matters right here and now for believers, and local absences or presences and specific adaptations are cosmologically conceptualized and anchored in specific environments. Thus, with water as the axis, even transcendental religions can be located and operating in ecologies dependent upon the water-worlds controlled by the very divinities, particularly if the waters are not holy.

## Conclusion

Ordinary water in culture and nature possesses qualities behaving and transcending differently

than all other elements in nature. Religious waters not only build on these inherent capacities,

but add new enigmas and transformative powers. While conceptions of holy water in the Ganges or the use of water in baptism have shaped many perceptions of what holy water is and how it works in religious practices, it might be fruitful to extend the frames and go beyond an emphasis on only holy water to religious waters in general. As seen, gods, even transcendental divinities like the Christian (or Jewish) God, have historically been believed to use their waters in many different ways directly impacting human lives and livelihood for better or worse. Apart from the Deluge, God has also withheld both the rains and rivers' inundations as penalties, but he also blessed the very same people with the precious and needed life-giving waters, not because water is holy, but because it gives lives to farmers and fields. On the other hand, the holy waters coming from Gish Abay are the closest devotees can come to collecting divine grace flowing directly from heaven.

Thus, even the Christian God may use his water in a number of different ways. Some of the waters may embody inherent heavenly holiness like the water at Gish; other types are neutral waters for farms and fields, or punishing waters such as withheld rains or torrential floods (and then there is water used as torments in different layers of the Catholic hell, for instance). Omnipotent and omnipresent gods may of course control the hydrological world; in fact, controlling and using the water-world is one of the most efficient

ways of manifesting power and affecting all people. Still, the gods in world religions are not rain or river-gods, and although the scriptures document interventions in the actual water world of life-giving rains and inundations, traditional indigenous religions are often better adapted to specific ecologies with all their spirits and rain-making practices. In water-worlds where water is not holy, the omnipresence of the cosmology may thus be even greater than in religions with holy water, since holiness implies restrictions and inclusiveness. If divinities control all water everywhere, this creates a total and encompassing worldview adapted to specific ecologies.

Water in general, and religious water in particular, will continue to fascinate and intrigue people. Although some of the paradoxes are possible to explain or partly analyze, it is nevertheless all the beliefs about the religious and mysterious qualities and divine powers that have made the River Nile the most legendary of all rivers in the world. Herein is also one of the fundamental characteristics and particularities of religious water; while most religious practices involve awe and different degrees of mysticism, the very water itself is very concrete, practical, and here and now. The religious waters look no different than ordinary water and hence the paradoxes of the ultimate source of life continue, because religious waters nevertheless have distinctly different origins, qualities, and powers.

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