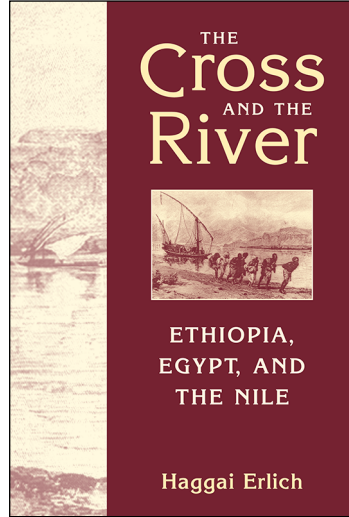


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# The Cross and the River: Ethiopia, Egypt, and the Nile

Haggai Erlich

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# 1

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## Introduction: The Crisis of the Nile

This book is about a history of collective identities and their role in intercultural and political international relations, but it is closely relevant to a contemporary issue of immense practical importance. It has to do with the very existence of Egypt. As these lines are being written, the “gift of the Nile” enters the twenty-first century facing an ever-deepening controversy over its waters. In the coming decades, gradually and perhaps inescapably, the Nile River will become an issue of life and death.<sup>1</sup>

At the heart of the matter is the fact that 86 percent of the water irrigating Egypt comes from Ethiopia and that Ethiopia itself intends to use a part of it. The waters of Ethiopia flow down the Nile tributaries of the Atbara River (the Takkaze in Ethiopia) and the Sobat (the Ethiopian Baro-Akobo) but mainly through the Blue Nile, or the Abbai—“the big (river)” and “the father of rivers” for the Ethiopians. The Blue Nile begins in Lake Tana (1,700 meters above sea level) and makes an 1,000-kilometer loop through Ethiopian territory, carving a 600-meter-deep gorge through the highlands. During its passage through Ethiopia the Abbai harnesses waters from over ninety tributaries before it meets the White Nile in Khartoum. The contribution of the White Nile is much smaller. Originating in the Great Lakes of Equatorial Africa, the White Nile is then lost in the vast marshes of the Sudd (meaning “obstruction”) region, before it emerges in the northern part of southern Sudan. Having been thus subject to intensive evaporation in the Sudd, the White Nile’s steady but slower stream yields a mere 14 percent of the total amount of the combined river reaching Egypt. The Blue Nile is much more energetic. Not only does it cascade through the huge, steep, rocky walls of the highland plateau, but its flow changes in an annual drama, peaking from June to October, the rainy season in Ethiopia. It is there and then that the lifeblood of Egypt is created.

The Ethiopian waters constitute by far the greater share of the Nile, and their sudden arrival creates the August floods that for many millennia have irrigated, or sometimes flooded, the fields of Egypt. Egypt itself has practically no rain. It contributes no water to the Nile, but it needs every drop. Egypt was not only born of the Nile, it also lives by it, and its dependence increases in accordance with the pace of its modernization and population growth. The 1987–1988 period demonstrated how increasingly vulnerable Egypt has become. After several years of drought in Ethiopia, the water level in Lake Nasser, behind the new Egyptian Aswan High Dam inaugurated in January 1971, was reduced to an alarming level. The volume of the reservoir had fallen from the normal level of 165–175 meters above sea level (173.04 in 1978) to 153 meters by early July 1988. Had the rains in Ethiopia continued to fail for another two months, the water would have dropped to 147 meters, halting the massive production of hydroelectric power from the Aswan Dam. The amount of water then left in Lake Nasser would have been sufficient for six more months of irrigation. Experts were predicting a horrible catastrophe. Another dry year in Ethiopia, they forecast, and the eternal river would virtually begin drying up, with chaotic consequences.<sup>2</sup> On 10 August 1988 heavy rains began in Ethiopia, giving Egypt a last-minute reprieve. But had the two countries united in facing common challenges, such anxieties might have been spared and the Nile could have given life even when Mother Nature turned capricious.

Various plans to control the river were proposed during the twentieth century to offer solutions made possible by new hydrological information on the Nile. The British, who had occupied Egypt in 1882 and later the Sudan and most of the Upper Nile in 1898, sought to develop the most effective use of the Nile's water by regarding the Nile basin as an integral whole. To develop the Nile for Egypt, they needed to increase the amount of water by preventing waste, regulating the flow, and storing surpluses where evaporation was minimal. As early as 1904, Sir W. Garstin produced his "Report upon the Basin of the Upper Nile," designed to increase the flow from the Equatorial Great Lakes by cutting a canal through the Sudd. In 1946 a British hydrologist in the service of the Egyptian Ministry of Public Works, Harold Hurst, published "The Future Conservation of the Nile," proposing dams at the outlet of the Great Lakes and at Lake Tana in Ethiopia, which would provide reservoirs of minimal evaporation for overyear or "century" storage. In 1958 H. A. Morrice and W. N. Allen, British experts representing the government of Sudan, proposed dams and hydroelectric stations on the Blue Nile and the Baro in their "Report on the Nile Valley Plan." In 1964 the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation published the results of a five-year study

ordered by the Ethiopians. "Land and Water Resources of the Blue Nile Basin: Ethiopia" envisioned twenty-six projects in Ethiopia, including four dams designed to turn Lake Tana and the Abbai's gorge into the primary all-Nile reservoir and to supply electricity and irrigation for Ethiopia while significantly enlarging and regulating the amount of water flowing to Sudan and Egypt.<sup>3</sup>

But for such all-Nile solutions to materialize, a unified multinational action was needed. In other corners of the globe, around other rivers, such unity and cooperation has been occasionally achieved. But the enormous, mysterious Nile, the home of humankind since its very beginning, has never experienced such human unity. No single political or cultural force has ever been able to control the entire basin. Islam failed in the seventh century to penetrate southward from Egypt beyond Aswan. Late-nineteenth-century European imperialism failed to subdue Ethiopia. Before, between, and after these periods no all-Nile unification of any sort has ever been achieved. The Nile system has remained a multicultural cosmos, a theater of ethnic diversity, of religious barriers, and of political dams.<sup>4</sup>

In this volume I will not address the stories of all the various riparian civilizations, nor will I elaborate on their multifaceted interactions. Rather, I confine it to Ethiopian-Egyptian cultural-political relations as seen from the perspective of the Nile. It is a long, multidimensional story, a unique case of inter-Eastern, inter-African dialogue between two ancient civilizations that have managed to endure, to undergo changes, and to survive. These are two history-oriented societies for which the memory of formative past events, the legacies of various chapters in their long dialogue, are still living sources of both identity and action. This is a story of mutual dependence, but it is also a story of broken eye contact.

#### "HISTORIC RIGHTS": EGYPTIANS AND THEIR ETHIOPIAN DILEMMAS

Egypt and Ethiopia have no common border, but their histories have always remained interwoven. Their common story has culminated in various conflicts and crises, but beyond the dramas of strategic and political interests, there lay deeper dimensions of culture and identity.

For the Egyptians Ethiopia has always meant the source of their Nile. Although the extent of the Blue Nile as their main source of water became understood only in the early twentieth century, the rulers of Egypt from time immemorial realized that the floods were the gift of Ethiopia. Moreover, they were convinced (and so were many Europeans)

that the Ethiopians were capable of obstructing the waters and the flow of the Blue Nile and its tributaries,<sup>5</sup> a theme that recurs throughout this history. Historically, the river produced an ever-developing world of anxieties and myths that, in themselves, went to the core of the Egyptian soul. Ethiopia in the Egyptian consciousness—and this is one major theme of this study—was important enough to become relevant even to the very essence of Egyptian self-perception. The concept of Ethiopia has been a meaningful “other” for centuries, an external being significant enough to influence attitudes stemming from the very definition of the “self.” Indeed, the concept of Ethiopia in Egyptian eyes has continued to develop along with changes in the Egyptians’ identity.

In my analysis of the Egyptian aspect, I shall concentrate on three relevant dimensions: the Islamic-Egyptian concepts of Ethiopia, the modern nationalist Egyptian concepts, and the Arab revolutionary concepts. All these identities were born during periods when Ethiopia was much on the Egyptians’ agenda, as they interpreted the Ethiopian other as a reflection of the Islamic, Egyptian, or Arab self in their messages and legacies. Furthermore, their concepts of the Ethiopian other were as complex and varied as the Egyptian self-definitions. This is the very crux of my thesis. Just as Islam became rich and multifaceted as a comprehensive prescription for Muslims, so the multifaceted Islamic concepts of Ethiopia were developed. Christian Ethiopia was, from the very beginning of Islam to this day, a matter of intra-Islamic controversy. On the one hand, Ethiopia was the embodiment of evil and danger in the eyes of Islamic radicals. On the other hand, it was the positive, just, blameless neighbor for the moderates, a classical case of an accepted, legitimate other. This Islamic dichotomy regarding Ethiopia was created during the formative stage of early Islam, and it went on to reflect the continuous inner-Islamic arguments about Islam itself, arguments that are still just as heated, perhaps even more so, in Egypt today.<sup>6</sup>

When Egypt became the center of Islam, there followed another formative period of the Egyptian-Ethiopian dialogue. When medieval Egypt reached its historic peak during the time of the Mamluks (1250–1517), Ethiopia enjoyed its “golden era” under the new “Solomonian” dynasty (1270–1529). It was during that period of active interrelations that the Egyptian version of the Islamic concepts of Ethiopia, less abstract and much more practical, was reshaped.

In time, with the birth of modern Egyptian nationalism, much of the Islamic and Islamic-Egyptian dichotomy over Ethiopia was transmitted into the new, modern set of self-definitions. In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, when Egyptian history began revolving around new ideas of representative politics, as well as around a territorial concept of

the Nile Valley as an historic entity, Ethiopia again became centrally relevant. Defeating the Egyptian army in 1876, the Ethiopians foiled the plan to connect the Red Sea coast with Khartoum and undermined the Egyptian chance to control the Sudan. This, in turn, began the countdown toward the fall of Egypt itself to British occupation.

In following decades Ethiopia was reinterpreted by the Egyptian nationalists in contradictory terms. In the eyes of the militants it became the uncivilized enemy and the brutal destroyer of the “Unity of the Nile Valley,” a slogan and a goal of Egyptian nationalism during the first half of the twentieth century. However, it became also a friendly neighbor for the more liberal faction of Egyptian nationalists, a faction that captured the leadership in the 1920s. For them Ethiopia was a Coptic<sup>7</sup> Christian state, an anti-imperialist citadel, and a worthy partner in a region of diversity and pluralism. Indeed, as in Islam, this inner dichotomy among modern Egyptian nationalists reflected their different interpretations of politics, society, and culture.

Finally, modern, revolutionary Arab nationalism was born in the mid-1930s in the minds of a new young generation in Egypt and the Fertile Crescent. Again, it was a period during which Ethiopia, then facing Benito Mussolini’s aggression, was much on the Egyptian agenda. Revolutionary Arabism, in its own formative stage, recycled some of the existing Ethiopian dichotomies and created its own. It perceived Ethiopia as a model for an anticolonialist struggle, but it also tended to adopt the more negative Ethiopian images of radical Islam and of militant Egyptianism. During its heyday in Egypt in the 1950s and 1960s, revolutionary Arabism’s concepts of Ethiopia were behind many regional issues: the conflicts in Eritrea and between Ethiopia and Somalia, as well as the Israeli involvement in the Horn of Africa. They also had much to do with Gamal Abdel Nasser’s Nile strategy, his blunt dismissal of Ethiopian relevance to the river’s waters, and his decision to erect the Aswan High Dam.

By 1987–1988 it became clear that Ethiopia, as the main source of the Nile, could no longer be ignored. The Aswan High Dam was no final solution. It was a partial, one-sided Arab-Egyptian solution to a comprehensive all-basin issue. Compared to the all-Nile plans mentioned above, it is the wrong dam in the wrong place. Its price is today’s Egyptian anxieties.<sup>8</sup>

Facing the possibility that Ethiopia may begin to construct projects that would reduce the amount of water in the Blue Nile, Egyptian policymakers continue to waver. As in the past, they must choose between threats, military intervention, and ethnic-religious subversion on the one hand or a friendly, appeasing dialogue with a potentially good and considerate neighbor on the other. In recent years, after the traumatic period of 1987–1988, their tendency seems to be toward the latter policy. In the

Egyptians' uneasy dialogue with the Ethiopians and in their public statements, the demand that the Ethiopians be prevented from using the waters is based on the concept of "historic rights," a concept perhaps as ancient as Egypt itself.

The Egyptians' legal argument for their exclusive rights to the Nile waters is founded on precedence: Egypt has always used the waters of the Nile without restriction. At least four of the major civilizations of ancient times—China, India, Mesopotamia, and Egypt—developed along the waters of large rivers. The Egyptians maintain that the basins of such rivers, the cradles of ancient cultures and states, should be seen as one integrative theater in which use is determined not by geography or hydrology, but by human history. Moreover, they argue, the idea of the Nile basin as an integrative entity of such a nature was confirmed by the international agreements signed during the twentieth century. The principle of historic rights was mentioned in the 1929 Egyptian [British]–Sudanese Water Agreement and reiterated in the Agreement for the Full Utilization of the Nile Waters of 1959. In fact, Egyptian (and Sudanese) exclusiveness with regard to the Nile waters was recognized by the British in all their colonial agreements. Moreover, it was accepted by the Ethiopians themselves, for in 1902 Emperor Menelik II agreed not to interfere with the flow of the river without British consent.

The moral dimension behind Egypt's "historic rights" is twofold: first, Egypt has no other option to survive; second, Ethiopia has lived without the Nile so far and presumably can do so in the future. In practice, however, the Egyptian interpretation of the "historic rights" concept is becoming less acceptable. There is a growing realization that Egyptian rights cannot exclude others. In the 1959 Nile Waters Agreement with Sudan, Egypt quantified its rights, dividing the total annual amount of an estimated 74 billion cubic meters: 55.5 billion for Egypt and 18.5 for Sudan. In essence, the Egyptians recognized the Sudanese right to an "equitable share." But Ethiopia was simply ignored, and the Egyptians and the Sudanese concluded that any additional quantity that could be conserved would be divided equally between them in accordance with their "historic and established rights." Claiming to share the Nile waters between them, Egypt and Sudan agreed to take joint action against any upstream attempt to challenge their historic rights. Since 1987–1988, however, it seems Egypt is more ready to accept Ethiopia as a legitimate partner and neighbor.<sup>9</sup> In negotiating over the vital waters, Egyptian leaders and public opinion makers have indeed resorted to the more positive concepts of Ethiopia, to images that were first created by early mainstream Muslims, applied by the Mamluks, and reshaped by the pioneers of liberal Egyptianism. In so doing, they are occasionally ready



to accept, albeit vaguely, the validity of the Ethiopian argument regarding the Nile waters, that of “equitable shares.”

#### “EQUITABLE SHARES”: ETHIOPIA AND THE MIDDLE EAST

The principle of “equitable shares” is indeed the polar opposite of “historic rights.” According to scholar Robert Collins, it has been recognized in China and India for many centuries and has acquired a greater significance over the past 500 years with the development of the nation-state.<sup>10</sup> It was internationally defined in the Helsinki Accords of 1966 as a principle of “fair shares,” ambivalent enough to leave much of the particulars to be negotiated by the parties concerned. The principle, however, is very clear as to the entitlement of every riparian country to a fair share of the waters of an international river and as to the obligation of all neighbors to accept the inviolability of these rights. In fact, nearly all international accords regarding international rivers are based on this principle. It was the imperialist British, the Ethiopians argue, who legally established Egypt’s “historic rights,” but they were never recognized by the independent African states. It is an unjust principle, the legacy of foreign intervention, long dead, like Emperor Menelik and British colonialism.

After centuries of internal wars and underdevelopment during which the Ethiopians did not have the resources to utilize the Nile, they are now determined to use it for Ethiopia. They are surely entitled to use a fair part for their enormous needs. Their country is no less populous than Egypt (it will soon become more so), and their infrastructure is less developed. At the very beginning of the twenty-first century, Ethiopia uses less than 1 percent of the Nile basin waters, while Egypt uses 80 percent. According to the World Bank in 1997, “the waters of the Nile probably constitute Ethiopia’s greatest natural asset for development. . . . The development of the River Nile in Ethiopia has the potential to contribute significantly to poverty reduction, meet domestic power and food demands, and become a cornerstone of a future Ethiopian export strategy.”<sup>11</sup> Could any government give it up?

Moreover, due to climatic changes during the 1970s and 1980s, the whole of northern Ethiopia is gradually drying up. The June–October rains that used to fall on northern Ethiopia, Tigre, Gojjam, Wallo, Bagemdir, and Gondar have been observed to be shifting to the center and the south. However, with the advent of the Tigrean leadership in 1991, the political center of gravity in Ethiopia has shifted to the north. The new regime in Addis Ababa introduced many revolutionary changes to the identity of Ethiopia, and doubtless it is also committed to the

development of northern Ethiopia, a region long neglected by its predecessors. But if Ethiopia, however lawfully and morally justified, begins diverting a significant amount of water from the Nile, the damage to Egypt may prove irrevocable. The last time northerners led Ethiopia in modern history (under Emperor Yohannes IV, 1872–1889) while Egypt focused on the Nile (under Khedive Isma‘il, 1863–1879), the clash of interests quickly led to war.

Is this, then, a zero-sum game? Can these two countries reach a solution? Is there room for understanding and cooperation? Water experts say that there is and that common efforts and diverse plans, implemented in a spirit of goodwill, would be of mutual benefit in concrete terms of irrigation, energy, and land erosion. We shall take them at their word, but let us turn again to history, this time to the Ethiopian side. There—and this is another major point in my argument—I think there is even more room for optimism. Analyzing the Ethiopian views of the “self” and the “other” may illuminate the “equitable shares” concept from a different angle, thus opening up more constructive options.

If the waters of the Nile have meant life for Egypt, they have meant something different for the Ethiopians. The part of the river in their own territory gave no life, at least not in the material sense. The huge gorge of the Abbai did not act as a bridge between people, as did the Nile in Egypt, but divided them. The energetic, dramatic flow in the depths of the gorge did not bring the water to the fields, but rather stole the precious liquid away. It also caused other damage, eroding the soil, killing man and cattle. Yet the river was of great importance. For the Ethiopians the Nile was primarily a major historical asset, their best card in their desire to retain their most important connection with the Middle East.

Ethiopians have hardly identified themselves by the Nile. The Abbai never really symbolized their territory or their history. Ethiopian identity, at least in terms of the dominant high culture and the state’s institutions, was first and foremost Christian. Ethiopia’s royal dynasty adopted Christianity in the fourth century. Acquiring unique local features, Ethiopian Christianity became the main source of political legitimacy as well as a main reservoir of popular beliefs, traditions, and customs. Simultaneously, from the very outset, the Ethiopian Church linked itself to the Egyptian Church of Alexandria and went on to rely on Christian Egypt as the main external factor in building state and culture. The fact that Ethiopia was a bishopric of the Egyptian Church until 1959 is a pivotal theme in this story. For sixteen centuries it went hand in hand with the fact that nearly all the major elements of Ethiopia’s canonical culture, in terms of political institutions, major languages, historic awareness, and national-royal ethos, were no less Eastern than African. From

its very beginnings Ethiopia was, at least in the eyes of its ruling groups, a part of the Middle East as well, and it remained so even after Islam unified the region and pushed Ethiopia to the sidelines.

Though surrounded by Islam, medieval Ethiopia managed to recover. During its so-called golden era (dating from the late thirteenth to the early sixteenth century), the country benefited dynamically from active relations on an equal footing with Egypt. However, traumatized by a sixteenth-century Islamic conquest, Christian Ethiopians developed a strong sense of siege, dreading a renewed Islamic offensive. It was because of this that the Christian connection to Egypt and its Coptic Church, and to a lesser extent to Jerusalem as well, acquired added importance. For the Ethiopians Alexandria and Jerusalem remained the two corridors to the outside world, as well as the two outside sources of legitimacy for their Christian Ethiopian identity. The Ethiopian identity, in spiritual but also in concrete political terms, was therefore institutionally linked to—indeed, dependent upon—Egypt. This link meant both the religious legitimacy of the imperial throne and salvation from the possibility of eternal Islamic siege. It also constituted a vital and active connection to the sources of Ethiopian culture and identity—to Eastern Christianity and, through it, to the greater Christian world.

The fact that Egypt was in a position to sever Ethiopia from the outside world and undermine its political structure and its Christian culture shaped much of its history. If Ethiopia was the source of the Nile for Egypt, Egypt was the source of the *abun*, the Egyptian metropolitan bishop, for Ethiopia, the key to religious legitimacy for its whole political system. Yet Egypt was also the land of Islam, its very center in Ethiopian eyes. In that respect, Egypt embodied the greatest threat of Islamic usurpation of Christian Ethiopia. Ethiopians generally ignored the complexities of Islam, of Egyptian or Arab nationalism, and failed to see the positive concepts these identities possessed regarding Ethiopia. They were far more aware of, and sensitive to, the radical Islamic, militant Egyptian, and revolutionary Arab concepts of Ethiopia's illegitimacy. They perceived Islam, especially under Egyptian-Arab leadership, as eternally desiring their very annihilation. It was primarily for this reason that Ethiopia cherished the Nile as a weapon. Playing on Egypt's ancient fear that it could obstruct the Nile waters, Ethiopia sought to secure its ties with the East. Ethiopians wanted to deter Islam from renewing its assault by using their Nile card, and with it, in times of crisis, they managed to secure their bishop from Egypt.

The Ethiopians were not, however, merely Eastern Christians. They pursued other options as well, such as turning south to Africa to spread their culture and state, or endorsing a policy of isolation. Indeed, their

sense of uniqueness was perhaps the strongest dimension of their identity. Barricading themselves inside their mountainous citadel was often believed to be Ethiopians' preferred approach to their existence. Yet the connection they felt to Africa was also a major part of Ethiopian identity, of its soul and self-image. Indeed, at certain times, particularly during the late nineteenth century, the south proved a land of profitable expansion. However, while postcolonial Africa, experiencing a process of emancipation, was the continent that provided Ethiopia with its historical seniority and political respect, the Middle Eastern option, though usually far less friendly, remained throughout the most prominent external factor in Ethiopia's development—indeed, the main factor in terms of both profit and danger. The Middle East, with Egypt as its center, was a region of far greater significance and relevance, a region of which Ethiopians were always suspicious, but one to which they always wanted to belong.

Ethiopia's present demand for its "equitable share" of the Nile's waters therefore marks merely a new chapter in a very long story. It is a renewal of the Ethiopians' long-standing desire to retain their African-Ethiopian identity while still belonging to the East. They aim, albeit reluctantly, to be a part of the Middle East, to claim their share of this region's riches, to be a player in a game of enormous potential and consequence.

## ETHIOPIAN-EGYPTIAN DIALOGUE

In the following chapters I shall discuss the main concepts underlying this multifaceted Ethiopian-Egyptian mutuality. Muslims, Egyptian Muslims, modern Egyptians, and Arab nationalists have developed a rich reservoir of polarized Ethiopian images. The Ethiopians face their own conceptual dilemmas vis-à-vis Egypt, its identities, and its strategies. On both sides understanding of the "other," as is universally the case, evolved from understanding and determination of the "self." I shall analyze this dialectical process of definition and redefinition as it unfolded throughout history.

More specifically, Chapters 2 and 3 address the formative medieval concepts. The initial dichotomy regarding Ethiopia was reflected in what I define as two polarized, early Islamic concepts. One was of legal acceptance of Ethiopia, encapsulated in a saying attributed to the prophet Muhammad: "Leave the Abyssinians alone." The other was one of total delegitimization of Ethiopia as a Christian entity, manifested in the idea of "*Islam al-najashi*," a label I explain in Chapter 2. In parallel, the medieval dichotomy of Ethiopian concepts regarding Egypt was initially

reflected in a polarization mentioned earlier. On the one side, Ethiopians felt an urge to be affiliated with Egypt, and with the Middle East in general, a concept embodied in the institution of the “Egyptian *abun*.” On the other side, though, Ethiopians demonized the Islamic other, suspecting Cairo of being ever after the destruction of their country, a sense that was firmly formed in the sixteenth century and that I call the “Ahmad Gragn trauma,” for reasons to be discussed later.

Chapters 4 through 9 are devoted to modern and contemporary developments. I shall discuss concrete Egyptian-Ethiopian relations that revolve mainly around the Nile, and I focus on the reinterpretations and modifications of these mutual images and concepts. As problems have become aggravated, greater efforts to develop an all-Nile debate have been made. In 1977 the Egyptians and the Sudanese began working on the formation of Undugu, an organization of Nile riparian countries that was to include Zaire, Rwanda, Burundi, and the Central African Republic. The Ethiopians, however, in accordance with their old strategy of letting the Egyptians sweat, preferred to participate as observers only.

The Egyptian-Ethiopian dialogue remains one of suspicion and threats, but my concluding chapter does contain elements of optimism based on recent developments. In 1992, for example, a new framework, TECCONILE, replaced Undugu and continued to host the annual Nile 2002 Conference. Although Ethiopia again avoided official membership in the organization, and although the “equitable shares”/“historical rights” debate is still lurking in the background creating political tension and potential crises,<sup>12</sup> at least the dialogue seems to have opened up. On 1 July 1993 Egypt and Ethiopia initiated an accord on Nile basin cooperation, agreeing that “the issues of the use of the Nile waters shall be worked out in detail through discussions by experts from both sides, on the basis of the rules and principles of international law.” According to the Ethiopian interpretation, this was tantamount to Egypt’s recognition of Ethiopia’s rights to the Nile waters.<sup>13</sup> In February 1997 Addis Ababa hosted the Fifth Nile 2002 Conference, which was attended by hundreds of officials and scholars, including 163 Ethiopians and 16 Egyptians. As reflected in the published proceedings, the two sides are far from establishing a relationship of mutual trust. In fact, both sides are busy planning and mobilizing resources in pursuit of unilateral, mutually antagonistic Nile strategies.<sup>14</sup> But, evidently, there is a new readiness to listen and to recognize that psychopolitical hurdles, the product of a long history, must be addressed.<sup>15</sup> Such a readiness, I believe, represents an opening up to an understanding of the other—the dialectical chain I analyze throughout this book—and will remain the key for future success. The more the Egyptians and the Ethiopians liberalize their views of

themselves, the greater the chance for mutual understanding. With goodwill, say hydrologists, a win-win, all-Nile game can be developed. Leaders of both countries declare that this is their wish.<sup>16</sup> Attention to history can provide a guide to the goal of all-regional, African, and Middle Eastern pluralism.

The history I present here is an attempt to follow a multidimensional process stretching over sixteen centuries of vicissitudes and change. My study weaves together three related themes: the political relationship between successive Egyptian and Ethiopian regimes; the involved story of the connection between the Christian churches in the two countries; and the way in which sharing the Nile system has influenced perceptions of the other and played a role in both Ethiopian and Egyptian definitions of national identity over time. Undertaking such a challenge, I can hardly claim to have covered it all. I have tried to understand concrete political issues in the context of their cultural backgrounds, but I could not render full justice to each of these spheres. I followed much of the literature behind the international discourse and ended up more or less presenting the Ethiopians' and the Egyptians' "official" mind-sets, the ideas of their learned elite, and occasional "voices from below." It is perhaps easier to properly present the relevant popular concepts in more focused studies.

## NOTES

1. For general background information, see Waterbury, *Hydropolitics*, and Collins, *Waters of the Nile*. See also Sa'id, *Nahr al-nil*, and Abate, *Water Resources Development*.

2. See Sofer, *Rivers of Fire*, chap. 2. See also *Al-Akhbar*, 8 March 1988; *Jerusalem Post*, 29 June 1988.

3. For the main ideas and plans aired during the twentieth century, for their failure to materialize, and for a warning that the continuation of one-sided policies by the governments concerned would lead to a major catastrophe, see Collins, "In Search of the Nile Waters."

4. This is the main theme of Erlich and Gershoni's edited collection *The Nile*; see mainly the introduction. See also Sa'id, *Nahr al-nil*, mainly chap. 8.

5. See Pankhurst, "Ethiopia's Alleged Control," pp. 25–37, and van Donzel, "Legend of the Blue Nile in Europe," pp. 121–129.

6. The issue of Islamic and later of modern Egyptian nationalism's and Arab nationalism's concepts of Ethiopia is a main theme of my book *Ethiopia and the Middle East*, which also discusses Ethiopian concepts of the Islamic other. Some of the ideas developed below were initially studied for *Ethiopia and the Middle East*.

7. Although the Ethiopian Church was affiliated with the Coptic Church, Ethiopian Christianity was not "Coptic." This issue will be addressed below.

8. See Collins, "In Search of the Nile Waters." More on the controversy over the Aswan High Dam can be found in Chapters 8, 9, and 10 in this volume.

9. In 1988 the Center for Arab Studies in Cairo published a voluminous collection of articles by different authors reflecting this new spirit. See Markaz al-Buhuth, *Azmat miyah al-nil*. See discussion in Chapter 9.

10. See Collins, "A Nile Policy." I thank Professor Collins for generously sending me very helpful material.

11. See World Bank, "The World Bank, Ethiopia, and the Nile."

12. See Waterbury, "Is the Status Quo in the Nile Basin Viable?" and "Policy and Strategic Considerations."

13. See "Egypt Recognizes Ethiopia's Right to Nile Waters," *Ethiopian Herald*, 3 July 1993.

14. See details in World Bank, "The World Bank, Ethiopia, and the Nile," p. 12.

15. See the various contributions to the Ethiopian Ministry of Water Resources, *Fifth Nile 2002 Conference: Proceedings*, such as Abraham, "The Nile Issue," in which the author, a historian and a researcher for the Ethiopian Foreign Ministry, writes mainly on the Egyptians' need to overcome psychological barriers.

16. See details in World Bank, "The World Bank, Ethiopia, and the Nile," particularly quotations therein from Ethiopian prime minister Meles Zenawi (7 April 1998) and Egyptian minister of public works Mahmud Abu-Zayd (2 March 1998).