

A critical analysis of representations of the United States and Egypt as development partners of Ethiopia in the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam project

Introduction

The Global South has long been the subject of 'regimes of representation', hegemonies of meaning that act as 'epistemological enforcers' for how people should think or act, constituted of visual images and language that do not just passively reflect reality but inscribe meaning upon it (Agnew & Corbridge, 1995; Mawdsley, 2008). By studying these regimes, we can not only uncover how different actors seek to naturalise certain discourses, or ways of thinking, about the subject being represented, but also how the representer constructs their own identity in opposition to the subject: a relational or dualist ontology (Bird-David, 1999; Mayhew, 2013). The key example of this, as described by Said (1978), is how Europe ("The Self") has defined itself using the Orient ("The Other"), putting itself in a "positional superiority" to its colonial subordinates.

This project will reverse the lens of analysis used by studies such as Mawdsley (2008) and Paterson & Nothias (2016), instead analysing the discourses and representations of development partners from the perspective of Southern media. This project will examine representations of Egypt and the United States in Ethiopian news media, specifically relating to the construction and filling of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), a unilaterally implemented mega-project with transboundary impacts that involve a range of stakeholders and will require co-ordination and co-operation to succeed and avoid conflict (Pemunta et al, 2021). By conducting a discourse analysis on the representations of these development partners, this project will allow a view into the nature of development in Ethiopia.

The GERD began construction in 2011 and is expected to upon completion generate 6,450 MW of electricity, making it the largest hydroelectric plant in Africa and tripling the power supply of Ethiopia (Pemunta et al, 2021). However, it lies over the Blue Nile, the main tributary of the Nile, which originates in Ethiopia and contributes around 86% of the downstream flow. This disturbs the 'hydro-hegemony' Egypt has held over the Nile basin for more than a century, solidified by oft-criticised acts such as the 1952 construction of the Aswan High Dam and the 1959 Nile Waters Agreement, a treaty which allocated the entirety of the Nile's flow to Egyptian and Sudanese use.

This project will focus on the analysis of two articles which report on a particular period of the negotiations, primarily between Ethiopia and Egypt, surrounding the rate of filling of the GERD which will alter the water received downstream (Kansara et al, 2021). The first article was published in the *Addis Standard*, an independent news magazine, in October 2020 and discusses the role of the Trump administration and the US, as a development partner of Ethiopia, in arranging a deal between the various riparian countries, particularly then-president Donald Trump's offer of 'Good Office' and later threats to Ethiopia (Messele & Ayalew, 2020). The second article was published in *The Ethiopian Herald*, a government-owned paper, in July 2020 and discusses Egypt's stance in the negotiations (Bekerie, 2020).

This project argues that these two texts provide an illuminating insight into the priorities of the Ethiopian state regarding development and sovereignty, as well as suggesting to us the outlook Ethiopia has on its own efforts to develop, south-south development cooperation, and Southern solidarity.

Analysis and Discussion

Sovereignty

The most prominent theme that runs through both articles is that of sovereignty. Ethiopia's historical claim to sovereignty is staked in an aggressive tone, stating that Ethiopia is "invincible in battlefields" and referencing 19th century "decisive victories" against Egypt and Italy, as well as the fact that it is arguably the only African country never colonised by the North. Indeed, the 1896 Battle of Adwa plays a key role in the mythology constructed around Ethiopia's sovereignty in Bekerie (2020). This trend aligns with the observation made by Mawdsley (2019) that "Southern narrative framings are currently moving towards more masculinist and virile assertions of national superiority and prowess" to reject discourses of a passive and feminine South from the North. In addition, in Messele & Ayalew (2020), a strong appeal to international law is made: the UN Charter is cited repeatedly, in particular Article 2(4), to criticise the US' actions as an unlawful attempt at "coercion" using "hegemonic compliance tools". This could be a subversive attempt to wield conventions implemented by the Global North against them as rhetorical weapons in an assertion of sovereignty.

This theme of realising sovereignty is used across both articles as an argument for the construction of the GERD: the dam is continuously presented as establishing "the **territorial integrity** of Ethiopia", an exercise to "**affirm** their sovereignty", and a "decision of a sovereign country **entitled** to use **its** natural resources" (emphasis added). However, at the same time, sovereignty is consistently valued above development: it is seen to be "better safe than sorry", with Ethiopians urged to restrain "the government from going for rush deals". Messele & Ayalew (2020) even go as far as to criticise Ethiopia's Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed and his 'medemer' policy, instead arguing for caution and a clear distinction between "fiends and foes in international relations". The suspicion seen is not entirely misplaced: Mawdsley (2012) and Kapoor (2008) discuss the role of friendly negotiations and 'gift-giving' as a "fraudulent kindness" that seeks to enforce systems of hegemony upon the Global South, often through tied aid, loans, conditionalities, and foreign policy obligations put upon the recipient. Another article in *The Ethiopian Herald* discusses this trade-off at length, arguing that "Ethiopia can **never compromise** in its sovereignty for the sake of aid" (Gashaw, 2021). Again, themes of masculinity and self-sufficiency can be seen, while also demonstrating an acute distrust of the Global North.

The United States

The articles resist employing the discursive representations normally seen around Northern development partners: as charitable, sympathetic, giving without expecting reciprocation, and with superior expertise based in technology (Mawdsley, 2012: see Figure 1). Instead, the US and President Donald Trump are presented critically as a brutish hegemon seeking to "coerce" and "undermine" Ethiopia: these representations are listed in Figure 2. What can be observed is that these representations almost reverse traditional discourses applied to Africa: it is not Ethiopia ruled by a savage and capricious despot but the US (Mawdsley, 2008). Indeed, it is interesting that most of the critiques are applied not to the US but President Trump specifically, who is used to personify the US: this could be seen as an extension of Mawdsley (2019), in that particular foreign policy positions and representations in the 'practical' geopolitical sphere sometimes emerge not from complex strategies or systems, but from the personal opinions and proclivities of individual actors. These representations further highlight an Ethiopian awareness of the threats embedded within offers of aid and diplomatic negotiations.

Egypt

The development relationship between Ethiopia and Egypt is presented in the articles as antagonistic and dysfunctional. Similar to the non-standard representations of the US, the usual discursive representations of Southern partnerships (including themes of solidarity, empathy, and practical expertise based on shared experience) are not present (Six, 2009; Mawdsley, 2012: Figure 1). Instead, much like the US, Egypt is presented as a hegemon holding power over the Nile Basin. Despite this, there is a distinct tonal difference: whereas the US is represented as brutish and “blunt” in its attempts to “coerce” Ethiopia, Egypt is instead seen as “aloof”, devious, and deceptive, manipulating the narrative of the GERD through institutional sway and the production of biased academic knowledge (see Figure 3).

However, from another perspective a very different interpretation can be seen. Within Bekerie (2020) one can see appeals to a distant shared history with Egypt. Ethiopia is said to have been referred to by ancient Egyptians as “the Land of the Punt” and considered a close trading partner, “revered” and held “in high regard”. Egypt is presented as having been perverted by colonialism and the intrusion of the British Empire: the Egyptian elite were “gave” a “sense of...duplicity” and corrupted into “the colonizers” (see Figure 3). The British, to use the conceptualisation of hauntology as a “traumatic ‘compulsion to repeat’”, are ‘haunting’ post-colonial Egypt: her plans for her colony are said to have been “inherited” and have “tainted” the Egyptians, their colonial past remaining and afflicting them with a “paternalism” (Fisher, 2012). Colonial Britain, as if a malevolent ghost from the past, is seen to be possessing Egypt, acting through it, to “perpetuate” colonialism against Egypt’s “fellow Africans”.

In this interpretation, the rhetoric deployed by the articles take on a different tone. Ethiopia is not only building the GERD to assert their own sovereignty and right to the Nile, but also as an act of solidarity. In attempting to break the “false paradigm” and “force Egypt from her false narrative”, Ethiopia hopes to free Egypt from this trance of “neocolonialism” and revive “Egypt’s Pan-African identity”. This is why Bekerie (2020) says that the “GERD is bound to be the second victory of Adwa”: Ethiopia is presented as hoping to drive the colonialism and hegemony from Africa a second time and find a Southern solidarity that works for all “400 million people” of the Nile Basin. This more closely aligns with the description of South-South cooperation seen in Six (2009): as “a combination of material self-interest and normative concepts (of)...solidarity”. The building of the GERD is no doubt a largely unilateral action that will to some degree disadvantage Egypt, but it is being discursively represented as an act of solidarity between African and Southern nations.

Conclusion and Evaluation

In summary, the news articles by Bekerie (2020) and Messele & Ayalew (2020) allow an insightful perspective, through the GERD, into development in Ethiopia. Firstly, an overwhelming prioritisation of sovereignty can be seen, based in both a historic national pride and a rejection of Northern discourses of femininity placed on the South. To continue, both the US and Egypt are subjected to non-standard representations (as a Northern and Southern development partner respectively). Instead, the US is seen as a neocolonial threat to Ethiopia, controlled by a capricious and hostile leader in a reversal of tropes normally applied to Africa. Egypt is similarly presented as a threat to Ethiopia, although a more devious and manipulative figure in comparison. Furthermore, unlike the vision of President Trump as a singular figure of evil, there are no mentions of any Egyptian actors in Bekerie (2020), only allusions to a shadowy and conspiratorial “Egyptian elite”. An alternative interpretation of the representations of Egypt was also explored, presenting the country as haunted by its colonial past under Britain and corrupted into repeating colonial injustices against its “fellow Africans”,

a position which Ethiopia is portrayed as trying to free it from in an act of Southern solidarity (downplaying the elements of national self-interest that the GERD contains).

To conclude I will reflect on the usefulness of the analysis done in this project. By analysing in depth only two articles, the project was able to consider in detail underlying motives and discourses behind the representations of the US, Egypt, and the GERD, including alternate interpretations. One could argue that by having such a limited selection of newspapers, the project was vulnerable to bias within the media. However, I argue that I have successfully accounted for this, being aware of bias and approaching the articles with a critical eye. Skjerdal & Gusu (2016) discuss how Ethiopian state media (such as *The Ethiopian Herald*) is “obliged to adhere to a development journalism philosophy” where “the media and other important actors unite to secure economic progress and social development”. With this knowledge, I argue that the analysis done on Bekerie (2020) provides not a flawed view, but an excellent insight into the specific priorities and perspective of the Ethiopian state. Similarly, in the analysis it could be seen how Messele & Ayalew (2020) were able to be more critical of the development agenda and state actions by the fact that they were in a private newspaper. Overall, I argue this project has worked effectively within its limitations in scope to provide a satisfying and insightful perspective into development in Ethiopia.

Appendix

Figure 1 – “The symbolic claims of Western donors and Southern development cooperation partners” (Reproduced from Mawdsley, 2012: 153)

Western Donors	Southern Development Cooperation Partners
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Charity - Moral obligation to the unfortunate - Expertise based on superior knowledge, institutions, science and technology - Sympathy for different and distant others - The virtue of suspended obligation, a lack of reciprocation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Opportunity - Solidarity with other Third World countries - Expertise based on direct experience of pursuing development in poor-country circumstances - Empathy based on a shared identity and experience - The virtue of mutual benefit and recognition of reciprocity

Figure 2 –Representations of the US and President Trump as hostile and hegemonical (emphasis added)

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - “Trump misinforms” - “the United States was coercing Ethiopia to strike an unconscionable deal” - “his outrageous statement ‘Egypt will blow-up the GERD’ is a blatant violation” - “made a blunt word of inciting aggression against Ethiopia.” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - “Trump made a vindictive statement” - “His mal fide remarks” - “The GERD deal tabled by the Trump administration was a honey-coated poison” - “he flouted his words and made sabre-rattling remarks against Ethiopia.” - “Also, it is a shameful act and unfortunate moment”
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Figure 3 –Representations of Egypt as manipulative and ‘possessed’ by Colonial Britain (emphasis added)

Themes of manipulation and dishonesty	Themes of inheritance and possession by Colonial Britain
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - “she is the mastermind of the strategic plan of the entire Nile Basin” - “force Egypt from her false narrative” - “It fabricated a narrative that purported historic and natural rights to Nile waters” - “Invented narratology” - “The Arab League is heavily influenced by Egypt. It is a mouthpiece of Egypt.” - “Egypt deliberately placed the Dam near its southern border so that it takes maximum advantage” - “run to Washington and to the UN Security Council to hoping to force Ethiopia into submission.” - “The academia of Egypt is committed to advancing the so-called historic rights claim.” - “It is working, cadre-style, to justify the upholding of the status quo.” - “Academia continues to perpetuate the false paradigm and associated Egypt-centered knowledge productions.” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Modern Egypt inherited the strategic plan Britain has prepared - “Britain developed a plan to make the whole Nile Basin serve the interests of Egypt” - “It is such distinct history that gave a sense of aloofness and duplicity to the Egyptian elites” - “To-be-like the colonizers have become the norm in Egypt.” - “It is not unusual for Egypt to continue looking at fellow Africans with jaundiced eyes, attempting to perpetuate hierarchical and unequal relations.” - “It can be argued that Egypt’s approach to Africa is tainted with paternalism.”

Figure 4 – Key of codes for discourse analysis and samples of discourse analysis from this project

Yellow – Discusses Issues of Sovereignty

Red – Discusses China

Blue – Discusses US

Green – Discusses Environmental Issues and Public Health

Pink – Discusses GERD and Conflict

Brown – Discusses North/South Divides and Hegemonies

Turquoise – Discusses Egypt

Underline – Key Quotations

D Messele & Y Ayalew (2020), VIEWPOINT: CAN ETHIOPIA SURVIVE THE TRUMP THREATS?, Addis Standard, 27 Oct

In practice, states have their own national interests, in many cases, but may not be tailored by international law principles. As a result, states may drive a hegemonic policy aiming at a position of dominance across the globe. Article 8 of the resolution sets out states' right to determine their socio-economic policies without intimidation, hindrance or interference from outside. Nevertheless, during GERD negotiations between Ethiopia, Egypt and Sudan; the United States was coercing Ethiopia to strike an unconscionable deal over the filling and operation of the dam. When the Ethiopian government was unable to make a deal, the Trump administration exerted its pressure by cutting development aid to Ethiopia. The Trump administration's latest move is counterproductive in many ways. To mention an instance, Ethiopia is an Anti-Terrorism ally of the United States in the Horn of Africa. As such, severing its usual partnership with Ethiopia will cost the United States more than expected. Undeniably, Egypt and Ethiopia are equal partners of the United States. But in terms of strategic importance — Egypt is a more equal partner than Ethiopia.

...

If Egypt blows up GERD, Ethiopia may end up taking serious countermeasures justified under international law including targeting Aswan High Dam. Assume Ethiopia takes a counter-attack, and detonates Aswan High Dam—the impact on civilians would be catastrophic. No matter how Egypt be mighty in economy, Ethiopia remains invincible in battlefields', and its military prowess is known in history. It shall be recalled that Egypt had fought twice with Ethiopia at the battle of Gundet in 1875 and the battle of Gura in 1876 and lost. These two battles were Egyptian attempts at imperial control over the source of the Blue Nile. We do not however rule out the possibility of attacks, but hoping these scenarios will not happen as Trump wishes.

A Bekerie (2020), 'The Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam: The Making of the Second Adwa', Ethiopian Herald, 28 July

Invented narratology of Egypt's historical and natural rights is central to her arguments to keeping the vast amount of the waters to herself. She brings an argument of 'the chosen people' by claiming that Egypt is the 'Gift of the Nile.' It passionately advances unilateral and hegemonic use of the waters to herself by distorting the notion of the gift. Gift implies giver and receiver. Further, the receiver ought to acknowledge to giver of the gift. After taking the gift, displaying or acting against the giver is tantamount to biting the hand that feeds. The notion of reciprocity and cooperation among the givers and receivers of the Gift should have been the basis of life in the Nile Basin. Instead we have a government in Egypt that pursue a policy of conflict and escalation in the region.

...

Given the hegemonic use of the Nile waters by Egypt, Ethiopia is obligated to carry out a non-hegemonic project on the River. It is obligated to tell her own story to the international community. The whole world has to know that Ethiopia provides 86% of the Nile waters. It

makes substantial water contributions to both White and Blue Nile Rivers. Historically, Ethiopia gave birth to Egypt, geographically speaking. It is the water and soils of Ethiopia that created the most fertile banks and deltas of the Nile. Huge alluvial soils were carried to Egypt from Ethiopia. The replenishment of the Nile Valley with fertile soils of Ethiopia is an annual event. The facts on the ground call for real cooperation and collaboration among all the riparian countries.

...

To conclude, Egypt ought to concede that the status quo cannot stand. It has to recognize that the Nile Basin is home to 400 million people. It is only through the principles of cooperation and equity that the people will have a chance to have better lives. It is in the spirit of affirming the sanctity of one's sovereignty that Ethiopia began to build GERD. The completion and the operation of GERD is bound to be the second victory of Adwa. CBC puts it best when it states that "the Gerd project will have a positive impact on all countries involved and will help combat food security and lack of electricity and power, supply more fresh water to more people and stabilize and grow the economies in the region." As much as the first victory of the Battle of Adwa inspired anti-colonial movements and struggle, GERD, as a second Adwa victory, which is bound to inspire economic, democratic and social justice movements.

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