

THE RELIGIOUS NILE

*Water, Ritual and Society since
Ancient Egypt*

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I.B. TAURIS

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Preface

Without me knowing it, this book started in 2004 just after I completed my doctoral dissertation. After a period of eight years studying death and life-giving waters in Nepal, India and Bangladesh along the holy rivers, one of my supervisors, Professor Terje Tvedt, advised me to change continent and focus on the Nile. 'There are many more possibilities there and less done from your perspective', he said, and I am indeed indebted to him for this advice, and, of course, he was right. As the saying goes, although in different forms, 'if you drink from the Nile you will always come back', and since then the Nile has been part of my life and career. My postdoctoral project 'An archaeology of the Pharaonic Nile and the rise of the Egyptian civilization: comparing religious water-worlds in history' (project number 171313) was funded by the Research Council of Norway, for which I am very grateful, and it resulted in the book *Horus' Eye and Osiris' Efflux: The Egyptian Civilisation of Inundation ca. 3000-2000 BCE* (2011). Chapter 5 builds on this work in a shorter and restructured version. Parallel to this work, I also had different positions at the Nile Basin Research Programme at the University of Bergen. During the 2008 spring semester I worked as the research coordinator for the research group 'Water, Culture and Identity', and edited the book *Water, Culture and Identity: Comparing Past and Present Traditions in the Nile Basin Region* (2009), focusing on cultural and religious aspects of the Nile. During 2008–9 I was also a Research fellow at The Centre for Advanced Study (CAS) at the Norwegian Academy of Science and Letters, University of Oslo and part of the research group 'Understanding the Role of Water in History and Development' led by Terje Tvedt, continuing working with water and

religion. Throughout the period 2001–16, I worked in close cooperation with Terje Tvedt on the nine-volume series *A History of Water*, which has also shaped my direction of water studies. I am therefore extremely grateful for the long and stimulating work with Terje over the years – without his constant support and inspiration this book would never have materialized. I will also thank in particular the director of the Nile Basin Research Programme (NBRP), Dr Tore Saetersdal, for his support and friendship for more than two decades, and also Professor Randi Håland, who was my main supervisor in my early years, directing me not only to an anthropological approach in archaeology but also to the wider world and a global and comparative archaeology. I would also like to thank Professor Tim Insoll, who at the time was at the University of Manchester (now at the University of Exeter), where I had the opportunity to spend a short semester in 2007 studying the Nile and ancient Egyptian civilization.

Since 2000, I have worked primarily at the Centre for Development Studies at the University of Bergen, which in the following decade changed names and structure a number of times. The academic and administrative staff has to be thanked for constant support. In 2010 I moved from Bergen and started working at the Nordic Africa Institute in Uppsala, continuing with water and the Nile. In 2009 I had my first trip to Ethiopia and the source of the Blue Nile, which, again without knowing it, turned out to define my future research direction for years. Not only did I work in close cooperation with my good friend Gedef Abawa Firew, and together we published the book *The Source of the Blue Nile: Water Rituals and Traditions in the Lake Tana Region* (2013), but it also stimulated my continuing research in Ethiopia, and other places along the Nile. In Ethiopia, most of the fieldwork was conducted in August/September 2009 and in January and March 2010, with additional follow-up inquiries in 2011 and 2015 on specific topics being pursued during the process of writing. I would like to thank Professor Yacob Arsano at Addis Ababa University and the members of the History Department at Bahir Dar University, Ethiopia, whose help was instrumental. Parts of chapters 2 and 6 build on this work in a restructured form.

At the Nordic Africa Institute I was part of the ‘Rural and Agrarian Change, Property and Resources’ cluster, led by Professor Kjell Havnevik. I am grateful for Kjell Havnevik’s support and trust in my work, also when things did not turn out as planned, which happened with my

next and main project about rainmaking and globalization in Tanzania. The main fascination with ethnographic fieldworks, and the greatest frustrations as well, is that it never turns out as expected. Despite initial difficulties, I ended up on the southern shores of Lake Victoria, which resulted in the book *Religion at Work in Globalised Traditions: Rainmaking, Witchcraft and Christianity in Tanzania* (2014). The fieldworks were carried out in 2011 and during the drought in the Horn of Africa. I would like to thank my interpreter Simeon Mwampashi whose personal and social skills opened up many doors during the course of the fieldworks. I would also like to express my gratitude to Jumanne Abdallah, Sokoine University of Agriculture, Tanzania, and the nuns at Nyakahoja Hostel.

Since I had been working with the source of the Blue Nile and the Sukuma on the southern shores of Lake Victoria, it led naturally to my next focus: the historic source of the White Nile in Uganda on the northern shores of Lake Victoria. I conducted fieldworks there from 2012 to 2014 (and a short fieldwork in 2017) in parallel with other projects, and during the autumn of 2014 I had a more or less complete manuscript ready to be published as a book with the title *The Source of the White Nile*, directly referring to *The Source of the Blue Nile*. At this time, the idea of working on *The Religious Nile* had developed, although without having any clear idea of how to proceed. I had sent the manuscript to Terje Tvedt for comments, and during a dinner in Oslo in September 2014 we talked about my future plans, and I briefly mentioned that I had been thinking about the religious Nile covering most of the basin. Then he gave me a piece of advice, obviously not the one I wanted at that time, but, as usual, he was right: cancel the book about the source of the White Nile! Thus, from the satisfaction of having almost a new book completed, I had none. However, from then on it was clear what to do and I knew how to write this book. As part of the cancelled book, I had also written about dam discourses, and I took that part out and published it as a small book, *Dammed Divinities: The Water Powers at Bujagali Falls, Uganda* (2015). The main ethnography from the unpublished manuscript about the source of the White Nile was hence the axis which this book developed around.

In Uganda, I would in particular thank the healers Jaja Kiyira, Jaja Bujagali and Jaja Itanda. Although it is not common to name informants, it is done in this case since they are public figures and easily identified, although the necessary anonymization is done when needed. Special

thanks are due to Richard Gonza and Waguma Yasin Ntembe for putting me in touch with key informants. Oki Simon provided invaluable help as a translator and Moses Mugweri, my assistant throughout, deserves special thanks. Henni Alava provided me with the quote about the Ugandan martyrs in Gulu. A research project like this does not take place only in the field. The Nile Basin Research Programme (NBRP) at Makerere University also assisted me, and I particularly thank Professor Edward Kirumira and Margaret Kyakuwa. The Uganda National Council for Science and Technology provided me with a research permit (SS 3202), and otherwise I would like to thank John Baptist Sseppuuya for excellent driving as well as help with other practical matters.

In 2013, I became docent in archaeology at Uppsala University and from 2016 affiliated at the Department of Archaeology and Ancient History, and I would like to extend my gratitude to professors Anders Kaliff, Paul Lane, Neil Price and Paul Sinclair. In 2017, I started on a project in Bergen again, which somehow completed the circle of this book.

I would like to express my sincere thanks to all the informants who generously gave of their time and answered my questions, and without their generosity this book – or any of the others – would not have been possible to write. While it is always a danger writing acknowledgements, thanking some and forgetting others, I hope I am excused since there are too many involved in a project like this who have supported me in one way or another throughout the years, and I am grateful to all. I would also like to extend my gratitude and a general thanks to the staff at the Nordic Africa Institute. The friendly staff at the British Library and SOAS have been very helpful during different phases of my work during the last 15 years. Lastly, I will thank my ‘own’ super-librarian Pernilla Bäckström for her invaluable help with library loans, and for support and everything else that matters in life.

At various stages, Francesca de Châtel and Peter Colenbrander have commented on language and academic un-clarities, and I will also thank the Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford, Terje Tvedt, Marcel Rutten, Kjersti Gravelsæter Berg and Nils Billing for allowing me to use some of their photographs. Tore Saetersdal also let me use the transcripts of one of their films on rainmaking and Nils Billing gave me valuable literature suggestions regarding Egypt. I would also like to express my gratitude to the Satterthwaite Colloquium.

While this book is more than ambitious, given that the Nile basin covers almost one-tenth of the African continent and the time span covers 5,000 years of history, and indeed I have had many second thoughts regarding if it was a good idea to embark on this project at all during the writing process, there are obviously periods and areas that are not covered in the same depth as others. In particular, Burundi, Kenya, Rwanda, Sudan (primarily today's South Sudan) and Tanzania are covered less than Egypt, Ethiopia and Uganda, and are to a large extent based on existing literature. This I hope is justified, since, in particular, in the upper Nile region rainmaking is a dominant cosmology and there are many structural similarities, which are discussed in Chapter 4. Still, with the focus on the sources, rainmaking, the spiritual world along the Nile, the Egyptian civilization, and the role of water in the monotheistic religions in a comparative context, including parts of the classical sources, I believe that many of the most central parts of the religious Nile are covered, and sufficiently documented for theoretical discussions of water and religion.

Regarding references, I have to a large extent tried to minimize the literature focusing as much as possible only on the Nile basin as such, given that the comparative reference literature is unlimited in practice, although in many cases it has been necessary to extend the knowledge base beyond the basin. Still, the references are voluminous enough and I have used endnotes to make the text more readable, and, I hope, to use a water metaphor, more flowing.

A last note about the terminology of the chronology is necessary. It has been a challenge to choose the nomenclature of years since the religious Nile includes Christianity, Islam, Hinduism and Judaism, and not least the African indigenous religions. The Western system of dating uses BC and AD, 'before Christ' and the Latin phrase *anno domini*, 'in the year of our Lord'. The Islamic calendar starts in AD 622 in the year when Muhammed fled from Mecca, and is labelled 1 AH and signifies the Hijri year or era, and the Islamic year follows the lunar calendar and hence the year is slightly shorter than the years used in the Gregorian calendar. One way of solving this is to use BCE and CE – 'Before Common Era' and 'Common Era' – which is in any case linked to Christianity and the birth of Christ, since these two calendars coincide with the same starting point. A last option is the strict archaeological C14 dating

method BP – ‘Before Present’ – which was introduced in 1950. The latter system would make the text unreadable or at least complicate matters too much without being more precise; for example, that Jesus was born in the year 1950 BP. The Islamic calendar, given that the years are shorter than the other calendars and the calendar starts later, in addition to the fact that water in Islam occupies only a smaller part of this book, makes this calendar less optimal in this analysis. Christianity in Ethiopia does, however, have a central part, and the Ethiopian Orthodox Church has indeed its own calendar following the Julian calendar, and for instance the year 2015 is 2008 in Ethiopia. Moreover, the Ethiopian New Year starts 11 September (or in leap years 12 September) signifying several important happenings, including the end of the rainy seasons (see Chapter 2).

There cannot be one dating system that will be optimal throughout all periods given that this book covers a 5,000 year span and numerous religions. Not only because of simplicity and comparison, BC and AD are used with notable exceptions, since large parts of the Nile basin are now Christianized and also traditional African religions most often use this system. In Chapter 5, which discusses ancient Egypt, BCE and CE are used, since this civilization developed millennia before Christianity. On certain occasions, when relevant, however, the Islamic calendar will also be used, but then correlated to AD to make the years comparable.

Throughout this journey I have tried my utmost to be guided by what the informants have told me and the narratives and interpretations of earlier travellers and scholars, but of course I am solely responsible for any mistakes and misinterpretations in this book.

1 Sources of Religion

APPROACHING SOURCES

One hundred and fifty years after John Hanning Speke came to the outlet of Lake Victoria in Uganda and identified it as the source of the White Nile in 28 July 1862, I came for the first time to this historic place. Approaching the source of the Nile, on 21 July 1862, Speke writes:

I told my men they ought to shave their heads and bathe in the holy river, the cradle of Moses – the waters of which, sweetened with sugar, men carry all the way from Egypt to Mecca, and sell to the pilgrims. But Bombay [the assistant], who is a philosopher of the Epicurean school, said, ‘We don’t look on those things in the same fanciful manner that you do; we are contented with all the commonplaces of life, and look for nothing beyond the present. If things don’t go well, it is God’s will; and if they do go well, that is His will also.’¹

When coming to the outlet of Lake Victoria on 28 July 1862, the search for the source was over (fig. 1). Speke concludes 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.’² He continues:

I now christened the ‘stones’ Ripon falls, after the nobleman who presided over the Royal Geographical Society when my expedition was got up; and the arm of water from which the Nile issued, Napoleon Channel, in token of respect to the French Geographical Society, for the honor they had done me, just before leaving England, in presenting me with their gold medal for the discovery of the Victoria N’yanza.³

The importance of finding the source has to be seen in conjunction with the history of the searches for the sources in Europe and the global relevance



1. John Hanning Speke at Ripon Falls and the source of the White Nile, 28 July 1862. Painting at Speke Hotel, Kampala.

of the Nile from the nineteenth century onwards. Moreover, in European mythology, the Nile had a special role. Speke writes, ‘the N’yanza is the great reservoir that floated Father Moses on his first adventurous sail – the Nile’.⁴ The Nile had a fundamental role in the Old Testament and hence in the history of Christianity, giving it special importance in the European context. Still, unlike Gish Abay, the source of the Blue Nile, which is a remote spring in the highlands of Abyssinia, the source of the White Nile documented by Speke at the outlet of Lake Victoria has been seen as a colonial construct and allegedly devoid of indigenous cultural and religious importance. Gish Abay, by contrast, has strong cultural and religious significance. It is believed that the heavenly River Gihon flows directly from Paradise to this specific spring, thus linking heaven and earth and making the water and the river deeply holy.⁵ In the written history to date, the source of the White Nile is not invested with comparable cosmological significance by any religion. Instead, it is generally held that there is not much to report about the water at this place in terms of culture and religion. This could not be further from the truth. In the river, innumerable spirits reside, some more powerful than others, and the most important of them is located only 8 km from the source at Bujagali Falls. This spirit is part of a wider water cosmology, which includes the source as the second most important and powerful water spirit in the Busoga Kingdom and cosmology at the outlet of Lake Victoria.

In discussing sources of rivers, in particular of the Nile, it is important to note that a source can be many things simultaneously, some partly overlapping and others partly contradictory. *Hydrologically*, a source is the remotest spring or discharge point of a river – the very starting point for measuring the river's length. Thus, although rivers have innumerable sources or small tributaries forming larger tributaries and so on, in terms of ultimate length there will only be one source. *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 all the flows of cosmos in the celestial realms. From a religious point of view, river sources can be unrelated to the hydrological sources. Given the aim of studying the role and importance of water and religion in history, these religious sources are of utmost importance, since many hydrological sources are often found and documented quite late in history, and often lack religious significance. In many cases it is the religious sources and not the hydrological ones that have defined history, or at least the mythology that has shaped history. *Historically*, some sources are historical places given major importance in the history of ideas and development. The history of the source of the White Nile has, to a large extent, been constructed by the British since Speke's discovery in 1862. But, as will become evident, this source is also a religious source, and even a hydrological source, even though it is not the remotest spring upstream in the Nile Basin.

Although Speke labelled the outlet of Lake Victoria as the source of the White Nile, most likely he did not see the real source, which existed, and still exists, there. At the historic source of the Nile documented by Speke there are two small adjacent islands. The Western Island is the main tourist destination for visitors coming to see the source, and there is a blue sign on which is written: 'The source of R. Nile. Jinja. World's longest river.' Few visitors pay much attention to the other seemingly irrelevant island just a stone's throw to the east. At the southernmost end of this island stand some huge trees. Because of the extremely rich bird life, all these trees and the nearby ground have been whitened by countless droppings. Next to the trees there is a small opening on which can be found a few apparently unspectacular remains of pots and minor wooden structures. But the importance of these islands is not because Speke in 1862 identified Ripon Falls as the source of the Nile, but because there is indeed a very powerful source of the Nile flowing between the islands at this point.

Today, the source of the Nile is not much celebrated in the guidebooks: 'a visit to this once lovely site is now a disappointment [...] the site looks basically at a passing river'.⁶ True, the Ripon Falls are gone because of the Owen Falls Dam that was opened in 1954, and today the name marks the place where visitors embark in tourist boats to the small islands now seen as the source. When standing at this spot, one inevitably looks at the large billboard proclaiming 'Welcome to the source of the great river Nile – Jinja, Uganda.' This billboard is worthy of comment. Written in huge letters are the words 'Uganda's heritage'. These do not, however, refer to the Nile or its source. Rather, they advertise the sponsor of this billboard, Bell Lager Beer. Below, one reads: 'On the western bank of the river is an obelisk marking the spot where Speke stood for hours when he saw the source of the River Nile, making it known to the outside world.'

The abovementioned islands are located in the bay named by Speke after Napoleon III, as the billboard records: 'The bay behind this billboard through which the waters of Lake Victoria funnel in the Nile is called the Napoleon Gulf.' But it is barely possible to see the bay or the islands because of the size of the billboard. Nevertheless, whatever the billboard's other shortcomings, there is one intriguing and important piece of information on it: "'Omugga Kiyira" is the local name for the River Nile.' Thousands of visitors have read these words without knowing what they mean, but behind this seemingly trivial information there lies a whole cosmology, which certainly makes the source of the White Nile an actual source, and a very important one, but also a very different source from the one Speke found. And this source has utmost importance today, being part of the greater water cosmology of this area among the Busoga.

In 2012 I read the text on this billboard as most tourists do, without knowing what it meant or the implications. The next year when I was back I did not make a discovery: it was the boatman, who is also named Moses, who told me what it means.

When standing next to the 'The source of R. Nile' sign and looking carefully across to the other small island and towards Lake Victoria, one may notice something peculiar about the water. There is a current at this spot. At first it may be difficult to see what is special unless one pays close attention, but the water flows the wrong way!

The two small islands are called Obuzzinga Nalubale, meaning the two small islands of the Lake God (fig. 2). The two islands are located in the gulf where all of the waters of Lake Victoria – the second largest lake in



2. Omugga Kiyira – the source of the White Nile in between the two islands. The tourist island is to the right and the sacrificial island to the left.

the world after Lake Superior – leaves the lake and starts flowing north before eventually reaching Egypt and the Mediterranean Sea. But at the very source, in the middle of the river between the two small islands, something in the water creates a current flowing southwards. The water from the lake is forced back at this point, and one may see banana leaves floating in both directions: some following the flow of the Victoria Nile northwards and some in the opposite direction, southwards. Moreover, while the water in the Nile coming from the lake is rather muddy and polluted, the colour of the water flowing southwards is crystal clear and tastes perfect. Even its temperature feels cooler.

The reason for this strange occurrence is that the source of the White Nile here is literally a source, not only geologically but also spiritually and religiously. If one looks carefully along the shores of the tourist island while standing near the sign, one clearly sees that fresh water is welling up from below. At this spot, there is an underground source of fresh water. Not only is this water crystal clear, but it is also very powerful. The volume and force of this water is uncertain, but it is obviously very forceful, since it actually pushes back the rest of the water in the Nile at this point. The force of this source would have been perceived as even mightier before the Owen Falls Dam was constructed. Just downstream from the source, the Ripon Falls would have offered powerful visual and aural evidence of the tremendous intensity of the water. And whereas

all the other river water would have turned into thundering cascades northwards, the water from the source would have flowed the other way.

'Kiyira' is the name of the specific spirit coming from the source. In the local language, 'Kiyira' means river and 'Omugga' means coming from below. This river god or spirit is nothing other than the waters welling up at the very source of the Nile and forcing the water from Lake Victoria backwards. And this water spirit is very powerful. Sacrifices are made to it on the other small island just across from the tourist island. In the river and all around there are numerous other spirits, and the small wooden structures on this island are some of the shrines to them, including Kiyira. Thus, the source of the Nile is very special not only in the European tradition, but also in local cosmology, for it is the home of innumerable spirits and of river gods, and in particular Kiyira.

Thus, this place is definitely a source from a religious point of view, but not in a conventional sense of a river's most remote spring or origin. This source is more like a fountain, but a very special fountain since it is subterranean in the middle of the outlet of Lake Victoria. Although Speke claimed that the 'lake is the great source of the holy river which cradled the first expounder of our religious belief', these beliefs at the source of the White Nile have little to do with Christianity and European tradition. The source is a fountain of wealth and a fundamental part of the Busoga kingdom's water cosmology. But the spirits also enable witchcraft. In many cases, it is difficult to distinguish between propitiation of water spirits and witchcraft, and to some extent the difference is in the eye of the beholder. Christians condemned all these practices as witchcraft and even among the Busoga healers they are perceived with ambivalence, since those who can bring the betterment may also bring malevolence. Still, Speke was also right, and even today among Christians in Uganda the historic source of the White Nile has a special importance precisely because it links Christians in Uganda with the Nile and Moses as described in the Bible (see Chapter 6).

In the traditional cosmology, the role and importance of the source at Ripon Falls has to be seen in relation to Bujagali Falls and Itanda Falls and to the associated hierarchy of water spirits. Bujagali Falls and Itanda Falls are respectively approximately 8 and 30 km north of the source following the Nile. Among the Busoga, all three falls have special religious significance. In each of the falls resides a river spirit or god. In fact, there are innumerable spirits, but there are three main spirits. Today, the spirits in the Ripon and Owen Falls have

been flooded, but the underground water fountain at the source is as mighty as ever. These three spirits at the source, Bujagali and Itanda incarnate themselves in human form as a traditional healer or diviner. The Budhagaali spirit in Bujagali Falls is the supreme god and is seen as the father or elder brother of the other two. This is due to the force of the falls, naturally and hence spiritually. The Bujagali Falls were the largest. Thus, the force and sound of the rapids testifies to the presence and power of the spirits: they can remove any malignance or misfortune, or be malevolent if devotees are disobedient.

Because the spirit is embodied in them, traditional healers can transfer and mediate the spirit's power. Believers or clients come to the healer with requests for wealth and success or health and prosperity for their children. The healer as medium asks the spirit or god to respond to these requests, and if there are successful physical or spiritual outcomes, the believer will fulfil his or her promise and obligation to the god. This may include making sacrifices to the river of a goat or a sheep or in accordance with the promises made when the healer procured the necessary medicines. These sacrifices are not part of annual or cyclical rituals, but occur when the believers achieve the outcome sought in the rite. Sacrifices at the source of the Nile therefore take place irregularly depending on how many have consulted the healer and taken part in his rituals and if the spirit has granted their wishes. And the human embodiment or the healer of the spirit at the source – Jaya Kiyira – conducts at least one sacrifice to the spirit annually. The water spirits at all three falls are part of the same water cosmology, and in the river live innumerable other spirits. On land, there are numerous healers, but only three main healers use water: in order of importance, they are the Bujagali healer, the source of the Nile healer and the Itanda healer.

Speke has been criticized because he did not discover anything that had not been known for millennia by local people living along the Nile's shores. Hastings Banda, Malawi's first president, for instance, found the idea that Europeans 'discovered' anything insulting and absurd: 'There was nothing to discover,' he said, 'we were here all the time.'⁷ Academics have also argued along these lines. Nwauwa says: 'It seems absurd to continue to credit European explorers with the "discovery" of African peoples, rivers, lakes, waterfalls, mountains, and creeks when Africans themselves knew about the existence of these things.'⁸ Although it is obviously true that indigenous people knew their waters, they did not know about the hydrology and that

the waters from the lake flowed to the Mediterranean. In fact, it seems they did not care or want to know. Not only did the term *mzungu* ('someone who roams around aimlessly') originate as a description of these explorers, their search for the sources made no sense. When Livingstone asked about the source and course of a local river, one chief answered: 'We let the streams run on, and do not enquire whence they rise or whither they flow', and another chief declined to discuss the topic, since it was 'only water – nothing to be seen'.⁹ Where the river flowed after passing through a chieftom was not relevant or worth bothering about. However, one should doubt the local people perceived it only as water and nothing to be seen; although it might be true that they did not worry about where it flowed, as seen with the source and the falls along Victoria Nile water, the spirits residing there are of utmost importance. In fact, everywhere water has cosmological importance, but in very different and specific ways at each place.

Still, it is true that Speke did not discover a waterfall or an outlet from a lake that the indigenous people did not already know. What Speke did discover, however, which became evident later, was that the mighty river connected the great and mysterious lake in the interior of Africa with the river passing through Cairo to reach the Mediterranean. His geographical and scientific quest enabled new understanding of the African continent, an understanding that was crucial to the forthcoming colonization of this part of Africa. Not only was the British discovery of Uganda connected with Egypt through the Nile, but a scientific and hydrological understanding emerged of utmost importance to British expansion in Eastern Africa. This expansion linked the different parts of the Nile Basin in ways that are still of fundamental geopolitical importance. It is in the context of river systems linking Lake Victoria to the Mediterranean that Speke's claim of discovering the Nile's source is to be understood. And it is only in this context that Speke claimed to have made a discovery. Still, Speke's discovery was contested back in England at the time.

In 1848, Frederick Ayrton wrote that anyone claiming to find the sources of the Nile should be met with the utmost scepticism and criticism. Not only had 'the question, as is well known, had an interest long anterior to the time of Ptolemy the geographer', but 'Sesostris, Cambyzes, Alexander, Ptolemy Philadelphus, Cæsar, Nero, and not a few besides, who have sought to leave for the chaplet of their future fame a record of their discovery of the sources of the Nile, have failed

in attaining this object of their ambition'.¹⁰ In the last decade alone some 50 individuals had appeared as rivals in the search for the source. Still, 'Caput Nili quærere', Ayrton says, 'has so long been accepted as a phrase of the futility of attempts to discover the sources of the famous river of Egypt, that, perhaps, one ought not to be surprised that a sudden announcement of success, even though professing to be founded upon the positive testimony of personal observation, should be met by incredulousness'.¹¹ The Romans had even a saying for searching for the sources of the Nile – 'Quaere fonte Nili' – which is equivalent to 'looking for the needle in a haystack'. With this background, Samuel W. Baker, who was the first westerner seeing Lake Albert, started his narrative by summarizing the Nile quest in one paragraph:

In the history of the Nile there was a void: its Sources were a mystery. The Ancients devoted much attention to this problem; but in vain. The Emperor Nero sent an expedition under the command of two centurions, as described by Seneca. Even Roman energy failed to break the spell that guarded these secret fountains. The expedition sent by Mehemet Ali Pasha, the celebrated Viceroy of Egypt, closed a long term of unsuccessful search. The work has now been accomplished. Three English parties, and only three, have at various periods started upon this obscure mission: each has gained its end. Bruce won the source of the Blue Nile; Speke and Grant won the Victoria source of the great White Nile; and I have been permitted to succeed in completing the Nile Sources by the discovery of the great reservoir of the equatorial waters, the Albert N'yanza, from which the river issues as the entire White Nile.¹²

From Khartoum in 1863, on his way back to England, Speke sent his famous telegram: 'The Nile is settled',¹³ and although Baker proclaimed that the issues were settled in the late 1860s, it was finally confirmed by Stanley in 1875 when he proved that there are no other outlets from Lake Victoria than the one Speke documented in 1862. Thus, in a historic perspective the Nile quest has to be seen in relation to the legendary status of the Nile sources for more than 2,500 years, and these legends were to a large extent religious in nature, including perceptions of different types of divine waters. Undiscovered in the nineteenth century when the rest of the world was largely explored and documented (and partly colonized), it was 'the problem of ages' in science and geography as Sir Roderick Murchison, the President of the Royal Geographical Society in London, said in 1863.¹⁴

After Burton and Speke's expedition (1857–9), when Speke made a detour and for the first time saw the southern reaches of Lake Victoria, there remained as many unanswered questions as before, although new knowledge had been gained. One such question was whether the monsoon that gave rise to the annual flooding of the Blue Nile reached as far south as Speke claimed. 'The solution of this question alone is worthy of the labours of another expedition,' Colonel Sykes commented. He went on:

The work is only half accomplished, and the reputation of our country demands that it should be completed. My own opinion is, that independent of any commercial advantages or sordid considerations, the Society ought, for the simple investigation and verification of physical truths, to use its best endeavours to induce the Government to send out a second expedition. For the good name of England; let us have the doubt removed. We have an inkling of the truth; let us have the whole truth.

He was specifically preoccupied with the Mountains of the Moon and whether the western source of the Nile issued from lakes below the mountains, as described by Ptolemy 1,700 years earlier.¹⁵

Claudius Ptolemy began his studies in Alexandria in the early second century and he was the main geographical authority onwards to the discovery of America.¹⁶ Ptolemy's *Geography* was rediscovered in Europe and the translated Latin version in 1406 by Jacopo d'Angelo representing a landmark in Western cartography. In 1475 it was printed without the maps, but two years later the maps were included, and from then on *Geography* was printed in many editions.¹⁷ Ptolemy's sources of the Nile have, however, even a longer history, and it directs the attention to the knowledge in antiquity and ancient Egypt. What did they know about the sources, but also and perhaps more important: what is a source? This is also a question about knowledge systems – hydrology or mythology. A hydrological understanding of the sources may not coincide with religious perceptions of sources, because sources are much more than hydrology and geography – they are about cosmology and the ultimate sources of life.

RELIGIOUS QUEST

The Nile quest is practically ended,' Harry Johnston wrote in 1903.¹⁸ Every important branch, affluent or lake-source in the Nile Basin had been identified and mapped, with some few exceptions. Still, as it was said already in 1884:

The Nile, which during thousands of years has attracted much attention from the intelligent portion of mankind, yet remains in many respects the most interesting of the great rivers of the globe. Its sources, which for so long a time were a mystery, have within the last quarter of a century been rediscovered; but that rediscovery has only rendered it more interesting, and more worthy of study.¹⁹

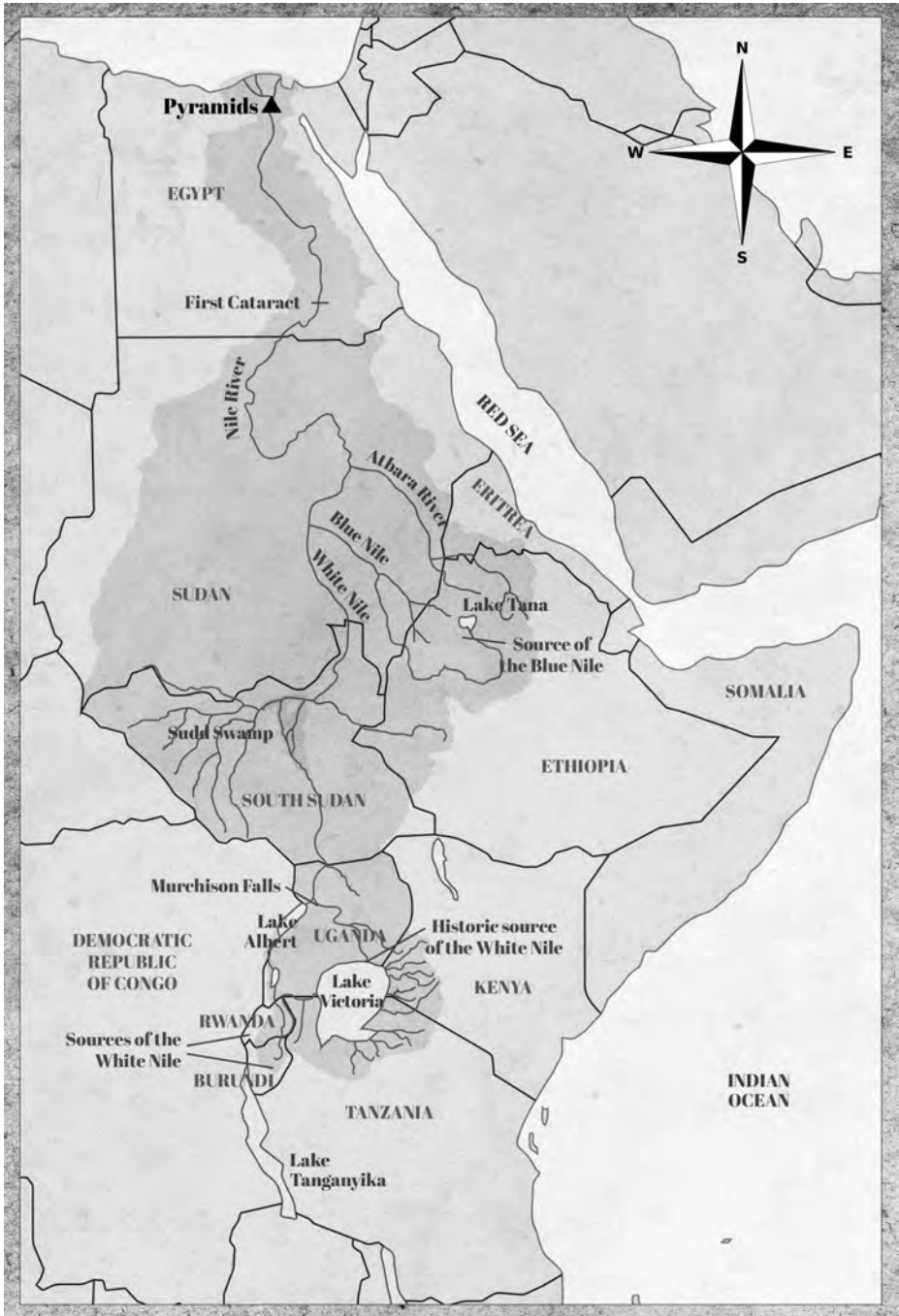
While the historic era of explorers and discoveries was over, with new knowledge the role and importance of the Nile grew, then as now.

The religious Nile is a little-explored theme. In the current political discourse and the struggle for water, although perceived as important, culture and identity – and religion as a supra structure guiding beliefs and being – has gained less significance. The Nile Basin Initiative, an inter-governmental partnership launched in 1999 by the riparian countries, has the overall objective ‘to achieve sustainable socio-economic development through equitable utilization of, and benefit from, the common Nile Basin water resources’. Still, at the very beginning of the first State of the River Nile Basin Report from the Nile Basin Initiative, the religious role of the Nile was emphasized by the chairperson and ambassador and minister of natural resources in Rwanda, Stanislas Kamanzi: ‘The Nile is commonly regarded as the most important river in the world, and occupies an important place in the tradition of many of the world’s religions, including Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.’²⁰ Even in contexts where water is a contested resource, a river like the Nile is much more than mere shares of water.

A focus on water and religion directs the attention to what matters most for the majority of the people living in the Nile Basin; water for wealth and prosperity. Religion structures this and the other worldly realms – and how they relate, spiritually as well as physically. The same waters pouring out from the sources or rains at the Ruwenzori mountains eventually flow to Egypt, linking people and perceptions, and particular beliefs – even in world religions like Christianity and Islam – relate to and are understood in specific local contexts and water-worlds along the Nile. In fact, in many cases it is the local particularities and peculiarities of specific types of water that are the sources for religious understanding and how these are understood and being integrated into larger religious structures and cosmologies, and even partly defining them.

This book will present a history of the religious role of water and the Nile in the rise and constitution of societies and civilizations in

THE RELIGIOUS NILE



3. The religious Nile from the sources to the sea.

the past and present (fig. 3). Thus, the book has two overall objectives, which are intimately connected and dependent on each other.

On one hand, it is an empirical quest by following the religious Nile from the sources to the sea in the past and present. While all water in the Nile is the same in one way, it is also in very different forms and amounts in time and space, and among the main types or bodies of water are rivers, rains and lakes. The specific forms and particularities of water at a given place are essential parts of livelihoods and worldviews for the people living there, whether it is in a desert or rainforest, and hence part of their religions.

On the other hand, it is a theoretical quest of how to gain more knowledge of religion as process and structure by using water as an approach, since not only does it link secular and profane spheres, but water is also the very basis for all human well-being, which are also divine concerns or incorporated into spiritual realms. The theoretical challenge thus has to combine living religion in practice in specific ecologies with theology, exegesis and cosmology in the world beyond or parallel to the daily, practical matters. Local beliefs or parts of traditional religions including specific features of nature and ecologies or water-worlds are often not in contradiction to other supra structures like world religions, rather the contrary: they constitute them, which unite the empirical and theoretical quests.

Hence, water and religion are fundamental in the origin and development of societies and civilizations. As Dawson wrote: '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.'²¹ Water is not only the basis for agriculture and all livelihoods, but the forces and generative processes enabling health and wealth are fundamental parts of cosmological worldviews. And in all religions, water comes from somewhere – physically and spiritually – giving sources in its various forms particular importance before the flows of rivers continue to the sea. Life starts from the sources, literally and metaphorically.

SOURCES AND NATURAL PHENOMENA

'Much that once was is lost, for none now live who remember it [...] And some things that should not have been forgotten were lost', the opening sequence in *The Lord of the Rings* starts. 'History became legend. Legend became myth. And [...] two and a half thousand years' ago, Herodotus,

the Father of History, inquired about the sources of the Nile, without knowing where they were. Herodotus wrote:

I could not gain any information about the nature of the river from the priests or anyone else. I was particularly eager to find out from them why the Nile starts coming down in a flood at the summer solstice and continues flooding for a hundred days, but when the hundred days are over the water starts to recede and decrease in volume, with the result that it remains low for the whole winter, until the summer solstice comes round again. No one could in Egypt give me any information about this at all, when I asked them what it was about the Nile that made it behave in the opposite way from all other rivers.²²

As for the question where the Nile rises, no Egyptian or Libyan or Greek I have spoken to claimed to have the definitive answer, except the scribe of the treasury of Athena in the city of Saïs in Egypt – and I got the impression that he was joking when he said that he knew the answer for certain. But what he said was that there were two mountains with sharply pointed peaks between the cities of Syene in the Thebaïd and Elephantine, which were called Crophî and Mophî; between them, he said, rise the springs of the Nile, which are bottomless, and half of their water flows north towards Egypt, while the other half flows south towards Ethiopia [...] Now, if this story of the scribe's was true, all he proved, to my mind, was that there are strong whirlpools and counter-currents there.²³

His *Histories* incorporated Egyptian legends, which were 2,500 years old when he wrote about them. Although the knowledge of the sources of the Nile was history at one time, it survived only as mythology, but the mythology turned into history like the Nile itself – ever flowing and ever changing, but still the same and different. The mythologies became sources for creating new histories and along the Nile religions developed around the mighty artery of life-giving waters flowing from the interiors of Africa to the Mediterranean Sea. Still, Herodotus has another curious passage where he also writes that the soil in Egypt is 'black and friable, which suggests that it was once mud and silt carried down from Ethiopia by the river'.²⁴ In other words, it seems that he knew that the sources came from Ethiopia, since he connected the fertile fields in Egypt with the silt coming from Ethiopia. It seems that in antiquity, there were no contradictions perceiving the Nile as coming both from the cataracts and Ethiopia at the same time. Philostratus says, 'This country supplies Egypt with the river Nile, which takes its rise at the cataracts (*Catadupi*), and brings down from Ethiopia all Egypt, the soil of which in flood-time it inundates.'²⁵

The waters in the River Nile are binding all people throughout time together; the waters flowing in the Egyptian Delta watering the fields have their ultimate origins in the sources of the Nile in Ethiopia and Uganda, and beyond; in Burundi and Rwanda and the Ruwenzori Mountains and elsewhere in Tanzania and Kenya, since there are innumerable sources and each and every single tributary in the catchment area can be seen as a source flowing downstream. In fact, without all these innumerable sources there would not have been a River Nile, but some sources are more important than others.

Natural phenomena are integrated into the religious realm, in particular when it is something beyond the obvious 'natural', like the origin of river and springs, as Dickson says, 'That pure water should spring from the earth and form into rivers to sustain mankind is a phenomenon that challenges the imagination.'²⁶ Thus, at the outset there are two crucial aspects – the mysteries at the very source itself from where it originates out of nothing, or from elements like rocks or soils from where the water trickles, and the ways they are forming mighty rivers like the Nile and sustaining whole civilizations. That the ancient philosophers devoted much time and thinking about the sources is no wonder and in particular natural phenomena that were counter-intuitive gave rise to speculation and mysticism. Religious sources have not always been identical with the hydrological sources defining lengths of rivers, or in other words, that the most remote spring is the source of a river. Other hydrological phenomena seemingly counter-intuitive or counter natural – unnatural nature – have also been seen as sources, in fact more important than the mere flow of a river downstream from the most distant origin.

In the ancient Egyptian religion the Nile had its source at Elephantine and the First Cataract where it flowed from a subterranean origin (see Chapters 5 and 6). Herodotus has, as quoted, one intriguing passage where he says that half of the water flows northwards towards Egypt and half southwards towards Ethiopia. This seemingly puzzling information may hint that there was a source in the middle of the river and that there also was a counter-flow running southwards, like the source of the White Nile in Jinja at the outlet of Lake Victoria. A great number of early travellers reported nothing unusual about the river, but a chief engineer of the Egyptian Sudan, M. Chélu, published a book in 1891. He documented all physical features such as the rapids, the cataracts, their beds and measured the

extent of the fall of each. He mentions that there was a counter-current, and a very powerful and violent one, which stretched as far as 50 km south. It is remarkable that no other travellers or early geographers have stressed this, if it existed, and it might have been seasonal. However, Herodotus also mentioned that there were strong whirlpools, and one was even commemorated as late as in the 1950s as 'The Whirlpool of Osiris'. Nordén, a Swedish traveller, noted in 1737 that at this place in the Nile it is very 'dangerous to pass on account of the stones which embarrass the channel of the river'.²⁷ William F. Albright also pointed this out in an article:

Evidently the prehistoric Egyptians, whose knowledge of the Upper Nile was very limited, noted this fact, and jumped to the conclusion that there were two Niles, rising at the cataract and flowing in opposite directions. In modern times the Maelstrom has been explained in just as naïve a way.²⁸

If there was a counter-current or strong whirlpools south of the First Cataract, today nobody can know for sure since, if such natural phenomena existed, it has been flooded by the Aswan High Dam (fig. 4). What is sure, however, is that such extraordinary natural phenomena would most likely have been ascribed with special importance and religious qualities, or at least have been seen as something unnatural or counter-intuitive in all senses of understanding. The ancient Egyptians obviously knew that



4. The Nile at Aswan today.

waters of the Nile flowed from lands further south of Aswan and the First Cataract, but that was not the point from a religious perspective. A religious source can originate, literally, in the middle of a river – in the falls or cataracts at Aswan, for instance. This was also the place where the water abyss came from the subterranean regions in Egyptian cosmology. In Egypt, the name for water abyss was Nun or the proper ‘inundation’, indicating that different types of water could have the same signification but visualized differently, and the two Nile sources were expressed in hieroglyphs as two serpents pouring water from their mouths.²⁹

Thus, at the outset it seems that the scholars in antiquity and the ancient Egyptians had different worldviews with regards to what a proper source was; the former emphasizing hydrology and the latter cosmology. Moreover, it seems likely that during antiquity onwards it was realized by the ancient geographers that there were at least two sources of the Nile – one flowing from the Abyssinian highlands and another from the interiors of Africa. Pliny mentions no less than seven Greek and Roman explorers who travelled in the regions south of Meroe, including the ones sent by Emperor Nero. Pliny had several sources of information, and the fact that the famous expedition sent by Nero probably reached the Sudd indicates that the ancient geographers believed that there were other sources of the Nile than the one coming from the Ethiopian highlands. Hence, Ptolemy’s Nile system and his famous map is not an invention of his own, but builds on centuries of knowledge and explorations.³⁰

In retrospect, it seems that Strabo was one of the ancients who had most accurate knowledge about the actual flood in Egypt, and implicitly where the source(s) was. He may himself have been travelling as far as the borders of Ethiopia and travelling increased knowledge, although he was surprised that his contemporaries were not aware of the summer rains in the Ethiopian highlands. According to Strabo:

The ancients relying for the most part on conjecture, but subsequently men having seen for themselves, perceived that the Nile was filled with summer rains when upper Ethiopia flooded, particularly in the most distant mountains; then when the rains stopped, the river flood gradually dies down.³¹

In antiquity, there were numerous popular and competing theories about the Nile flood and all of them had their proponents. One theory emphasized the etesian winds (northerly summer winds of the Mediterranean)

in different variants. Thales believed that it drove back the water itself and thereafter it started to accumulate and thereby caused the flood. Euthymenes favoured this interpretation in combination with an oceanic source whereas Thrasyalces argued for a combination with a rain-cloud theory. Pliny shows that these theories continued to flourish centuries later, as he says:

People have advanced various explanations for the rising of the Nile, but the most likely are either the backflow caused by the Etesian winds which blow against the current river at that time of the year – the sea outside being driven into the mouths of the Nile – or the summer rains in Ethiopia.³²

A second theory was that the source of the Nile in fact was the ocean, which could cause unseasonable flooding, and this position was favoured by Dicaearchus, Euthymenes and possibly also Juba. A third theory proposed by Anaxagoras was that the flood originated when snow on the high mountains in remote Ethiopia melted. A fourth position was held by Herodotus that the flood was caused by the sun in one way or another. The last category of explanation was favoured by many philosophers like Thrasyalces, Aristotle, Callisthenes, Eratosthenes and Agatharchides, namely that the flood had its origin in the tropical rains. Strabo dismissed all but the latter explanation without arguing why, simply by stating: 'Whereas the fact that the river risings come from rain did not need investigation.' Although we know today that this is the correct explanation, it is unclear how he arrived at that conclusion; in particular, since not only were there many contradicting theories among his contemporaries, but these theories continued to flourish for a long time after Strabo. In any event, Strabo stressed the need for investigating why the rains occurred during the summer and not during the winter as it does on the northern shores of the Mediterranean, and why the rains fell in the southern regions.³³

Thus, a part of the struggle and confusion in antiquity with regards to the sources of the Nile was how to relate hydrology and mythology. Although the Greeks and Romans also believed in religious water, their cosmologies were different, but more important in this context was the different emphases on hydrological or scientific understanding and measurements of the river's flow and its source. Religiously, however, this is not the most important, unless the hydrological source coincides with the religious one, as with Gish Abay or the source of the Blue Nile. In African

cosmologies, 'water is power. It is never dead, in the sense of being unusable or spent. It is life-water when it purifies, it is death-water when it soils,' Diadji says. 'I speak of water as a sign of life, and as a sign of death, but always of water full of Existence, because there is no non-being in water. Thus water is always and everywhere imbued with spirituality.'³⁴

Consequently, local sources or bodies of water within a given cosmology are given specific meaning for the people living next to these. In many respects, the search for and knowledge of distant sources are more important for downstream users and countries than for those living nearby, who may not know that the river flows downstream for thousands of kilometres to other people and lands who depend on it in unimaginably different ways – such as Egypt, located in a desert – then as now. Still, the importance of a source goes beyond the basin and is not restricted to people living next to them ascribing specific meanings to these waters, or to ancient Egyptians and even Greeks and Romans in antiquity. Throughout history, apart from scientific and geographical quests, sources and, in particular, the sources of the Nile, had also fundamental importance in Christian mythology and cosmology. Throughout the history of Christianity, the link between the Garden of Eden and earthly Paradise has been established, but not exactly where. In Genesis it is written (Gen. 2:8–14):

Now the LORD God had planted a garden in the east, in Eden; and there he put the man he had formed. The LORD God made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground – trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food. In the middle of the garden were the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. 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 gold of that land is good; aromatic resin and onyx are also there.) 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 Ashur. And the fourth river is the Euphrates.

In the Bible, the term 'living water' is usually seen as 'water of life', and referred to as 'running', 'fresh' or 'springing' water, including 'a well of springing water' and 'living fountains of water'.³⁵ In the Old Testament, the waters of life have a prominent place, including at least four domains or types of creation waters:

The fountain of the garden of Eden and its connection with the primitive waters of the deep, the flood and the destructive potential of the deep, the crossing of the Red Sea and the sustenance of the chosen people by Horeb's water, and lastly the *fons signatus* of the garden of the Canticles.³⁶

In Western poetry and literature, God has been described as 'the great Source, or Fountain', or, for example, as Coleridge wrote in his notebook in 1796: 'Well-spring – *total* God'. In Christian mythology and symbolism, the fountain thus represents the fountain of eternal life;³⁷ it is not only water, but also divine grace and a spiritual source for heaven. 'When Adam and Eve are expelled from the garden, they lose the tree of life and the waters of life; in the fullness of time, at the very end of the narrative of cosmic history, the tree and waters of life are restored to a redeemed mankind,' Dickson writes. 'This imagery was understood by Renaissance readers to constitute a pattern describing an essential Christian tenet, the renewal or regeneration of the believer made possible by Christ's intervention of time.'³⁸ As described by John, 'Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God' (John 3:5), pointing out that the regenerative water is Christ who is the fountain of living waters,³⁹ in this context having a fundamental role for baptism as a sacrament:

The fountain of Eden, therefore, represented the temporal source of life, not only because it was the source of the four great rivers, but most importantly because it was connected with the waters of the deep and hence with creation. Furthermore, its privileged position at the very beginning of the biblical narrative [and when] God proclaims that he will be a fountain of living waters to his people [...] we can expect that the image of the fountain in Eden would be recalled along with other types of the regenerative waters of life.⁴⁰

The divine waters were not limited to the rivers from Eden, but included also wells and deep underground streams. Christ proclaimed to the Samaritan women that he was the true fountain of life, as written by John: 'But whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life' (John 4:14). In fact, Messiah means the 'anointed one'. William Fulke, a biblical scholar and meteorologist, described the rivers from Paradise as such:

But this river flowing out not of the earth, nor out of the temple of Jerusalem, but out of the throne of God almighties and of his Christ, doth minister joys of eternall life most abundantly to the Citizens of the new Jerusalem. They therefore never feare death, which drincke dayly of the river of the water of life.⁴¹

The cosmological importance of this divine water and river cannot be underestimated, and the Gihon River from Paradise was believed – then as now – to be the source of the Nile. This is the source Gish Abay in Ethiopia. Moreover, the divine qualities of these waters are also partly reflected in the etymology of ‘nature’ itself and water has thus a fundamental place in Christianity as in most other religions.

WATER AND QUALITIES OF NATURE

Roy Williams once said that ‘culture’ is one of two or three of the most difficult words to define, because it is a concept fundamental to numerous non-compatible disciplines – perhaps only ‘nature’ is more difficult to define. Consequently, the concepts of culture and nature have a history of diverse and mutually contradictory ideas,⁴² and they have numerous definitions. In this regard, it can be fruitful to search for the original meaning of ‘nature’, which in this context reveals important aspects of water as an element of nature, but also of the role of water in religion.

The etymology of the word ‘nature’ comes from Latin – *nasci* – which means ‘to be born’, ‘to spring from’, ‘to arise’ or ‘to be produced’.⁴³

Nature, then, is the creative matrix from which all things arise and to which they return, the complexity of orders of powers by which these things are upheld and by which each of them, or each type of them, attains its own peculiar attributes and capabilities.⁴⁴

And that water as a peculiar element of nature had special characteristics was without any doubt in antiquity, although different cosmological meanings could be ascribed. According to Seneca:

All standing and enclosed water naturally purges itself. For, in water that has a current, impurities are not able to settle; the force of the current sweeps them along and carries them away. Water which does not emit whatever settles in it more or less boils. As for the sea, it drags from the depths dead bodies, litter, and similar debris of shipwrecks, and purges itself of them, not only in storms and waves, but also when the sea is tranquil and calm.⁴⁵

Water is always in a flux. The fluid matter changes qualities and capacities wherever it is, and it always takes new forms. This transformative character of water is forcefully used in ritual practices and religious constructions. Water represents the one and the many at the same time, and the plurality of ritual institutionalizations and religious perceptions put emphasis on water’s structuring principles and processes in culture and cosmos. Water is

hence a medium which links or changes totally different aspects of humanity and divinities into a coherent unit; it bridges paradoxes, transcends the different human and divine realms, allows interactions with gods, and enables the divinities to interfere with humanity. Water is a medium for everything – it has human character because we are humans; it is a social matter but also a spiritual substance and divine manifestation with immanent powers; and, still, it belongs to the realm of nature as a fluid liquid.⁴⁶

The ‘natural’ characters of water are quite different from other properties in nature, perhaps with the exception of fire.⁴⁷ Bachelard writes:

[Water] can be cursed [...] evil can put it in active form [...] what is evil in one aspect, in one of its characteristics, becomes evil as the whole. Evil is no longer a quality but a substance [...] Clear water is a constant temptation for a facile symbolism of purity [...] it is the one that constantly breathes new life into certain old mythological forms. It gives life back to forms by transforming them, for a form cannot transform itself. It is contrary to its nature for a form to transform itself [...] but] water is the most perfect liquid, it is the one from which all other solutions get their fluidity.⁴⁸

From an ecological and religious point of view water can thus be described as benevolent or malevolent, where the former is seen as a blessing or divine gift and the latter as a curse or collective penalty for moral or ritual misconduct resulting in harvest failures, famines and death. Malevolent waters normally occur as devastating floods, too much precipitation such as prolonged rains, the fimbulwinter of snow or the lack of rain; and unsuccessful rainmaking rituals or deliberately withholding the rain is generally seen as evil or as a consequence of malevolent and malignant powers.

In his *Natural History*, the Roman author and philosopher Pliny the Elder writes: ‘My subject, the natural world, or life (that is life in its most basic aspects), is a barren one,’⁴⁹ and one may add both physically and spiritually. This is one of the fundamental characteristics of water in religion: it gives life and it is about life. Fresh water represents deep ontological relations, and the water-worlds in a society create opportunities for all kinds of constructions. The hydrological cycle links all places and spheres together, and the physical character of water combined with its role as a historical agent enables the medium to link the past with the present and the future.⁵⁰

Also, Pliny's view is interesting from another perspective, since it transcends the dichotomy of culture and nature. Nature is life; a quality of living – growing, germinating, and being – and hence also culture and religion. Water is life and a quality and essence of being human, since the body consists of some 60 per cent water and without it everyone will die within a few days. The extreme power of water as a life-giving force is experienced by all; when somebody faints or almost dies due to absolute thirst, water re-generates strength immediately – no other element has such intrinsic powers.

Thus, water has a unique place in culture, nature and religion. Pliny writes later:

What could be more amazing than water standing in the sky? [...] This same water falls back to earth and, if one considers the matter, becomes a source of all things that grow out of the earth – thanks to the miracle of Nature [...] Consequently we are bound to admit that all earth's powers are due to the gift of water.⁵¹

At the outset then, the original Latin definition of 'nature' and its inherent qualities of nature bears many similarities to the qualities of water, or more precisely, nature cannot be understood without a focus on water.

As Eliade pointed out with regards to water on a general level, 'it existed at the beginning and returns at the end of every cosmic or historic cycle; it will always exist, though never alone, for water is always germinative, containing the potentiality of all forms in their unbroken unity'.⁵² Or in the words of Victor Turner: 'For African thought [...] embeds itself from the outset in materiality, but demonstrates that materiality is not inert but vital.'⁵³ Not only is spirituality embedded in materiality, but it is also active and transcending the materiality. Thus, following Eliade again, 'The prototype of all water is the "living water" [...] Living water, the fountains of youth, the Water of Life [...] are all mythological formulae for the same metaphysical and religious reality: life, strength and eternity are contained in water.'⁵⁴ The ancient Greeks believed that their gods drank ambrosia – immortality – and Aristotle said that whoever did not drink ambrosia became mortal, because otherwise, how could gods be eternal if they needed food?⁵⁵

From a human perspective, eternal life or existence is hardly possible in this worldly domain, and for humans, Hocart says, immortality is not as we usually perceive it, 'but freedom from premature death and the diseases

that cause it and the renewal of this vigorous life hereafter'.⁵⁶ The ritual specialist employing water is often a traditional doctor. That a traditional healer also works as a doctor using medicines is logical given that rituals and medicines traditionally work in very much the same ways. Hocart goes on:

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. 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.⁵⁷

Water, on the other hand, sharing many of the properties medicines have, is more total and encompassing than anything else, and medicines without water are traditionally not working.

These wonders of nature, in particular in relation to life and agriculture, were pointed out by many thinkers in antiquity. In antiquity, there were at least 56 Classical, Hellenistic and Roman authors writing about the properties and benefications of the Nile water.⁵⁸ Moreover, 'Creation is procreation, and therefore magical power must have some connection with sexual power.'⁵⁹

In *The Odyssey*, Homer (c. 850 BC) gave the river the name Aigypptos. The name Nile – or more precisely Neilos, seems to first appear in Hesiod's poem *Theogony* (c. 750–650 BC).⁶⁰ Heliodorus, Bishop of Tricca, himself a mysterious figure in history, is the author of *Æthiopica – The Ethiopian Story*. In the introduction he writes, 'Thus endeth the *Æthiopian* historie of Theagenes and Cariclia [by] the author whereof is Heliodorus of Emesos a citie in Phænicia [descendent] from the Sunne.' In the Ninth Book he writes about the Nile at the feast celebrated by midsummer when the flood increased. The Egyptians believed Nylus (the Nile) to be a god, and the greatest of all Gods, equal to heaven, because he watered their country without clouds or rain that comes out of the air. Nylus is Osiris. They said that Nylus was nothing else but the year: 'Which opinion also the name approved, for if you divide the letters conteyned therein, into unities, if they be put together, will make three hundred sixty and five, and so many there bee days in the yeere.'⁶¹ Thus, an interesting feature of the name is the numerical value of the Greek letters used in it (50, 5, 10, 30, 70, 200), which add up to 365 or the total number of days in a year, indicating that the Nile was everything.⁶² Many ancient sources show the belief in mystical powers of number.⁶³ Heliodorus also wrote that the Nile is called 'Horus', 'the giver

of life', 'the saviour of all Egypt, both Upper and Lower Egypt', 'the father of Egypt', 'the creator of Egypt', 'he who brings new mud each year'.

Seneca wanted to 'separate the Nile from ordinary rivers; it is unique and exceptional.'⁶⁴ He also said:

There is another type of water which we Stoics like to think began with the universe. If the universe is eternal, this water, too, always existed. Or, if there was some beginning for the universe, this water also was set down along with everything else. You ask what water this is? The ocean and any sea from it that flows between the lands. Some judge that also the rivers whose nature is explicable take their beginning along with the universe itself; such as the Danube and the Nile, rivers so vast and so remarkable that they cannot be said to have the same origin as the other rivers.⁶⁵

Moreover:

This, then, is the classification of waters, as it seems to some: of the waters that are later than the ocean some are celestial, others are terrestrial. Celestial waters are discharged by the clouds. Some terrestrial waters swim on the surface, so to speak, and creep along the top of the ground; others are hidden.⁶⁶

Seneca also pointed out:

The idea appeals to me that the earth is governed by nature and is much like the system of our own bodies in which there are both veins (receptacles for blood) and arteries (receptacles for air). In the earth also there are some routes through which water runs [...] and nature fashioned these routes so like human bodies that our ancestors even called them 'veins' of water.⁶⁷

According to Philostratus, among the Egyptians 'The Nile is the chief object of worship, for they regard this river as land and water at once.'⁶⁸ He continues:

Nature has raised up this noblest of rivers before the eyes of man and has arranged it to flood Egypt at the very time the earth, especially parched by heat, may draw in the waters more deeply [...] It brings both the water and the soil to the sandy and thirsty ground [...] It aids the fields for two reasons: it both inundates them and coats them with mud [...] the remarkable characteristic of the river is that while other rivers wash away the land and exhaust it, the Nile, much larger than the others, is so far from eating away or rubbing away the soil that on the contrary it adds to the soil's vigour [...] Egypt owes to the Nile not only the fertility of the land but the land itself.⁶⁹

All of Egypt was made up of the Nile: the silt created the land and the water gave it life – both qualities and outcomes of the flood, which created



5. The annual inundation of the Nile.

an extremely fertile environment (fig. 5). And the sources were religiously also well known to be located at the Cataracts at Elephantine or Aswan. In a conversation between Apollonius and Nilus, after Nilus inquired for how long a time Apollonius would stay among the naked sages, Apollonius answered:

So long as the quality of their wisdom justifies anyone in remaining in their company; after that I shall take my way to the cataracts, in order to see the springs of the Nile, for it will be delightful not only to behold the sources of the Nile, but also to listen to the roar of its waterfalls.⁷⁰

And Philo of Alexandria wrote:

Egypt is a land rich in plains, with deep soil, and very productive of all that human nature needs, and particularly of corn. For the river of this country, in the height of the summer, when other streams, whether winter torrents or spring-fed, are said to dwindle, rises and overflows, and its flood makes a lake of the fields which need no rain but every year bear a plenty of crop of good produce of every kind.⁷¹

A 'river', Philo also said, 'is generic virtue, goodness. This issues forth out of Eden, the wisdom of God, and this is the Reason of God; for after that has generic virtue been made. And generic virtue waters the garden, that is, it waters the particular virtues.'⁷² Moreover, 'For God willed that Nature should run a course that brings it back to its starting-point, endowing the species with immortality, and making them sharers of external existence.'⁷³

Diodorus, too, stressed that 'the Nile surpasses all the rivers of the inhabited world in its benefactions to mankind.'⁷⁴ He also adds other qualities as a consequence of this noble river, if one is to believe his comparison of Egyptian farmers to those elsewhere:

For since the water comes with a gentle flow, they easily divert the river from their fields by small dams of earth, and then, by cutting these, as easily let the river in again upon the land whenever they think this to be advantageous. And in general the Nile contributes so greatly to the lightening of labour as well as to profit of the inhabitants [...] For, generally speaking, every kind of field labour among other peoples entails great expense and toil, but among the Egyptians alone is the harvest gathered in with very slight outlay of money and labour.⁷⁵

The flood was also a time of feasting and religious activities. Diodorus notes:

The masses of the people, being relieved of their labours during the entire time of the inundation, turn to recreation, feasting all the while and enjoying without hindrance every device of pleasure. And because of the anxiety occasioned by the rise of the river the kings have constructed a Nilometer at Memphis, where those who are charged with the administration of it accurately measure the rise and despatch messagees to the cities, and inform them exactly how many cubits or fingers the river has risen and when it has commenced to fall. In this manner the entire nation, when it has learned that the river has ceased rising and begun to fall, is relieved of its anxiety, while at the same time all immediately know in advance how large the next harvest will be, since the Egyptians have kept an accurate record of their observations of this kind over a long period of terms.⁷⁶

As will be seen later, from the earliest Egyptian dynasties, the records of the Nile were documented, and indeed at least in later periods the Nilometers were also shrines or temples.

In religion, nature in this sense – as life and what sustains life – is but one side of the coin. Life is what humans ultimately value, but life comes at a high and inevitable price: death. In order to maintain life, the life of other organisms is sacrificed on a daily basis, whether it is grains or animals.⁷⁷ Living necessitates death, and in the end death waits for all living creatures, humans included. Following Joseph Campbell

we may say, then, that the interdependence of death and sex, their import as the complementary aspect of a single state of being, and the necessity of

killing – killing and eating – for the continuance of this state of being, which is that of man on earth, and of all things on earth, the animals, birds, and fish, as well as man – this deeply moving, emotionally disturbing glimpse of death as the life of the living is the motivation supporting the rites around which the social structure of the early planting villages was composed.⁷⁸

Everyone has to kill to live and to maintain life. Not only animals have to be killed, but even harvesting plants and crops can also be perceived as killing. A sacrifice of a living being is conducted as an offering to a deity in exchange of some divine or supernatural gifts or favours, and essential in this understanding are the concepts of ‘vital force’ or ‘energy’,⁷⁹ but importantly, ‘it is not the life of the animal that is at issue but rather the life in the animal’.⁸⁰

Religiously, one may stress that it is not a worship of nature as such for two reasons. First, ‘nature’ as a whole is too broad and all-encompassing, including everything, so a worship of nature as a unity would imply that everything was holy or sacred, and thereby nothing. The holy or the sacred has meaning only in contrast to what are not holy or revered; the profane or the secular in one way or another. Trees, rocks, sand, air, water, etc. – or everything – cannot be equally religious. If that was the case, humans would live in a holy totality, and the closest we can imagine such an existence is for instance the Paradise of Eden. By definition, in heaven everything is holy, including water, and that is why the river Gihon flowing in paradise is utmost holy and the outlet of this river on earth at the source of the Blue Nile in Ethiopia – Gish Abay – is a direct link to heaven and God’s grace (see Chapter 2). Second, as Hocart has emphasized, there is no such thing as ‘nature worship’. It is not nature as such that is worshipped, even when a tree or a stone is venerated, but a tree in African religion is no more worshipped than the timber used in Christian Churches symbolizing the original cross on which Jesus was crucified. Contrary, the divine may embody and materialize *within* a stone, statue, tree or water, but the very stone, statue, tree or water has no soul as such; it is the mere presence of the divinity that is venerated.⁸¹ Importantly, not everything has power or being imbued with power. As Hocart says, ‘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.’⁸² The natural world of religion is *differentiated*, which is also essential for the analysis of religion as a social process.⁸³

A divinity may choose to embody a person like a healer, or a stone or waterfalls, but without this divine embodiment, the stone or the

person is simply just any stone or person. Importantly, even if a divinity chooses to manifest in a stone or in water, it is not only there, in the same vein as Christians believe in Jesus everywhere despite worshipping him in churches. The gods are obviously invisible, Obeyesekere argues, but still visible:

Not only are they present in a particular community, but they may be present if invoked in other communities and shrines at the same time. They must be in this place, and that, in the then and the now. They therefore obviously cannot be present *in person*; rather, they are there in *essence*.⁸⁴

Or as Campbell wrote: 'A god can be simultaneously in two or more places – like a melody, or like the form of a traditional mask. And wherever he comes, the impact of presence is the same: it is not reduced through multiplication.'⁸⁵

Still, the perception of veneration or worship of nature has caused many misconceptions throughout the history of religion, such as idolatry, but in Christianity and traditional religions alike there is a difference between sign and signifier. A god may be visible or comprehensible through the forces of nature, whether it is successful harvests or plentiful rains, and some gods or spirits have defined and restricted forces in certain spheres, like controlling rain but not rivers' inundation. However, weather phenomena, for instance, are testimonies of the powers of certain invisible divinities, but not the essence of the divinities themselves. In this regard, the almighty Christian God works in the same way; the Deluge was a testimony of his powers, but the Deluge *was not* God. From another perspective, in this world gods and divinities have few other options than to work through nature and materiality in a broad sense, in one way or another. Apart from transferring humans straight to heaven, all divine revelations or interventions on earth have a material dimension from penalty and suffering of the body (or the release of it), the life-giving rains and successful harvest, plagues or the Deluge, and so on. Or in other words, 'Religion is fundamentally material in practice'⁸⁶ and water plays a fundamental role in religious practices, precisely because it is life, and those who control the sources of all human life – whether divinities or not – have utmost power.

Nevertheless, the role of water has largely been omitted in religious or theological studies, and part of the reason is that life in this realm on earth is just a prelude to an eternal existence in one way or another in the other world from a religious perspective. This life is just a means, although a

very important one, towards a greater goal from a Christian or Muslim perspective, or at least a more permanent or enduring existence in traditional religions. Hence, cosmologies are predominantly occupied with the other world and not so much with the life-giving properties of water on this side defining religious practices. Still, the varying water-worlds are important for humans and consequently included in their own perceptions of religion. Herein lies also some challenges of defining religion. If culture and nature have been difficult to define, religion has been even more so. From a religious perspective, culture and nature can be seen as parts of religion, but inferior since religion signifies a larger whole in time and space – cosmos – existing both before and after this world, with all its culture and nature: religion is a supra-entity without external boundaries beyond and above this world governed by more powerful structures or divinities.

However, by claiming that the religious world is often believed to be greater than this world does not mean the worldly matters are beyond the realm or importance of the divinities in whatever form, rather the contrary. Apart from the gods, divinities or ancestors, in many religions although not all, humans are at the epicentre of the religious world, for the better or worse, or so it is often believed and perceived by the believers themselves since religions ultimately are about their lives in a broad sense. This directs the attention to the history of religions and how scholars have approached religion, and more often than not gods and divinities and their works have not necessarily been the focus, and as a consequence, the divine or life-giving qualities or properties of water given by the divinities have often been neglected.

THEORIES OF RELIGION WITHOUT WATER⁸⁷

The history of religion or the sociology of religion may start with many great thinkers, but there are several reasons why Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831) is a fruitful point of departure, as Merleau-Ponty stressed: ‘All the great philosophical ideas of the past century [nineteenth century] – the philosophies of Marx and Nietzsche, phenomenology, German existentialism, and psychoanalysis – had their beginnings in Hegel.’⁸⁸ Hegel’s perception of African history, religion included, shaped large parts of the nineteenth- and early twentieth centuries’ discourses. Hegel stated that Africa ‘is no historical part of the World; it has no movement or development to exhibit. Historical movements in it – that is in its northern part

– belong to the Asiatic or European World.⁸⁹ Africans were not only perceived as barbaric and as having evolved behind the rest of humanity, but Africans were ‘capable of no development or culture, and as we see them at this day, such have they always been’.⁹⁰ However, the ancient Egyptian civilization represented a ‘problem’ with regards to understanding how such astonishing developments could have taken place in Africa. This ‘Egyptian problem’ was solved by excluding the civilization from black Africa. According to Hegel: ‘Egypt will be considered in reference to the passage of the human mind from its Eastern to its Western phase, but it does not belong to the African Spirit.’⁹¹ Even the distinguished Oxford professor Hugh Trevor-Roper wrote as late as 1965 that Africa has no history: ‘at present, there is none, or very little: there is only the history of the Europeans in Africa. The rest is largely darkness, like the history of pre-European, pre-Columbian America. And darkness is not a subject for history.’⁹² Samuel W. Baker (1821–93), who was the first white explorer coming to Lake Albert and seeing the Murchison Falls, claimed in 1867 that the Nilotic people had no religious belief at all: ‘Without any exception they are without belief in a supreme being, neither have they any form of worship or idolatry; nor is the darkness of their minds enlightened by even a ray of superstition.’⁹³ From seeing Africans as having no religion, in the following anthropological discourse Africans were credited with religion, but for a long time it was seen as ‘primitive religion’, and indeed, still is by some Christian pastors and preachers, being African or not. Later, Africans have been perceived as ‘notoriously religious’, yet another cliché separating Africans from other believers, although also held by Africans.⁹⁴

Although debated and discussed, Hegel’s idealism and dialectics have generally been seen as reverted or turned upside down by Karl Marx (1818–83) and his materialism, and Marx’ thoughts were firmly rooted in the Hegelian tradition. Although Marx did not write much about religion, he is famously renowned for the phrase that religion is ‘the opium of the people’. The following sentence is, however, more telling and illustrates Marx’ view about religion, although most often omitted in discussions of Marx: ‘The abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is required for their real happiness.’⁹⁵ For Marx, religion was ideology, and the ideology was legitimating exploitation and structures of dominance. Marx did not use the pyramids as examples supporting his view, although today it is estimated that a pyramid like the one of Khufu was built by some 30,000 men over a period of 30 years.⁹⁶ Others

have, on the other hand, used the pyramids as examples, and Pliny the Elder was particularly harsh about the pyramids in Egypt:

They are a pointless and absurd display of royal wealth, since the general view is that they were built either to deny money to the kings' successors and the rivals plotting against them, or else to keep the people employed. These men showed much vanity in this enterprise. The remains of several unfinished pyramids survive.⁹⁷

Or as Rudyard Kipling wrote, maintaining the stereotype of Egypt, 'Egypt is one big undertaker's emporium.'⁹⁸

Today, Pliny's approach can firmly be analysed within Marxism or materialism as an approach. Not only does it omit the religious role and importance of the pyramids and the role of the Nile in the Egyptian cosmology (Chapter 5), but the ancient Greek and Romans' curiosity and questions have also been challenged. They were visiting Egypt when the tradition was living and they could have asked all kinds of interesting questions and solved some of the largest mysteries in the world. Why did they not ask *why* the pyramids were built? And when they did, why did they accept seemingly pointless answers? The nineteenth-century French Egyptologist Auguste Mariette was particularly furious about Herodotus: 'I detest this traveller [...] [he] tells us gravely that a daughter of Cheops built a pyramid with the fruits of prostitution. Considering the great number of mistakes in Herodotus, would it not have been better for Egyptology had he never existed?'⁹⁹ Although Herodotus writes in other places that he does not believe the stories he was told or that they are foolish tales, with regards to the evilness of Cheops prostituting his own daughter it seems that he retold them in good faith. Not only that, according to what he was told the pharaoh's daughter also wanted to be remembered, and everyone who had intercourse with her had to give her one stone, as well as other payments. Of these stones were her pyramid built and each side measured 150 ft.¹⁰⁰

The Great Pyramid of Khufu is the world's largest pyramid and the last of the existing seven ancient wonders of the world. The enormous monuments thus point to the role of materiality in religion and Marx' emphasis on the 'production of material life' conditioning or determining ideology and social structures, religion included. From another perspective, Herodotus is attributed with the most famous phrase 'Egypt is the gift of the Nile', but most probably it stems from Hecataeus of Miletus who travelled through Egypt almost

a century before Herodotus.¹⁰¹ In any event, the paramount importance of the Nile as the artery of life for all welfare and prosperity in Egypt is without any doubt. This also raises questions regarding the roles of different water-worlds in shaping perceptions of religion, and whether it is a form of determinism to include nature and water in religious explanations, or whether it is the contrary, that water is at the very core of the substance of religion in practice?

The German sociologist Max Weber (1864–1920) did not work in the Hegelian tradition and his works, including those of Durkheim, were challenging historical materialism. Max Weber's *The Sociology of Religion* has been seen as 'the most crucial contribution of our century [twentieth century] to comparative and evolutionary understanding of the relations between religion and society, and even of society and culture generally'.¹⁰² According to Weber:

To define 'religion', to say what it is, is not possible at the start of a presentation such as this. Definition can only be attempted, if at all, at the conclusion of the study. The essence of religion is not even our concern, as we make it our task to study the conditions and effects of a particular type of social behavior.¹⁰³

Two of Weber's central aspects in his analyses were rationalization and theodicy. The notion of rationalization implied both an increasing systematization of ideas and religious beliefs and a decline of magic and mysticism. In *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Weber argued that the Protestant ethic created a capitalistic spirit because magic was eliminated from the sacraments.¹⁰⁴ Although this process to a large extent took place with Protestantism, it does not fully apply to religious water, and varying concepts of the powers and capacities of holy water continued to exist even within Protestantism.¹⁰⁵

What is more important along the Nile, even today the mysterious powers of water not only flourish within traditional African religions, but also within Christianity and Islam. Despite possible rationalizations in other aspects of religion, the divine or magical qualities of water continue. Still, nature and the water-world were included in Weber's thoughts, at least implicitly. The elect could be measured in terms of success and accumulation of wealth based on the belief that obedience to God's law and commandments would ensure prosperity. As Thomas says, 'the course of worldly events could [...] be seen as the working-out of God's judgments. This was but a refinement of the more basic assumption that the material environment responded to man's moral behaviour.'¹⁰⁶ Here the water-worlds are

part of the picture, since devastating floods or withholding the precious and life-giving rains have also been seen as God's penalty for sinful behaviour. This points to the other central aspect of Weber's thoughts: theodicy. God is almighty and has unlimited powers over his creation, but why then is God allowing both good and evil at the same time? While the almighty God may penalize his children by withholding the life-giving waters or creating floods like the Deluge, it is within the believed sphere of a just God (fig. 6), but there are still other realms where water is in the domain of evil, like the properties of the devil or witches.¹⁰⁷ In short, Weber aimed to explain religious conditions and effects of certain types of social behaviour, and his approach has been described as 'methodological individualism', since he emphasized individuals and their social actions rather than social structures, although not as functions but as meaning and causes.¹⁰⁸

If Max Weber's approach can be described as methodological individualism, the sociologist Émile Durkheim (1858–1917) can be seen as working within the framework of methodological collectivism. Apart from that, his influence on social sciences and anthropology is undisputed, and scholars like Mary Douglas, Victor Turner, Edmund Leach and Claude Lévi-Strauss have worked within the tradition he founded, although there are disagreements with regards as to what extent. Durkheim's approach to religion can partly be understood by his own beliefs, or more precisely, his absence of religious beliefs. Evans-Pritchard pointed out that Durkheim was not only an unbeliever, but a militant atheist and propagandist.¹⁰⁹ His famous *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1915) rests on the same premises that he put forward in *The Rules of Sociological Method*, first published in 1895, that social facts can only be explained by other social variables.¹¹⁰ Natural variables and the physical world were left out as research topics in the humanities and social sciences. C. P. Snow later characterized this scientific divide as the 'two cultures' – a universe of humanities as opposed to the natural sciences.¹¹¹ The approach that social facts can only be explained by other social facts has been a dogma in sociology and from this perspective water in general, and water and religion in particular, has been omitted, simply because water has been seen as a natural variable; at best given subordinate relevance if seen as a social construction. That said, also given his atheist stand, Durkheim was more positive to the variety of 'other' religions than Christianity than many of his contemporaries. In *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, Durkheim writes:

In reality, then, there are no religions which are false. All are true in their own fashion; all answer, though in different ways, to the given conditions of human existence. It is undeniably possible to arrange them in a hierarchy [...] [but] All are religions equally, just as all living beings are equally alive, from the most humble plastids up to man [...] So when we turn to primitive religions it is not with the idea of depreciating religion in general, for these religions are no less respectable than the others. They respond to the same needs, they play the same role, they depend upon the same causes; they can also well serve to show the nature of the religious life, and consequently to resolve the problem which we wish to study.¹¹²



6. *The Deluge*, Genesis 7:23. Gustav Doré, 1880.

Whereas Durkheim worked within (and established) the sociological tradition explaining religion as and with social factors, yet others have focused on more psychological perspectives. Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) analysed religion from a psychoanalytical approach focusing on, among other factors, the Oedipus complex and relations to the (patient's) father.¹¹³ While this approach is fundamentally reductionist in its basis and not very useful in comparative religious analyses, the psychological experiences in religious minds are equally undeniable. Still, others have gone beyond psychology as a discipline. Rudolf Otto (1869–1937) emphasized precisely the religious experience and stressed what he called the 'numinous' – the experience of the sacred or the holy.¹¹⁴ Mircea Eliade (1907–86) too stressed the irreducible character of religion and religious experiences, which are impossible to grasp or reduce to explanations by means of physiology, psychology, sociology, etc.¹¹⁵ Eliade's phenomenological approach is to understand religion on its own terms: 'Understanding is ecstatic and contemplative, not reductionist and analytical. Understanding is given to us, from somewhere within ourselves or from the outside, but it is not known through thinking.'¹¹⁶

This approach is quite the contrary of Durkheim as an atheist and makes religious studies difficult for non-believers, if not impossible. Nevertheless, although one may be sympathetic to this position where one aims to understand religion on religious criteria only, all religious phenomena are historical and all data are conditioned and consequently religious phenomena cannot be understood outside of its 'history'.¹¹⁷ From another perspective, 'Religious beliefs are not immune from explanation in nonreligious terms,' Kevin Schilbrack says. 'Religious communities speak and act in ways that can be redescribed in terms of what they take as true, a redescription that makes certain kinds of explanation and evaluation possible.'¹¹⁸ And history is not only His Story in a strict religious sense, but more importantly in the daily life is the water-world people live and inhabit, which is the source of all life.

Although the origins of religion might be before, behind or beyond history from a religious point of view, all religions are historically situated in time and space among humans and consequently need to be understood on these premises as well. In the real world the metaphoric and symbolic world is omnipresent and open for interpretation, and religion can also

be seen as a model *of* 'reality' and a model *for* 'reality', as Clifford Geertz (1926–2006) said. Thus, religion defines the 'rules of the game', at least in terms of cosmic and final answers and solutions, most often expressed in complex systems of symbols, and how humans should live a moral life. But as he also pointed out, 'no one, not even a saint, lives in the world religious symbols formulate all of the time, and the majority of men live in it only at moments', highlighting the challenges of distinguishing secular and profane spheres and how religion is part of culture and social structures, or the other way around. In 'Religion as a Cultural System', Geertz argues that there have been no theoretical advances of major importance in the study of religion since Durkheim, Weber, Freud or Malinowski, because 'no one even thinks of looking elsewhere – to philosophy, history, law, literature, or the "harder" sciences – as these men themselves looked, for analytical ideas.'¹¹⁹ Water is one such area where one has to search, not because it is also within the domain of hard sciences, but because it is both nature and culture and the universal and the particular at the same time, and it constitutes large parts of religious belief systems and practices. More important than that, water may challenge academic dogmas; water is fundamentally about human life and hence a human concern since time immemorial. As a universal concern for humans, water has also been incorporated in the divine realms as believed by people themselves.

The reason for this short tour in the history of the sociology of religion, which is incomplete not only with regards to the scholars presented and their thoughts, but also all others who could have been included, is to illustrate parts of complex and varied approaches to the study of religion, even before any definitions or attempts to define religion have been put forward. The aim here is not to criticize these respective scholars, with the exception of Hegel's view of Africa and African history, which has been thoroughly criticized in post-colonial theory, but to point out that all these theories are reductionist in one way or another, and therefore, they are also partly right on their own premises and equally insufficient. In order to get a broader and more comprehensive understanding of religion, one needs all these perspectives and new ones. With water as a point of departure and in this case the River Nile, one may attempt to approach a more holistic understanding of religion.

JAJA BUJAGALI AND THE POWERS OF THE GODS

When the Bujagali Dam located only 8 km north of the source of the White Nile eventually was inaugurated in 2012, it was delayed for more than a decade and the final price tag was almost one billion US dollars. Apart from the general and global anti-dam activism against large dam construction and corruption allegations which terminated the first phase of the project, a unique aspect of this dam project was that to a large extent it was the powerful river spirit in the Bujagali Falls that blocked the construction of the dam. Although the name of the spirit in Bujagali Falls has various spellings, 'Budhagaali' will be used when referring to the spirit and Jaja Bujagali in referring to the medium or healer. Since this dam was partly dependent upon World Bank funding, the construction had to incorporate social and environmental assessments, and the Budhagaali spirit was at the core of this. From 2001 to 2011 no less than three grandiose appeasement and relocation ceremonies took place, but they were not conducted by Jaja Bujagali, but another healer, Nfuudu (see Chapter 3).

Jaja Bujagali, who is one of the most renowned and powerful traditional healers, said in one interview before the dam was constructed:

If they want to relocate [spirits] to another place, will they carry the whole river or falls to that place? [Do] they really think that a [spirit] is like a goat that can be transferred from place to place? [...] The spirits would never allow the dam to be built.¹²⁰

If the dam was built, people would die, he argued. Moreover, he stressed that a river spirit could not be moved except of its own free will (fig. 7). The powers of water and water spirits in the profane sphere are evident when one spirit through its medium could block an almost billion dollar dam for years. The process and the ritual drama behind the dam and its relation to other water spirits along the Nile in the Busoga cosmology will be elaborated on later, but as an introduction to the abovementioned theoretical approaches to religion, it can illustrate some points.

From Marxism or materialism as an approach, the dam contractors would probably agree that 'the abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is required for their real happiness', or in other words, electricity, industrialization and modernization are the sources for development, wealth and prosperity leading people out of the poverty trap, not the local medicines provided and made efficient by a powerful



7. Jaja Bujagali.

healer. And although a partly privately financed dam controls the modes of productions and hence could be criticized from other Marxist perspectives, the mere fact that a dam could be blocked by an invisible spirit is from this perspective an illusion.

Following Weber, 'the essence of religion is not even our concern, as we make it our task to study the conditions and effects of a particular type of social behavior.' The social and political consequences of Jaja Bujagali and the way he conveyed the spirit's messages, according to him, is clear – the dam was delayed for a decade although he failed to terminate it once and for all. And although Weber argued that modernization and rationalization would lead to a decline of magic and mysticism, these were very much present in the twenty-first century at the Bujagali Falls, and such perceptions were even favoured by contemporary anti-dam activists.

The sociological tradition from Durkheim onwards explaining religion as and with social factors and variables alone cannot account for a water spirit like Budhagaali. Although the spirit itself is invisible, as all spirits and consequently understood as a social construct, it was the force and the powers of the waterfall that gave testimonies to the supremacy of the spirits. Without the thundering cascades of explosive waters as external nature, the perceptions of the water spirit would not have originated.

While a Freudian perspective aimed at understanding why and how a spirit may speak to and embody a healer, partly based on the life-histories

of the healer, is important and valuable, it cannot explain the specific forms and the ecology of the water spirits.¹²¹ The perspectives of Otto and Eliade, where religion can only be experienced and not rationally understood, also holds true. As Jaja Bujagali explained to officers from the World Bank, 'the Spirit speaks through him. Non-believers may view this response as nonsense, believing that spiritual mediums are speaking for themselves.'¹²² This is, however, not a dialogue, but when the spirit embodies the healer he becomes possessed. From yet another perspective, Geertz is also right when he says that religion can be seen as a model *of* 'reality' and a model *for* 'reality'. More than anything else the spirit shaped the reality of the dam construction with all its delays and grand ceremonies, and even global dam discourses between dam developers and anti-dam campaigners. Studies of symbolism are obviously important in religious studies and the healers' compounds are full of ritual paraphernalia believers hardly know the full meaning of, since they are not initiated and not supposed to know.

As all these brief examples show, the above theoretical perspectives are perfectly fruitful for studying aspects of religion depending upon the questions asked. While studying the totality of religion is probably not possible, and perhaps not even desirable since the complexity of empirical realities is so great and varied that it will be a form of reductionism because one has to choose some aspects, by bringing water into the picture it may open up new possibilities for understanding practices at work and how religion works. With the Budhagaali spirit as an example, everything centres on water and the waterfalls in particular. Similar scenarios exist all along the Nile and a water and religion perspective is therefore not a substitute for other approaches, but a possible entrance to combine the fluidity of other perspectives while being sensitive to the empirical realities on the ground or literally found in water. Following the Nile from the sources to the sea may enable such an approach.

WATER AND RELIGION – FUNCTION OR SUBSTANCE?

While there is no general 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 since it has enhanced knowledge of religion.¹²³ On a general level, religion focuses on answering three main questions: 1) What becomes of us after death? 2) How should we lead a moral life? and 3) How and why were the

universe, life, and human beings created?¹²⁴ These are, however, overall, existential questions, and do not help much in defining religion and are relevant for non-religious people as well.

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. But, as things are with us, no classification is better than a working hypothesis into which, as the constituent element, enters the knowledge of its own mortality.¹²⁵

One century later, defining religion was as difficult as before, despite all the scholarly developments and discussions. In his book *Religion Without God* from 2013, Ronald Dworkin defines religion, as the title of the book suggests, without God: 'Religion is deeper than God. Religion is a deep, distinct, and comprehensive worldview: it holds that inherent, objective value permeates everything, that the universe and its creatures are awe-inspiring, that human life has purpose and the universe order',¹²⁶ and within such a perspective the belief in a god is but one alternative.

Broadly, religion and definitions of religion can be seen from functional or substantive approaches. Functional or pragmatic approaches identify cultural phenomena as religious when certain problems are seen as belonging to or possible to be solved by the divine spheres. Durkheim belongs, for instance, to this category. This approach focuses on what people get out of religion and what types of problems religion can solve. Substantive approaches focus on the ontological reality of certain phenomena, like the existence of gods, divinities and ancestors, and the beliefs and rituals concerning the interaction between this and the other world. Augustine is clearly in the latter category when he said that religion means 'worship of God'¹²⁷ and also Edward Tylor when he wrote that a minimalist definition of religion is 'belief in spiritual beings'. Otto and Eliade also belong to this category.

Although the different positions have caused a heated scholarly debate for more than a century, it is possible, as Schilbrack argues, to combine these two positions, not because of convenience but because it grasps the religious phenomena in a better way. If one rematerializes religion in this worldly sphere, one may distinguish between realities that are available and visible to our senses, and those that are not. The empirical realities, like

suffering and drought, are equally as real as the non-empirical realities for believers, like the belief in God's forgiveness or judgement at Domsday. Schilbrack thus defines religion as 'forms of life predicated upon the reality of the superempirical [...] Religious communities are those that adopt values they do not believe depend on human or other empirical forms of agency',¹²⁸ which may function as a working definition and analytical approach, although no definitions should be seen as absolute.

Whether particular African river spirits or transcendental divinities like God in Christianity or Allah in Islam, they are all clearly substantive or ontological while at the same time may fulfil functional tasks benefiting humans and local communities, if they want, but they may also choose not to do so. Bruce Trigger distinguishes between transcendental religions such as Judaism, Christianity and Islam and cosmogonic religions, and African traditional religions may partly fit in the latter category in this classificatory scheme. In the former 'the omnipotence of a single god renders that god's existence totally independent of his creation, [and] sacrifice becomes merely a token of individual and collective human gratitude for the deity's favours'.¹²⁹ 'Cosmogony', on the other hand, is derived from two Greek words, *kosmos* and *genesis*. *Kosmos* refers to the order of the universe and/or the universe as order and *genesis* to the process of coming into being.¹³⁰ Importantly, individual deities in cosmogonic religions are generally viewed as dependent on humans and supported by humans through sacrifices. In short, humans and gods depend on each other.¹³¹ This has salience for the types of rites being conducted, specifically sacrifice or prayer, the two fundamental acts of worship. Broadly speaking, sacrifice is more common in cosmogonic religions and prayer in transcendental religions, although both types of worship may occur in both religious types.¹³² Still, it is difficult to label many traditional African religions as strictly cosmogenetic religions, since these divinities may also exist independently of their own creation.

More importantly, perhaps, is that it is possible to combine the functional and substantive approaches to religion not only from an academic perspective, but also from a religious one as perceived by the believers. That gods and divinities work and may interfere in this world among humans for the better or worse is indisputable, so the functional approach is obviously correct on certain premises. But these divine engagements in the human world are dependent upon the substantive approach, that the gods and spirits exist ontologically and that

it is possible for humans to intervene with them in an asymmetrical and inferior relationship. Thus, in practice, a substantive approach can exist without a functional approach, but a functional approach cannot work unless the spirits and divinities exist.

Although supreme gods like God and Allah are independent of their own creation, this goes to a large extent also for African traditional divinities and ancestral spirits, but in varying degrees. Indeed, some also argue that African traditional religion is simultaneously monotheistic and polytheistic at the same time, since there most often is one supreme and unrivalled supreme being, often the creator of the universe and all living beings, and at the same time innumerable other spirits and ancestors in multiple forms.¹³³

Among the Sukuma along the southern shores of Lake Victoria in Tanzania, for instance, there is a Supreme Being. Although he is not almighty and supreme in the Western sense or in Islam, everything is contingent on his force despite the fact that he is not responsible for maintaining the world, including procuring the life-giving rains in response to rainmaking rituals. He is basically too superior to bother with mundane things and the well-being of humans. He is mainly concerned with nature as a whole and not controlling humans and natural fluctuations, which are the realms of the ancestors and the non-ancestral spirits. Consequently, humans cannot contact the Supreme Being directly (the non-ancestral spirits and the ancestors may), but they can intervene very much and easily with the ancestral spirits, which after all were their descendants and the ancestors as spirits want to be remembered and respected.¹³⁴ This is an important difference, not only from a water perspective, but in all realms of human life. The ancestors have historically been very active and in close contact with their descendants. The ancestors are superior to humans – ever existing regardless what humans do – but they are commonly believed to have the power to actively intervene in the here and now for the better or worse.

A fundamental part of African traditional religions and their cosmologies is *power*. The power of and in cosmos is nevertheless generally ambivalent and ambiguous; it is neither good nor bad, but both, and it is a constant struggle to balance the various forms of power. The very same source of power can thus be a source for good and bad, depending upon the intent of the practitioners; it can heal a person but it can also inflict malevolence upon the same being:

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.¹³⁵

It is a common feature in most religions that the superior divinities are believed to care for humans and their believers in one way or another, although the ways this happen may largely be concealed or imperfectly understood by the believers. During the drought in the Horn of Africa in 2011, in a village outside Mwanza on the southern shores of Lake Victoria in Tanzania, I met an old woman who had become a Christian. According to her, this was one of the three worst droughts she had experienced in her whole life. Despite being a Christian, she still believed in the ancestral tradition of rainmaking and recalled that in the old days it worked and provided the life-giving rains. But rainmaking traditions had largely disappeared in this area and it was quite impossible to conduct these rituals anymore, not only because of the sacrifices and the expenses involved, but also since hardly anyone believed in the powers of the traditional rituals anymore it was difficult to find a proper rainmaker these days. As a hungry Christian starving during the drought, she went to the Church where the priests prayed for food and prosperity. But as she laconically commented, they left the Church more hungry than when they came. The Christian God did not deliver rain and food; the former ancestral and rainmaking tradition was believed to do so (fig. 8).¹³⁶

This poignant example, and there are many others, illuminates parts of the cosmic principles and differences between transcendental gods and other divinities with regards to the ways they may or may not interact and intervene in the daily lives and what matters the most for agriculturalists: the precious life-giving rains for bountiful and successful harvests. The fact that religions are believed to work and function in one way or another is unquestionable. Concepts such as ‘work’ and, in particular, ‘function’ have, however, as part of the criticism of structural functionalism, gained negative connotations in the history of anthropological thought and largely been abandoned. In *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity*, Roy Rappaport stressed that ‘neither religion “as a whole” nor its elements will, in the account offered to them, be reduced to functional or adaptive terms’. He continued:



8. The life-giving rains after the 2011 drought in Tanzania.

An account of religion framed, *a priori*, in terms of adaptation, function or other utilitarian assumptions or theory would [...] paradoxically, defeat any possibility of discovering whatever utilitarian significance it might have by transforming the entire inquiry into a comprehensive tautology.¹³⁷

While there are legitimate reasons why functionalism, and in particular in religious studies, has been dismissed (since the functionalism of the 1950s and 60s was based on flawed premises), one should not confuse academic exegesis with real perceptions and aims of believers praying or conducting sacrifices. The religious aspects of function is more consequential, as it is said in Deuteronomy (4:40):

You shall therefore keep His statutes and His commandments which I command you today, that it may go well with you and with your children after you, and that you may prolong your days in the land which the Lord your God is giving you for all time.

It is not a function humans decide, but a consequence of God, but as it is emphasized here too, God *may* – whatever God decides is uncertain and it partly depends on human obedience and piety. In other words, the divine consequences may have functions, but these functions and consequences are often quite different from humans' intentions or the consequences they wish and pray for.

That the Christian God is fully capable of providing both rain and food is undisputable. In the Old Testament, rainmaking was the utmost testimony of the powers of the gods. In the battle between the Jews and the Baal worshippers on Mount Carmel (1 Kings 16–45), the ultimate proof regarding which god was superior and indeed the only one was through rainmaking.¹³⁸ In the desert, the Baal-worshippers failed, whereas when Elijah prayed and sacrificed, Yahweh let the precious rain fall. Being a supreme divinity, God may also use his powers to completely bypass the hydrological cycle and provide food miraculously. One of the most famous passages in the New Testament is when Jesus fed the 5,000 hungry with two fish and five bread (John 6:1–14). Thus, the question is not whether gods and divinities work, function and can provide everything the believers pray or ask for, but the structures of different belief systems in which these interventions are believed to take place and on which premises humans are thought to actively partake and potentially bend the divine powers for their own benefits, or why the divinities choose not to intervene and let people starve or die. All these interactions take place within overall cosmological frameworks where the asymmetrical relationships between divinities and humans establish religious hierarchies and worldviews combining how the Otherworld is related and integrated into this world, which in daily life is rather practical. Water is fundamental in the daily and practical life, but so are many other things as well, and therefore it is important to understand why and under which circumstances some fundamental matters are ritualized and elevated above all other important and fundamental issues.

While the criticism of functionalism has been massive, I think there is one important aspect which has not been discussed sufficiently, which Lord Raglan mentioned briefly in a sentence in the foreword to Arthur Maurice Hocart's book *Social Origins*: 'if all customs and beliefs [...] had been evolved by them in response to their own needs, we should expect them to be far more tenacious than they actually are'.¹³⁹ In other words, they should be much more uniform, but one could also anticipate that if only function was the function, so to speak, there would be limits to symbolic elaboration and mythic developments, since functionally speaking, there would not be any need to complicate things and make extensive mythologies and metaphors beyond the mere function. Nothing could be further from truth, and it also shows the futility of reducing or criticizing any functional aspect of ritual as functionalism.

Weber points out, at least implicitly, that gods may also choose to change the divine gifts according to culture and social developments. Rain 'was one of the rewards promised by Yahweh to his devotees, who were at that time primarily agriculturalists [...] God promised neither too scanty rain nor yet excessive precipitation or deluge.'¹⁴⁰ And while he emphasizes 'that any particular economic conditions [being] prerequisites for the emergence of a belief in spirits does not appear to be demonstrable', he nevertheless cannot escape the economic foundation of religion. In Egypt the regulation of the Nile was the source of the king's strength:

In the desert and semiarid regions of the Near East this control of irrigation was indeed one source of the conception of a god who had created the earth and man out of nothing and not merely fashioned them [...] A riparian economy of this kind actually did produce a harvest out of nothing, from the desert sands. The monarch even created law by legislation and rationalization, a development the world experienced for the first time in Mesopotamia. It seems quite reasonable, therefore, that as a result of such experiences the ordering of the world should be conceived as the law of a freely acting, transcendental and personal god.¹⁴¹

Thus, Weber seems to acknowledge economy in a broad sense as a basis for religious development although rejecting a narrow understanding. In Hinduism, Lakshmi is the goddess of wealth, fortune and prosperity, which include not only material wealth but also spiritual wealth. In some symbolism, she is even portrayed holding a jar with money. Although Hinduism is not a money religion, it emphasizes, as do most religions, human wealth in a broad sense, including spiritual enlightenment. In other words, the specific administration and organization of wealth does not create religion, but wealth in general is intrinsic to social understanding of religion in general. As Thomas Piketty says:

The truth is that economics should never have sought to divorce itself from the other social sciences and can advance only in conjunction with them. The social sciences collectively know too little to waste time on foolish disciplinary squabbles. If we are to progress in our understanding of the historical dynamics of the wealth and distribution and the structure of social classes, we must obviously take a pragmatic approach and avail ourselves of the methods of historians, sociologists, and political scientists as well as economists.¹⁴²

From a social perspective, it can be seen as what Marcel Mauss said with regards to the gift: it is a 'total social phenomenon' because it involves

legal, economic, moral, religious, aesthetic and other dimensions.¹⁴³ Or as Weber stressed, 'the nature of a stratum's religiosity has nowhere been *solely* determined by economic considerations',¹⁴⁴ but on the other hand, as he showed in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, religion may create specific conditions for further economic developments and in particular mentalities having feedback mechanisms shaping the whole economy and development.¹⁴⁵

The social aspect of work in Africa and more particular in rural Kenya is elaborated by Shipton:

Work in equatorial Africa is something you do with others if you can, alone if you must, and in midday sun only when desperate. Sharing work can be conceived in more than one way. It can be seen in an economic idiom as exchanging labor, in a social and experiential one as keeping company, or in a political one as practicing some sort of solidarity or making a statement about ideology. It is a sign and a seal of religious commitment, since much work on farms is done by church groups, and whether or how often you show up can count you in or out.¹⁴⁶

Importantly for this study, thus, agriculture as a livelihood from the cradle to the grave and beyond in ancestral realms cannot be compared to Wall Street economy. In other words, religion does not arise from economy seen as free from culture and society, but religion may include economy because it is part of grander concepts of wealth. Thus, in religion, the economic part of wealth can be seen as one part of cosmic generative forces. But this relates also in another way to the study of the role of water and religion in agricultural societies and the development of religion. Weber once pointed out that the religion of peasants has often been looked down upon; in fact, the early Christians perceived the rustic as the heathen (paganus), and the peasants were basically Christians of a lower rank according to the doctrine of the medieval church. Religious thinking and development took place in monasteries and urban churches.¹⁴⁷ This has implications for this study. Although baptism is a church practice, the religious water-worlds analysed here have partly developed apart from the main doctrines, in particular in water contexts based on farmers' understanding and changing lives. Still, all these partly different and partly overlapping and similar perceptions have mutually influenced each other, and today also agrarian rituals are part of the official doctrines.

Water is at the heart of agricultural economies, but religious water is much more and has never been reduced to mere substance and survival: it is life in the broadest sense. In other words, water in traditional agriculture represents completely different beliefs than for people selling groceries at the supermarket, although it is about food in both settings. Hocart writes about cosmic rites:

The rituals [...] have as their purpose to produce or increase the necessities of life. They are acts of creation. They create more [...] buffaloes, more clouds, or whatever desired objects may be. The cosmic rites create more of everything that man may need, and as the food supply depends on the proper working of the whole world, such ceremonies create the world.¹⁴⁸

Or more particularly with regards to agriculture, 'the essence of these rites is that increase of food is secured by identifying men and objects with the food it is intended to produce or something that has power over that food.'¹⁴⁹ Life, and water as life, should not be reduced to function, but to meaning, and as meaning of life there are no limits to the depths of mythology and symbolism of water and the elaborateness of cosmologies.

On a general level, local deities and cosmologies are often believed to better be able to solve any kind of practical problems here and now than transcendental religions and divinities, despite the latter being omnipotent and omnipresent. Still, in a cosmology like the Busoga at the source of the White Nile, there are many spirits that are not particularly active (see Chapter 3), but there are always other spirits that it is possible to engage with for any specific and practical purpose. Some spirits are believed to be more powerful and deliver the particular wishes of the devotees if the appropriate rituals are conducted, and from a practical point of view it makes sense to engage with the spirits and healers who have the greatest reputation for being powerful and deliver what is urgently needed for prosperity and betterment. Such practical strategies by the believers and practitioners have to be included in cosmological worldviews, because daily life is full of miseries or mundane problems that have to be solved. Religion is about life, but not only life after death.

Barth argues that the most fruitful way to approach cosmology is to perceive it as 'a living tradition of knowledge – not as a set of abstract ideas enshrined in collective representations'.¹⁵⁰ Tradition can be seen as 'the transmission of customs or beliefs from generation to generation, or the fact

of being passed on in this way [...] a long-established custom or belief that has been passed on from one generation to another'.¹⁵¹ From this perspective, what matters the most for farmers is the arrival of the annual rains in the right amounts at the right time. Agriculturally, the arrival of the rains is a hydrological matter from a profane perspective, but if this sphere is part of religious or cosmological realms, the life-giving rains are often part of rainmaking rituals. As a point of departure, this may exemplify structural premises and processes of the relations between local and transcendental religions in practice and the ways they work.

Healers or conjurers not only work differently than gurus or priests in world religions, as Barth points out, but their knowledge transfers are quite opposite with different cumulative effects on how traditions are transmitted. The conjurer initiates his novices into sacred knowledge, not necessarily articulated, but often performed. The novices are supposed to be transformed through participation in the rite itself, and as such the knowledge becomes embodied. The guru, on the other hand, teaches, explains, instructs and elaborates – he *shares* his knowledge. Moreover, he always needs more or new knowledge to share. Thus, the guru's knowledge is radically decontextualized and logical, and represents a different way of knowing.¹⁵² Similarly, the local environments in which the world religions originated are equally decontextualized when the religions develop and spread across continents, and in this process new meaning and importance is ascribed to the ecologies and water-worlds.

Despite that a local healer may claim that his or her powers or the powers bestowed upon him or her by various spirits are unlimited and almighty, in practice they are restricted and limited to certain areas defined geographically and spiritually, or more precisely by the specific water-world. The respective healers may claim that their particular spirit or spirits are the most powerful in the world and beyond, but so do many healers, and in the next kingdom, chiefdom or ethnic group there are other local spirits believed to be equally strong. Often the local spirits work within bounded territorial units, whether it is a chiefdom or an ethnic group. While this limits the powers on one hand, the spatial demarcation of the geographical spread of the powers of various local spirits seems to enforce the very powers within that territory; they may solve anything and everything, including weather

modification and enable different forms of witchcraft for the better or worse. In such contexts, the local environment is to a large extent incorporated into the cosmology since this is the primary context of life and living. Local spirits are often seen as more powerful and practical than transcendental gods in daily life.

In world religions like Christianity or Islam, following Barth's knowledge transfer by the guru, the most important knowledge is distributed and shared by all, ideally by each and every one on the planet. The knowledge is not necessarily abstract, rather the contrary – it is very specific, such as the Ten Commandments – but it is a shared knowledge with relevance for all regardless of whether believers live in deserts, rainforests or in the arctic. A world religion works partly above and beyond the local environments since it covers all and cannot privilege one specific ecology or water-world over another; for example, emphasizing rainmaking. Still, during the Old Testament times when the religion was still a rather local religion and located to desert environments, water had a strong and more prominent role. In the Hebrew Bible there are more than 580 direct references to water and many more to rain, rivers, wells and dews. Similarly, in the Qur'an the word 'water' occurs more than 60 times, 'rivers' over 50 and 'the sea' over 40, whereas 'fountains', 'springs', 'rain', 'hail', etc. occur less frequently.¹⁵³ But when religions grew out of their specific ecological contexts of origin, the role of particular environments and water-worlds were downplayed in favour of more theological exegesis or divine events that could include all, such as the crucifixion of Jesus. In academic terms, religion changed focus from practice to theology or from function to substance, broadly speaking, although the works of God were evident in other spheres, like the creation from *ex nihilo* in Genesis.

However, despite worldwide theology, universal eschatology and cosmic soteriology, even world religions have to relate their beliefs and practices to local contexts, since believers live in specific contexts and these water- and life-worlds are where religion operates. This has several implications. Holy water coming from heaven or the source Gish Abay in Ethiopia is given great importance and has become a place of pilgrimage. Apart from various divine places where holy water pours out, also rain and the weather are within the religious realms, but this water is not holy as such. Priests in Tanzania and Ethiopia and elsewhere may also pray to God for the life-giving rains when it is desperately needed, but

the absence is understood differently in transcendental religions than within rainmaking cosmologies both with regard to the actual inherent qualities of water and the divine processes at work. This directs the attention to divine waters or water in religion in its many facets.

DIVINE WATER AGENCY AND HOLY, SACRED AND NEUTRAL WATERS

The term 'holy water' is so commonly used that it is often more concealing than revealing because the divine waters are so complex and take so many forms, and very few of them are 'holy' in a strict sense, of course depending upon definitions. Still, more than mere theoretical exegesis, it is worthwhile to explore what 'holy water' means and its religious implications. In order to understand the religious role of water, one could distinguish between 'holy' and 'sacred'. In general, 'holy' and 'sacred' are often seen as identical and used interchangeably, but the terms imply different relationships to the divine. Most people say 'holy water', but not 'sacred water', and this difference is important. Theoretically, as Oxtoby pointed out, 'holiness' refers to the divinity and what is derived from the divinity as attributes, whereas 'sacredness' points to consecrated items, 'respected or venerated objects but not the divine itself and not to persons as individuals'. Moreover, one says 'the holy Bible', but the 'sacred books of the East',¹⁵⁴ and this relates directly to the ways and by whom the divine revelations are revealed. The difference lies in whether the scriptures are truly seen as divine revelations or as being compiled and written by sages and priests at a later stage; the content might be the same, but the religious authority differs.

'Holy water' thus implies a special and particular relationship to the divine: it is identical with the divine, at least partially. In Hinduism, Mother Ganga is truly a holy river encompassing everything in the religion, and the water itself *is* the goddess. This perspective is fundamental to understanding the role of holy water in religions. The water may be the very divinity itself and Hinduism is a water religion *per se*. On the other hand, holy water may take numerous forms, even in Christianity. As will be discussed in Chapter 2, in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church water is seen as holy. The beliefs in the holiness of water among the vast majority of the people in the Lake Tana area may be linked to Gihon as the divine river in heaven and in the baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist in the Jordan River. Gihon as

a divine river is mentioned in both the Bible and the Qur'an. When Jesus was baptized in the Jordan River, he transferred holiness to the water as a substance, and hence, all water is holy. Gods and divinities may transfer holiness to any kind of substance, but water is the most common form. Such water, although holy, is different from, for instance, Ganga, which is solely a water goddess, and not all divine powers and qualities are embodied in water in Christianity. Nevertheless, the actual baptism of Jesus and the role of baptism have made water holy in Christianity, because the sacrament was institutionalized by Jesus through his immersion in water. Still, the function and use of holy water in whatever profane sphere may differ, despite the fact that certain types of water in both Christianity and Hinduism are holy. Even holy water may be conditioned on this worldly side; it might be used as holy in a Christian baptism when officiated by a priest, but it may not bless animals or cure infertility of cattle, although the latter is also important for farmers living of their husbandry. The mere fact that a certain item or in this case water is invested with direct divine qualities does not imply that humans can use it for whatever purposes apart from the original function as believed to be defined by God himself. That humans do so, however, is another thing, and throughout European history holy baptismal water has been stolen from churches for other means, including apotropaic purposes. This points to the fluidity of the qualities of holy water in particular; if it works in one defined sphere it might also work in another, devotees may believe, since it is holy, despite that priests say it is a sacrilege.¹⁵⁵

Even in Christianity there are many types of waters and all of them are part of the divine sphere in one way or another. The purifying waters (by torturing) like the Deluge or in Hell are neither holy in the common sense nor sacred, although they are invested with cosmological properties. Holy water enabling divine grace like the holy (Catholic) water used in baptism is in a different category. On the other hand, in Protestantism and Calvinism, the water in baptism is not holy, but the spiritual outcome is the same since the Word works parallel to the sacraments (although Luther himself saw the water as holy). Precious rains for successful harvests, wealth and well-being is yet another category of water. It is neutral in essence as mere water, but the spiritual grace is the very presence of the right amount at the right time: God lets the rain fall and there are numerous references that he has and can withhold

it too, if he wishes, and the same principles are testified to in Islam as well. In arid areas, this bears similarities to more traditional rainmaking practices, but with the notable exception that in local cosmologies this is believed to work in practice and that transcendental gods seldom intervene in such daily or yearly water issues (see Chapter 4).

Importantly, all the above qualities and divine processes with regard to water appear in ecologically more 'water neutral' contexts in the sense that these do not refer to specific natural phenomena – for example, particular springs, annual inundations, irregular rains among different villages, forces of waterfalls, etc. – although ecological differences are incorporated on a broader scale, such as the difference between the barren deserts in Egypt dependent upon the Nile and the life-giving rains in Israel. Thus, at the outset, then, by using Christianity as an example, there is on one hand a whole water cosmology unrelated to specific ecologies (such as the creation waters or the rivers in Paradise), but, on the other, there are yet other cosmologies directly relating to specific phenomena of the Nile, such as Gish Abay (see Chapter 2) or the divine miracles of the annual flooding in Egypt in Christianity (see Chapter 6). If transcendental religions like Christianity and Islam have at least two parallel cosmological perceptions working hand in hand, one ecologically context free and the other originating from specific water features in nature, then it is no wonder that this relation is even more intimate in local or traditional religions, which have developed in particular ecologies where all life and well-being depended upon specific water types and their changing relations throughout the year.

The source of the White Nile originating in the middle of the river at the outlet of Lake Victoria, and possibly also the Nile at First Cataract in ancient Egypt, are particular phenomena in nature which cosmological meaning is ascribed to. There are yet other dimensions to this. It seems that at least from the later periods of the Egyptian civilization even the divine water originating from the abyss at the First Cataract changed cosmological qualities and properties as it flowed downstream towards the sea.¹⁵⁶ This represents another form of holy water – even the character of the holiness or the divine waters may change qualities and properties as the water flows, and subsequently enable different purposes and rituals.

A last challenge is how to conceptualize water spirits or deities living in water without the water itself being holy. Again, the goddess Ganga unites all these perceptions and she is somehow the most perfect water deity: she is water and water is Ganga, at least at the most cosmologically auspicious places like Varanasi, and hence the water is holy. The Christian God, on the other hand, is not a water God, but the almighty may transfer some of his powers to water, like in the Catholic conception of the baptismal waters. Thus, some water, but not all, and only in particularly ritualized contexts, is holy. Then there are other spirits living in water like the Budhagaali spirit in the Bujagali Falls or Nalubaale in Lake Victoria, and innumerable other spirits along the course of the Nile and its lakes. The force and sound of the Bujagali Falls give testimonies 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 who ‘live everywhere’, the Budhagaali spirit has its ‘home’ in water and particularly in the Bujagali waterfalls, or today in the reservoir after the dam was completed. 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 proved the power of the spirit, but according to the healer embodying this spirit – Jaja Bujagali – the spirit is still as strong as before, even though the falls have been dammed and it now lives in the reservoir. A spirit’s power is not dependent upon physical materialization, since spirits are spirits, but the force of a waterfall may visualize and convince the adherer of the spirit’s power.

A study of the religious Nile from the sources to the sea may hence start with a concept of ‘holy water’ as a point of departure and analytical approach for probing into the rich variety of water perceptions, mythologies and cosmologies. However, as with the very term ‘religion’ having a certain bias, water in religion and divine spheres take numerous forms and functions transcending other definitions of religions and the concept of ‘holy water’. The concept of holy water works best in the major world religions, but as seen with Christianity, even in this religion there are many types of religious water that are not holy in a strict definition. Importantly, even though the waters in, for instance, the Bujagali Falls cannot be labelled

'holy' in the same way as the waters originating at the spring Gish Abay in Ethiopia, that does in no way imply a derogatory view of local cosmologies, rather the contrary for a number of reasons.

Since the very same waters may have many varying qualities and properties depending upon where, when and used by whom – holy, sacred, neutral, and even evil – it is the differences and changing divine powers and consequences that are the central focus in the different water cosmologies. Water is a unique element in the sense that it is always both *universal* and *particular* at the same time, 'and shared ideas of water seem to have encouraged religious beliefs and practices, making it possible to identify underlying structures in the use and beliefs of water'.¹⁵⁷

It is also about how religious ideas and conceptions flow like water, following the river or the hydrological cycle, or not – in many cases the spread of beliefs have not followed the water courses but on foot on land. Often as the water or the perceptions of water flow, they change meaning and cosmological importance. While the water at the source of the Blue Nile is utmost holy at the very spring, this particular holiness is limited to the source and the water further downstream is not imbued with the same holiness. The Nile is not a holy river all along its course in Christianity because it consists of much more and very different waters. The absence of making the whole river holy when the source as the origin is holy, is yet another peculiar phenomenon of the Nile. In other cases one single drop of holiness can transfer holiness to the greater whole, but not in the Christian or Hindu Nile. In Bradford in the UK the River Aire, a polluted and industrial river in the city, was in 2002 turned into 'a sort of holy Ganges in Bradford' where the ashes of the departed could be immersed. It became a 'substitute' river for the Ganges. While this was possible in Britain, it was not possible in Jinja at the source of the White Nile (see Chapter 6). Thus, the very same origin water, in this case the Ganges, may have different ritual and religious functions far away from the source.

It is the totality of all these different religious conceptions and beliefs that make the Nile the legendary river that it is. Although the Nile quest and the searches for the sources since antiquity onwards enhanced the fame and mystery of this most celebrated river, it did not end with the Western rediscoveries of the sources. The legacy continues, and then, as now, the mythological greatness of the Nile is inseparable from the religious role water has had and still has from the sources to the sea.

CHALLENGES AND CONTENTS

After this rather lengthy introduction to water and religion, it is time to follow the religious Nile from the sources to the sea. This is not, however, a straightforward task. Before Speke came to the source of the White Nile in 1862, 'The usual and most methodical mode of describing a river [was] to commence at its source, and to follow its course down the entire stream, noting its various tributaries as they consecutively join in,' Beke wrote in 1847. But, he commented, 'this method is [...] forbidden us in the case of the Nile',¹⁵⁸ primarily because of the challenges in the Sudd in Sudan. Although the hydrology is now well-known, concepts of the religious Nile do not always follow the hydrological flow in time and space, and today, for instance, Christianity is prevalent in the whole Nile basin and consequently in many cases it is necessary to include a broader perspective when discussing particular places and bodies of water in their various forms.

The very character of water itself is also complicating the procedure and narrative. While the searchers for the sources have primarily emphasized the most remote source of a river giving the total length in a hydrological perspective, from antiquity onwards it has been explicitly clear and discussed that the ultimate sources of the Nile, and rivers in general, is the rain from the sky or heaven. Thus, one approach could have been to start with the rains in the Ruwenzori Mountains, and then turn the emphasis to Lake Victoria and the proper Nile successively, but rain is important everywhere from the sources to the sea, even in the barren deserts in Egypt where there is hardly any. Explaining the absence of rain, and the exceptional occasions when it comes, is also within cosmological spheres, and in order to gain a broader picture of water and religion throughout the basin it is the relation between the different main types of water – sources, lakes, rivers and rain – that must be emphasized and analysed.

Then there are the empirical and chronological challenges. This is not a problem as such, since 'data' comes from Latin meaning 'what is given',¹⁵⁹ and the empirical data at hand is what one has to use, and new data and perspectives later enables other histories and interpretations. Still, the empirical base is uneven and scattered in time and space. Parts of the Buganda lake history were first documented and written by Speke and Grant during their 1860–3 expedition and for larger parts of the following century it was other

explorers, colonial administrators and missionaries documenting most of the oral traditions. Regarding the source of the Blue Nile and the Lake Tana traditions in Ethiopia, there have been scant references to the religious practices throughout the centuries since the first Portuguese missionaries came there around 1615. As a consequence, the empirical material of both the sources of the Blue and White Nile is to a large extent based on my own fieldworks. This gives the analysis a contemporary emphasis although with longer historical trajectories linking the current perceptions and practices with religious and mythological pasts. To some extent this also highlights the importance of the religious Nile, since today's relevance and pervasiveness of beliefs build on centuries and even millennia of traditions.

Egypt, on the other hand, represents quite the opposite. From the ancient Egyptian civilization going back five thousand years and throughout the millennia with changes of religions, not only is the material culture extremely rich, but so are the written sources. Together, these empirical limitations and possibilities make it impossible to strictly follow the Nile as it flows in time and space. Moreover, since the Nile basin covers an area of almost one-tenth of the African continent, some areas, types of water and time periods are covered and discussed more than others. Still, given the legendary and mythological status of the Nile River, I attempt to discuss the most important and interesting aspects of the religious Nile by following the river's flow from the sources to the sea as much as the data allows, although the religious beliefs and practices literally flow back and forth in time and space along the river.

The interpretative challenges are obviously huge when it comes to water and religion, particularly in the past. Unlike hydraulic structures like a dam or canal, which are clearly material, to a large extent the religious aspects of water are in its *use*, and by definition, the actual use of fluid water leaves very few traces since the water flows away. The next three chapters focus therefore on ethnography, either documented primarily by myself or others, bearing in mind that these are living traditions having long historic trajectories which may span hundreds and perhaps even thousands of years back, although having been constantly changed and renegotiated throughout history. Then the journey moves further back in history by using archaeological and other historic sources.

Chapter 2, 'The Source of the Blue Nile and Lake Tana in Ethiopia', starts with Gish Abay – the divine source from which the waters of Paradise

flow – thus linking heaven and earth. In particular, this source has a special role in Christian mythology and cosmology, but also Lake Tana has been ascribed with great religious significance. The monastery islands in the lake were core areas of the Christianization process in this part of Ethiopia and, according to legend, the Holy family visited Lake Tana after staying in the deserts of Egypt. Today, the religious perceptions of holy water have a prominent role in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, and the celebration of the Timkat festival or the commemoration of the importance of Jesu baptism is the most important festival. Still, the same waters also have other cosmological meanings. The source of the Blue Nile was also a stronghold for the traditional religion in the area and lavish ox sacrifices were conducted. Nowadays animal sacrifices to the river still take place, but it is a disappearing tradition. Among the indigenous group the Woyto, water is everything and their cosmological beliefs are structured around their river and lake lives. In the river lives their main and benevolent spirit Abinas, providing everything for his devotees and in the recent past an omnipresent hippo-cult was part of Abinas' realm.

Chapter 3, 'From Lake Victoria to Murchison Falls in Uganda', addresses the various water spirits from the lake through the outlet and along the Nile to Murchison Falls. Starting with a historic description of the nineteenth century among the Buganda and Lake Victoria, there seems to have been a strong continuity in the living traditions of the river spirits up to today. A detailed ethnographic description is presented of the healers and their spirits in the Busoga cosmology from the source to Bujagali and Itanda Falls. This is put in the context of dams destroying the waterfalls where the major Busoga spirits live. The Bujagali Dam and the rituals aiming to appease or relocate the Budhaagali spirit is discussed and also the fierce rivalry between the healers Jaja Bujagali and Nfuudu who both claimed to be the spirit's embodiment. In traditional religion, however, as in many others, there are also darker sides, and the role of witchcraft and extreme sacrifices aiming to please the water spirits are analysed. The spirits are not only benevolent, but they might be malevolent and bloodthirsty too; neither good nor bad, but both. This is also evident in the Murchison Falls, which has a very special place in Uganda's recent history and the civil war. The water spirits held court at the falls and instructed Alice Lakwena, a local Acholi healer who became possessed by the

Christian spirit Lakwena, to take up arms and stop the war. Although she failed and eventually was defeated, the spirits at these falls are still powerful and represent a source of utmost spiritual powers, including witchcraft.

Chapter 4, 'The Sources in the Sky and Rainmaking', starts with the Upper Nile basin and the Ruwenzori, directing the attention to rain in Congo, Rwanda, Burundi and Kenya, and Tanzania south of Lake Victoria and in Sudan. While rain drains into the streams forming the Nile River proper, the majority of the people in the basin do not live along the main river courses. In sub-Saharan Africa, then as now, smallholder and subsistence agriculture is the main basis of livelihood. This puts specific emphasis on the arrival of the annual rains at the right time and in right amounts for a successful harvest. However, in these regions there is not only great inter-annual variability in precipitation, but also within a year and from villages to villages. This unpredictable agro-water availability has throughout history been attempted to be controlled by invoking the ancestors and spirits. Rainmaking is thus not an ecological technique procuring rain, but a religious practice whereby the ancestors or divinities provide the life-giving waters if appropriate propitiations and sacrifices are made or if the ancestors are pleased with their heirs and the community at large. Rainmaking has also to be seen in larger cosmologies controlling the flows of energy in cosmos, which is not restricted to only rain. Blocking the vital forces of life may have violent consequences, and examples from Rwanda and historic Sudan are used to exemplify how societies are structured around controlling the life-giving forces and waters. This directs the attention to Egypt.

Chapter 5, 'The River Civilization in the Desert', analyses the ancient Egyptian kingdoms from a water perspective in relation to the sun cult in a chronological perspective going back to the origin of the civilization. During the first two dynasties there were massive human sacrifices as part of the kings' funerals, which bear similarities to sacrificial killings in a rain cosmology. With the Pyramid age it seems that a religious change took place where everything was focused on the Nile and the yearly inundation. By using the material culture and the monumental architecture, the analysis aims to combine mythology and ecology by looking at the Nile itself. The Nile was the artery of life in Egypt. The living King and Pharaoh was Horus, and when he died he became Osiris, the dead King of the

Nether World. Osiris also appeared as the divine power immanent within the Nile, and particularly within the waters of the flood. This embodiment of the Nile was believed to be real and intimately connected to death, and in fact, the waters were the divine blood and life-juices from which everything and all life arose. The inundation was seen as the liquids running from Osiris' decaying corpse. The Nile and, in particular, the flood was designated as Osiris' efflux or discharge, which directs the attention to the colours of the Nile. Although the two main branches of the Nile are usually called the White and the Blue Nile, these colour descriptions are not accurate for the physical properties of the river during the inundation: in Egypt the river was green, red and white, and the different properties and qualities of the hydrological Nile are analysed in a religious perspective.

Chapter 6, 'Water and World Religions Along the Nile', also starts with Egypt, but with the later periods and the continuities in beliefs structured around the Nile and its annual flood with an emphasis on the origin of monotheistic religion and the role of Moses. Following Egyptian beliefs, early Christianity continued many of the same perceptions and practices, but the life-giving qualities and properties were Christianized and seen as miracles of God. In the following periods, Muslims also continued these practices and perceptions, but then as part of Islam, and as late as the nineteenth century there were many rituals, although changed throughout the millennia, that had strong similarities to those in ancient Egypt. Thus, the waters of the Nile shaped also important parts of Christianity and Islam. These religious beliefs and perceptions spread across the Mediterranean Sea to Europe and beyond, but rather than following the religious Nile out of the African continent, the analysis will return to the sources. Not only Christianity and Islam are important religions along the Nile, but there are Hindus too, and parts of the ashes of Gandhi were immersed at the source of the White Nile. While the Nile is not a holy river among the Hindus, water is, and the analysis concludes by a comparative discussion of water and religion in traditional cosmologies, Christianity, Islam and Hinduism.

The religious Nile is thus a source to understanding origins and developments of religion over time as perceived and practiced by believers without a strong focus on scriptural or interpretative theology and eschatology. Water matters and the life-giving waters are not only a human concern, but in many cases they are the utmost testimonies of active gods and spirits

and the most precious gift they can provide to their devotees. The water of the Nile flows as it always has done, then as now, but at the same time the river has been continuously changing – in velocity, amount, duration of the inundation and colours. And all along the river's course there have been particular water phenomena in nature; counter flows, sources in the middle of the river, sudden sources originating in hills to disappear as miraculously as they came, gentle and havocking rains, silent and violent waterfalls, and much more. While this analysis will mainly stand on land where people live emphasizing water and the river, since it is impossible from an academic perspective to embody the river and follow its flow throughout the ages, a poet may, on the other hand, imagine how it would be. While not emphasizing the divine qualities of the water as such, as I do in this book, James Thomson in his poem *A Voice from the Nile* takes a stance and perceives how it would be for the Nile to see endless numbers of people and different religions along the banks throughout history and how they have related to the river's life-giving waters. Different religions come and go, but the Nile remains and all religions are shaped by the river. James Thomson writes:

[...] The pyramids and Memnon and the Sphinx,
 This Cairo and the City of the Greek
 As Memphis and the hundred-gated Thebes,
 Sais and Denderah of Isis queen;
 Have grown because I fed them with full life,
 And flourish only while I feed them still.
 For if I stint my fertilising flood,
 Gaunt famine reaps among the sons of men
 Who have not corn to reap for all they sowed,
 And blight and languishment are everywhere;
 And when I have withdrawn or turned aside
 To other realms my ever-flowing streams,
 The old realms withered from their old renown,
 The sands came over them, the desert-sands
 Incessantly encroaching, numberless
 Beyond my water-drops, and buried them,
 And all is silence, solitude and death,
 Exanimate silence while the waste winds howl
 Over the sad immeasurable waste.

Lo, I look backward some few thousand years,
 And see men hewing temples in my rocks
 With seated forms gigantic fronting them,
 And solemn labyrinthine catacombs
 With tombs all pictures with fair scenes of life
 And scenes and symbols of mysterious death [...]
 [...] Tremendous hieroglyphs of secret things;
 I see embalming of the bodies dead
 [...] Then I flow forward some few thousand years,
 And then see new temples shining with all grace,
 Whose sculptured gods are beautiful human forms.
 Then I flow forward not a thousand years,
 And again see a woman and a babe,
 The woman haloed and the babe divine;
 And everywhere that symbol of the cross
 I knew aforetime in the ancient days,
 The emblem then of life, but now of death.

Then I flow forward some few hundred years,
 And see again the crescent, now supreme
 On lofty cupolas and minarets.
 Whence voices sweet and solemn call to prayer.
 So the men change along my changeless stream,
 And change their faiths; but I yield all alike
 Sweet water for their drinking, sweet as wine,
 And pure sweet water for their lustral rites [...]

[...] And I through all these generations flow
 Of corn and men and gods, all-bountiful,
 Perennial through their transientness, still fed
 By earth with waters in abundancy;
 And as I flowed here long before they were,
 So may I flow when they no longer are,
 Most like the serpent of eternity:
 Blessed for ever be our Mother Earth.¹⁶⁰