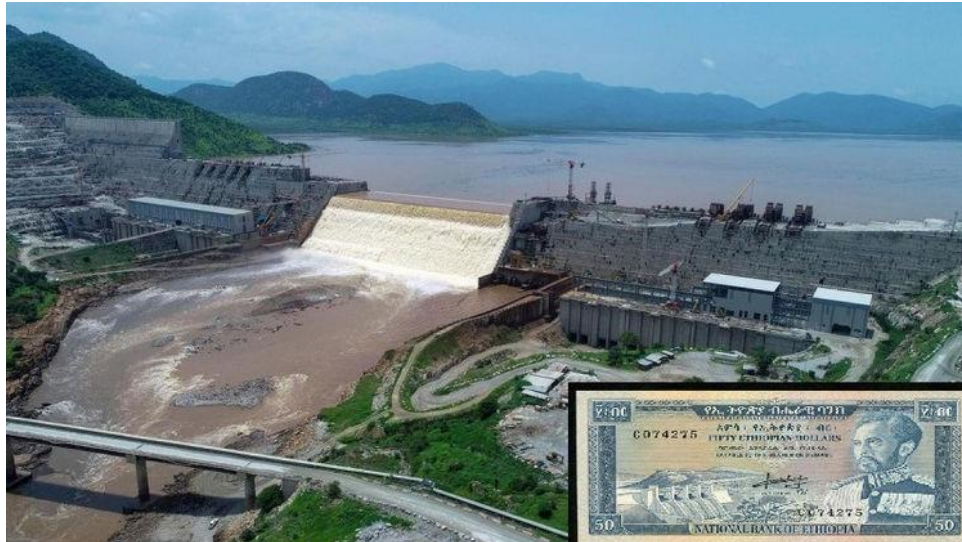


Ethiopia's Torturous One-Hundred-Year-Long Effort to Build One Dam

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It took a century for Ethiopia to realize the dream of utilizing its prized asset--the Blue Nile River (አባይ). Now that this African nation is on the cusp of test-producing electricity at the nearly completed Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), it helps put this ambitious project's long journey in perspective as we get ready to celebrate this historic milestone. Such a back-drop is especially pertinent since there has been a tendency to portray the dam as a project which miraculously appeared out of the blue during the Meles Zenawi era. The reality is that many Ethiopian emperors had sent chills down the spines of Egyptian rulers over the centuries by merely hinting that Ethiopia would alter the course of the Blue Nile in retaliation for whatever offense the Egyptian despot had committed against Ethiopia. In the modern era, however, these warnings would acquire a more tangible dimension, prompting many governments with vested interests to erect all kinds of barriers against the realization of this ambitious undertaking.

In November 1922, the [British government](#), which then administered Sudan and Egypt as its colonial protectorates, showed a keen interest in building a dam across the Blue Nile with a view to further bolster an already thriving cotton-farming enterprise in Egypt and Sudan. Even though the British plan contained various concessions and payments to Ethiopia, at the time, it was a risky move vis-a-vis Ethiopia's sovereignty. Still, in the late 1920s, Great Britain dispatched its Consul in Dangilla, Western Ethiopia, to survey the Blue Nile from its source at Sakala, all the way down to the river's confluence with the White Nile, in Khartoum. In his capacity as His Majesty's Consul for Northwestern Ethiopia, Major R.E. Cheeseman would undertake a

consequential survey which, among other things, accurately pin-pointed Shafarack crossing, not far from the town of Dejen, as an ideal spot for bridge and/or dam construction, but also identifying the site in Guba, Beni-Shangul, which would be endorsed by the U.S. Bureau of Land Reclamation, and eventually chosen as the actual site for the GERD. (See Cheeseman, 1968. *Lake Tana and the Blue Nile: An Abyssinian Quest*, new impression, Frank Cass and Company Limited).

In 1927, around the time Cheesman was surveying the Blue Nile, Ras Teferi Mekonnen, then Regent to Empress Zawditu's new government, was granted robust royal backing to assemble a delegation, led by Dr. Martin (also known as Hakim or Dr. Workneh), to the United States to obtain the government's help in getting the [J. G. White Corporation](#) to build a dam at a cost of USD 20 million. When the news of such a scheme was published in the media, the response from Great Britain, which, as was noted above, then administered Egypt as a colonial protectorate and had a vested interest in the implementation of such a deal, was swift. The British business community, in particular, had reaped enormous profits from the highly lucrative cotton cultivation in Egypt, spread over various parts of the Nile basin. Dr. Workneh endeavored to smooth Britain's ruffled feathers and [traveled](#) to the United Kingdom on November 8, 1927. Upon his arrival in Liverpool, he declared that his nation would endeavor to obtain British-government consent before building the proposed dam. By 1930, after Ras Teferi's coronation as Emperor Haile Selassie I, His Majesty attempted to expedite the dam's construction; however, the J.G. White Engineering company could not find a funder in New York's powerful financial centers because of the changing world political and economic climate, for Ethiopia itself soon got engulfed by the aggressive ambitions of Italy, a European nation-hell bent on avenging its humiliating defeat at the Battle of Adwa in 1896, which it had waged against Emperor Menelik's army.

The second attempt to build the Dam came four decades later, in 1958, again under the direct leadership of His Imperial Majesty Haile Selassie I. In this attempt, the United States government was persuaded to direct the U.S. [Bureau of Land Reclamation](#) to carry out an extensive, six-year-long study of the Blue Nile for both electricity generation and industrialized agriculture expansion. The findings of this comprehensive report, which had weighed the relative merits of various dam-construction and mechanized agriculture sites, made a series of recommendations which echoed the recommendation for a suitable site which, as noted above, Cheesman had made some thirty years earlier. However, although His Imperial Majesty had a close relationship with the United States, Great Britain--and the multilateral institutions these nations kept represented--successfully thwarted the effort, and Ethiopia's quest did not go further than the symbolic construction of a much smaller dam, which was inaugurated in the presence of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II. Still, undeterred by this stinging set back, Haile Selassie's government used this milestone to set the agenda for the next generation, by printing a picture of the dam on the Ethiopian banknote of 50 Birr, accompanied by his Majesty's public [prophecy](#) that future generations of Ethiopian leaders would one day succeed in building bigger dams. Furthermore, despite the disappointing outcome, a careful reading of the considerable research on the quest for erecting such a dam, reveals that His Majesty must have spent at least two decades during the two attempts to change the Blue Nile basin into an engine for industrial

development. Sadly, Emperor Haile Selassie's overthrow by the Derg put an end to the close relationship Ethiopia had enjoyed with the United States, thereby dooming any continuation of the project to failure.

The third attempt was made by the Derg under President Mengistu Haile Mariam, but this quest focused primarily on irrigation and mechanized agriculture. Although the Derg was embroiled in continuous warfare against separatist groups throughout its tenure, it did make a significant effort to relocate people affected by famine to areas where irrigation would be possible throughout the year and set up new towns like Pawe, in Gojam. It is one of the first significant efforts in Ethiopia to diversify agriculture and move away from total dependency on rain, and render vulnerable regions more food-secure. Sadly, even this effort would, in turn, be dismantled by the Tigray People Liberation Front (TPLF), which ended the Derg's 17-year reign and replaced it in 1991. To the dismay of local residents, TPLF not only halted the Tana Beles project, but dismantled and transported hospital equipment and agricultural equipment to Tigray, effectively killing the project on Blue Nile.

Ironically, the last but successful, attempt to erect a dam across the [Blue Nile](#) would be carried out in 2011, under the leadership of Prime Minister Meles Zenawi. The project was rolled out at an opportune moment when Egypt, which had always objected to any work on the Blue Nile, was far too preoccupied with the widespread uprisings sweeping the Middle-East at the time to thwart the start of the project. Thus, although the project was vital for Ethiopia, and was uppermost in the minds of many Ethiopian leaders and citizens alike for centuries, it could only be realized when Egypt was distracted by internal turmoil during the [Arab Spring](#). However, soon after the start of the project, a coup d'etat led by General Abdel Fattah El-Sisi would successfully depose the democratically elected government of Mohamed al Morsi, and the relative calm which followed the change in leadership, soon resulted in the dam-building efforts being subjected to a crescendo of criticisms from multilateral lending institutions, thus compelling the search for self-funding.

Even after work on the project was in full swing, a new set of internal challenges emerged, all causing a delay in the completion of the project. This stemmed primarily from the decision to assign the corrupt and unqualified Metals and Engineering Corporation (METEC), a government agency, as overseer of the massive construction project. Predictably, METEC chose to embezzle funds, while doing shoddy work, which ultimately slowed down the project completion. In 2018, when Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed assumed office, he set the completion of the project as a top priority. To that end, he summarily canceled METEC's contract and assigned a more competent firm to complete the remainder of the work. However, on July 26, 2018, not too long after the stalled project began to gain momentum, its chief engineer, Engineer Simegnaw Bekele, was mysteriously found [killed](#) inside his car, which inexplicably was left parked in the middle of Meskel Square. As for external constraints, two years after the Chief Engineer's death, in October 2020, President Trump publicly suggested "[bombing](#) the GERD by Egypt," indicating the backroom disdain for the audacity of a developing nation developing its own natural resources. Noticing the partisan nature of the Trump administration-mediated negotiation on the

GERD, Ethiopia was compelled to walk out of the deliberations, advocating for an African-led solution to an African problem. This is in keeping with an earlier initiative, where the regional Nile riparian countries had come together to solve the problem of equitable use of the Nile through what was named the [Comprehensive Framework Agreement](#) (CFA), signed by Uganda, Ethiopia, Rwanda, Tanzania, Kenya and Burundi.

Egypt has since leveraged all its regional and international connections and assets--short of carrying out direct military attacks--to impede the GERD's progress. It even took its dispute with Ethiopia to the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), to extract a resolution favorable to it. For the first time in the history of the world and probably the last time, Ethiopia's Minister of Water Irrigation and Energy, Dr. Seleshi Bekele, addressed the [UNSC](#) in a quest for an equitable solution. A hydroelectric project that was supposed to have started in 1922, has thus had to meander its way through the decades, and will probably face more challenges in the coming months and years. The lesson from this long and arduous journey in building mega projects is that developing countries, especially in Africa, should first evaluate external factors and other interest groups before undertaking major projects. Developing a capacity to self-fund mega projects may be the only way when funding from international financial organizations is controlled by a small but powerful club of wealthy nations with a vested interest in steering such projects in directions favorable to themselves.

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