

Editorial

The River Nile: Managing Turbulence

The majesty of River Nile belongs to the world, but the river's management – stretching from Lake Victoria to the Mediterranean Sea, crossing many artificial boundaries – is the responsibility of a few countries that benefit directly from its largesse.

Developing strategies to equitably assign the stewardship, benefits, and responsibility over the Nile has been inevitably turbulent. And so it was on May 14th when Tanzania, Uganda, Rwanda and Ethiopia signed a new agreement to establish a permanent commission to manage the Nile.

Missing from the agreement are Egypt and Sudan, and pending support over the next year are Kenya, Burundi and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. For most onlookers in the international community, it is difficult to understand any agreement about the Nile that does not include two of the countries that are most associated with the river's history in the popular press.

Agreements do not come easily in this part of the world, and this particular one has taken a decade to negotiate, but it may take another decade of litigation to implement, if some countries choose to stay away from the negotiating table while climate change and population growth threatens the Nile. Perhaps we can all take a step back and be inspired by poets from different parts of the world who have reflected on the Nile. Here are four from internationally respected poet laureates.

NILE¹

Excerpt of a poem by Tsegaye Gebre-Medhin (Ethiopian Poet Laureate, August 1997)

My name is Africa. I am the mother of the Nile.
O Nile, my prodigal daughter on the wilderness of the desert
Bringing God's harmony to all brothers and sisters
And calming down their noises of brass in their endless nakedness
O Nile, you are music that restore the rhythm of existence
Into the awkward stampeding of these Middle Eastern blindness
You are the irrigator that cultivate peace
From my Ethiopian sacred mountains of the sun
Across to nod on the East of Aden and across Sinai
Beyond Gibraltar into the heights of Mount Moriah
O Nile, my chosen sacrifice for universal peace offering
Upon whose gift the heritages of Meroe and Egypt
Still survive for the benefit of our lone World.

TO THE NILE²

By John Keats

On of the old Moon-mountains African!
Chief of the Pyramid and Crocodile!
We call thee fruitful, and that very while
A desert fills our seeing's inward span:
Nurse of swart nations since the world began,

¹ <http://www.ethiopians.com/abay/abay.html>

² <http://www.netpoets.com/classic/poems/037039.htm>

Art thou so fruitful? or dost thou beguile
Such men to honour thee, who, worn with toil,
Rest for a space 'twixt Cairo and Decan?
O may dark fancies err! They surely do;
'Tis ignorance that makes a barren waste
Of all beyond itself. Thou dost bedew
Green rushes like our rivers, and dost taste
The pleasant sunrise. Green isles hast thou too,
And to the sea as happily dost haste.

POEM OF THE NILE³

Excerpt of poem by Al-Saddiq Al-Raddi

Sura

The Nile flows quietly...
Sleeping through the city's silence
And the burning sorrows of villages.
Now friends no longer exchange greetings each morning
No longer recognize each other.
Everywhere one sees them, these one-time prophets,
Poverty-stricken, sipping their tea, their tears,
Speechless.

They hide death in their fraying clothes,
And all they can say to our children is: patience.
They fade into the trees, commit suicide
At night, derive from alcohol
Their arguments, embark on futile wars
With their women, give up
Their prayers, then disappear.
Walls climb the ivy
And Khartoum, sitting in a café
Smoking

In the dark you can't tell apart
Muggers from those whose journeys they'd cut short.
We were lovers, looking for our children
Who were breaking into bakeries, stealing fire
From the ovens' throats.
- What name do you give me?
- I call you earth's Fiery Anger
So rise up
- What will be the taste of ashes?
And we parted!

Sura

Fire is the opposite of Water
And Smoke is a memory that prepares us only for ash.
Water is the opposite of Fire
And the waves are like maps, rippling across the land.
And the girl? She is somewhere between this heart and this knife...

³ http://www.poetrytranslation.org/poems/23/Poem_of_the_Nile

City - you're a handful of grains of wheat, tucked
Into the purses of usurers and slave-traders.

And the black men
Are approaching, approaching. River Nile
To what deserts are you taking my reflections? You depart
And I stand among the horses, by your gate,
And my soul would embark on a holy journey too,
For the silence suspended between us
Is a language floating among the ruins of a beautiful, vanished past
.O River Nile, father
Were the trees merely windows reflecting women's sorrows,
Or have your waters shattered their images,
Drowned the history of women,
And painted forever their meadows the colour of poverty?
Poverty invades the children's playgrounds, leaving
Them silent, accursed, their heritage
Only anger and disbelief.
The Nile opens his arms
Speaks to the migrant birds
Falls silent
Reigns
And never sleeps
Never sleeps

The Nile drinks dry the desert's tavern,
Gets drunk on dumps of toxic waste,
Must survive in the city, falling apart
Each night, rising up through its history
And never sleeps
Never sleeps
The drums began with the sun
And its light filtered songs that entered into the pores of the soul.
In the river's shallows boats sheltered from toil and wind.
Now the carnivals of the blacks take fire
And the Nile has burst through the layers of time.
And, see, the kingdom of Maroe appears
And the face of the Nubian lover
Who walks among the sorrows of the waterwheels
Searching for warriors among the horses.
Where does the line of ancestral blood begin
And when does the blood loss reach its climax,
O King Piankhy, enthroned ruler of Kush,
A kingdom unravelling in bitter silence?
Shout at the horses, and let
The waters ready themselves.
Let the maps explode. How can the land be lost
When the future belongs to the Nile?
The Nile knows of the disgrace of cities
That has vanished.
Knows of the old times
Yet never speaks.
It is the Nile...
Generations will pass, and there will always be children
Lingering on its banks,
Waiting
For it all to end.

A THOUGHT OF THE NILE⁴

By Leigh Hunt

It flows through old hushed Egypt and its sands,
Like some grave mighty thought threading a dream,
And times and things, as in that vision, seem
Keeping along it their eternal stands,—
Caves, pillars, pyramids, the shepherd bands
That roamed through the young world, the glory extreme
Of high Sesostris, and that southern beam,
The laughing queen that caught the world's great hands.

Then comes a mightier silence, stern and strong,
As of a world left empty of its throng,
And the void weighs on us; and then we wake,
And hear the fruitful stream lapsing along
Twixt villages, and think how we shall take
Our own calm journey on for human sake.

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⁴ <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/archive/poem.html?id=173702>