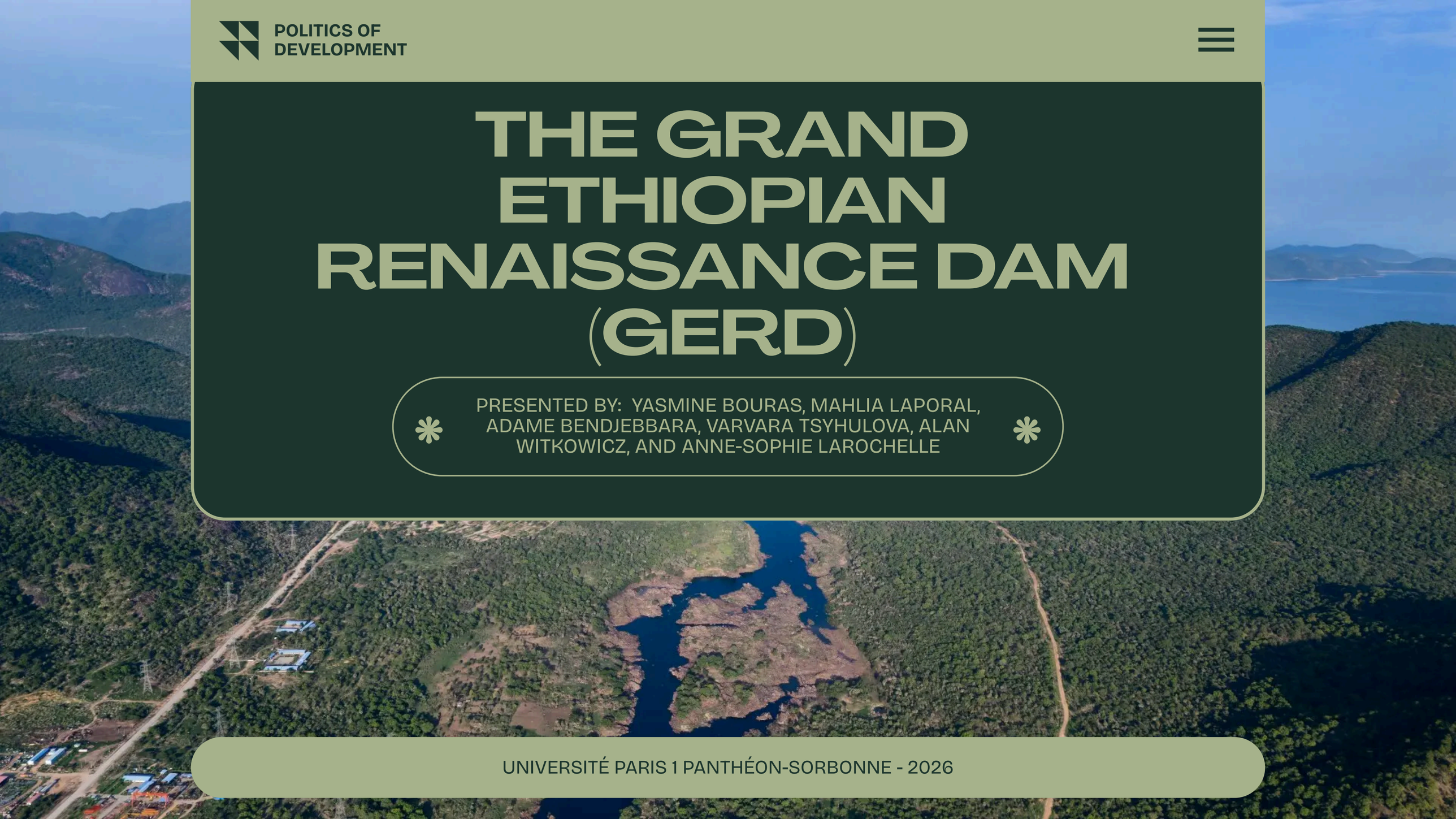
POLITICS OF DEVELOPMENT

THE GRAND ETHIOPIAN RENAISSANCE DAM (GERD)

PRESENTED BY: YASMINE BOURAS, MAHLIA LAPORAL, ADAME BENDJEBBARA, VARVARA TSYHULOVA, ALAN WITKOWICZ, AND ANNE-SOPHIE LAROCHELLE



UNIVERSITÉ PARIS 1 PANTHÉON-SORBONNE - 2026

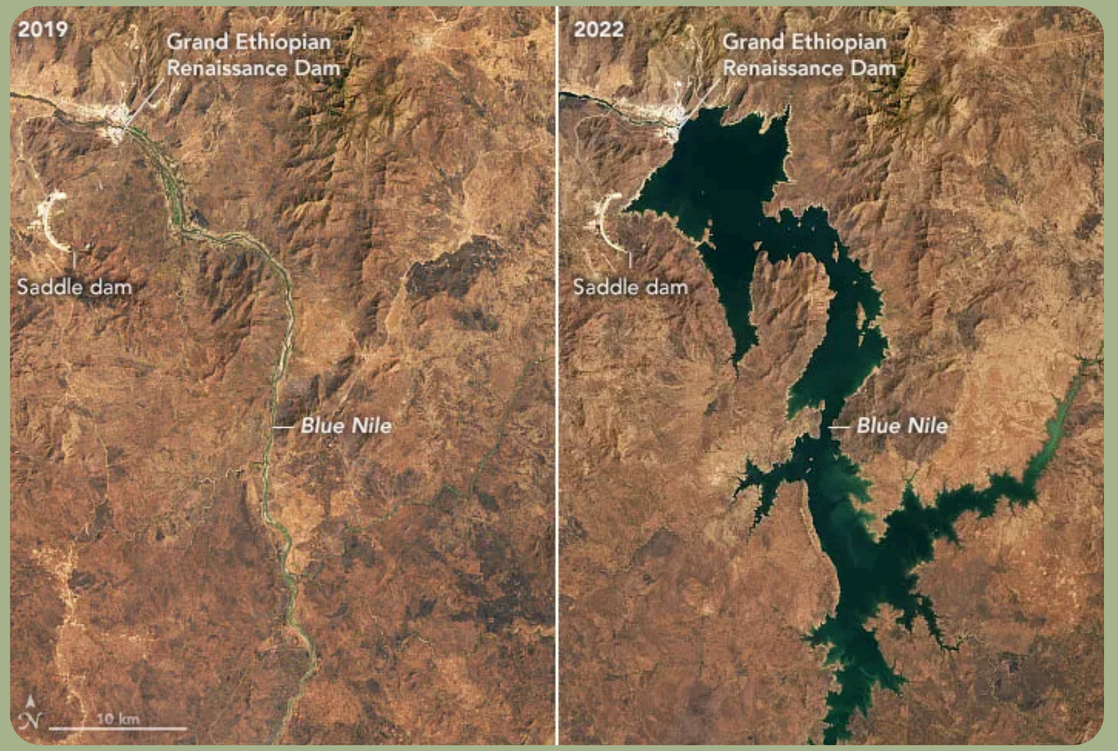
INTRODUCTION



CONSTRUCTION BEGAN **IN 2011.**

LOCATION: THE BLUE NILE, IN THE BENISHANGUL-GUMUZ REGION (WESTERN ETHIOPIA), NEAR SUDAN.

OBJECTIVE TO **MASSIVELY EXPAND ETHIOPIA'S ELECTRICITY PRODUCTION.**

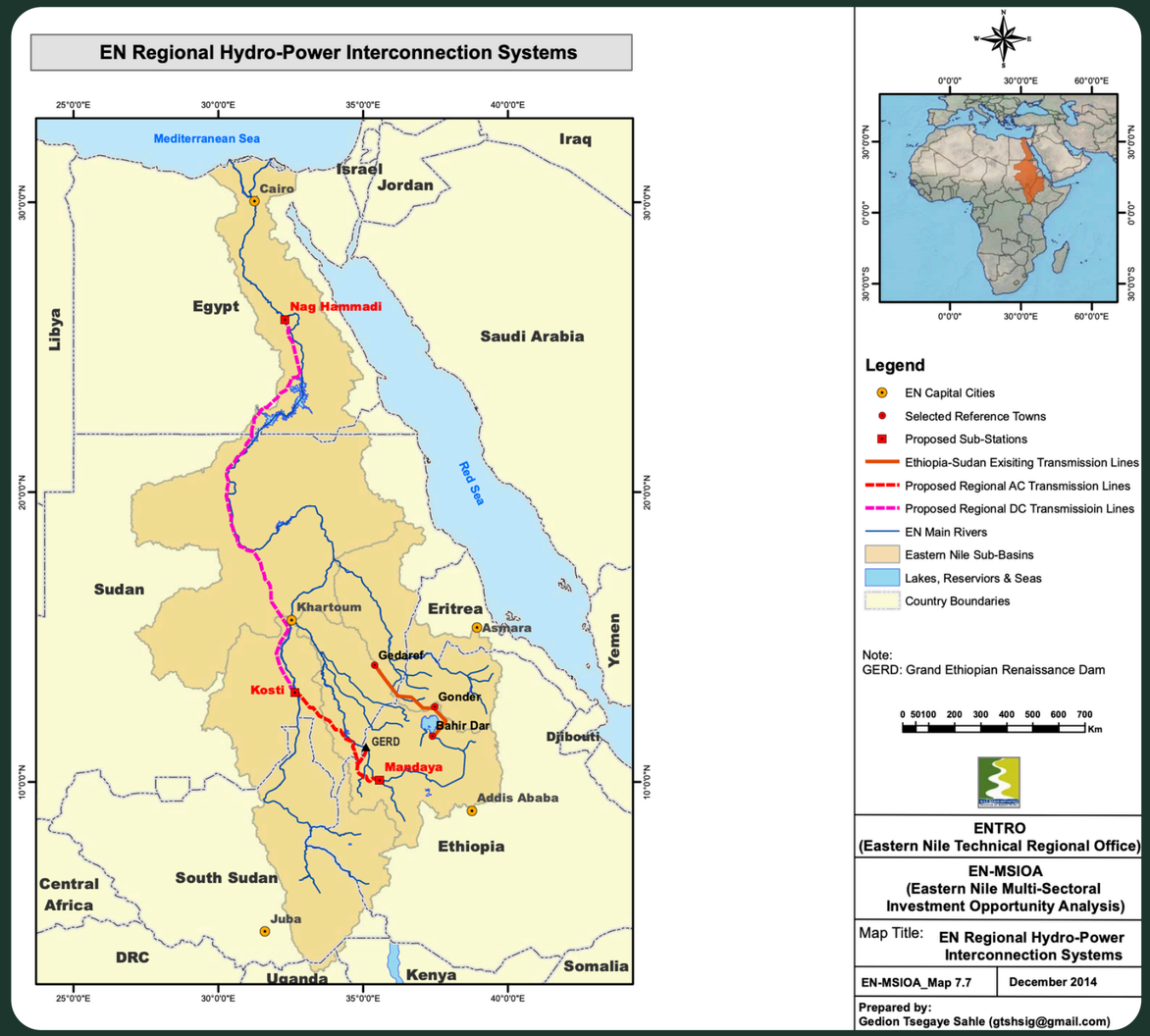


Location map: BBC News | Satellite imagery: NASA Earth Observatory (2019–2022)

1991 EPRDF takes power under Meles Zenawi (Marxist-Leninist roots)
Following the fall of the Derg regime, Ethiopia enters a new political period.

2000s Developmental-state model
State-led economic transformation, industrialisation and major infrastructure investment.

2011 GERD construction begins
Hydropower becomes the flagship expression of Ethiopia's development ambitions.



SOURCE: ENTRO, EN-MSIOA (2014). EXISTING AND PROPOSED REGIONAL HYDROPOWER INTERCONNECTIONS.

GERD AS AN INSTRUMENT OF STATE-BUILDING

- INFRASTRUCTURAL POWER - state's capacity to organise resources, territories and relations with its citizens
- DOMESTIC MOBILISATION - relied heavily on domestic financing and public participation in funding GERD
- STATE-BUILDING - reinforcement of the central state's political and administrative power
- ACCOUNTABILITY - reducing dependence on external donors doesn't necessarily increase government accountability towards citizens

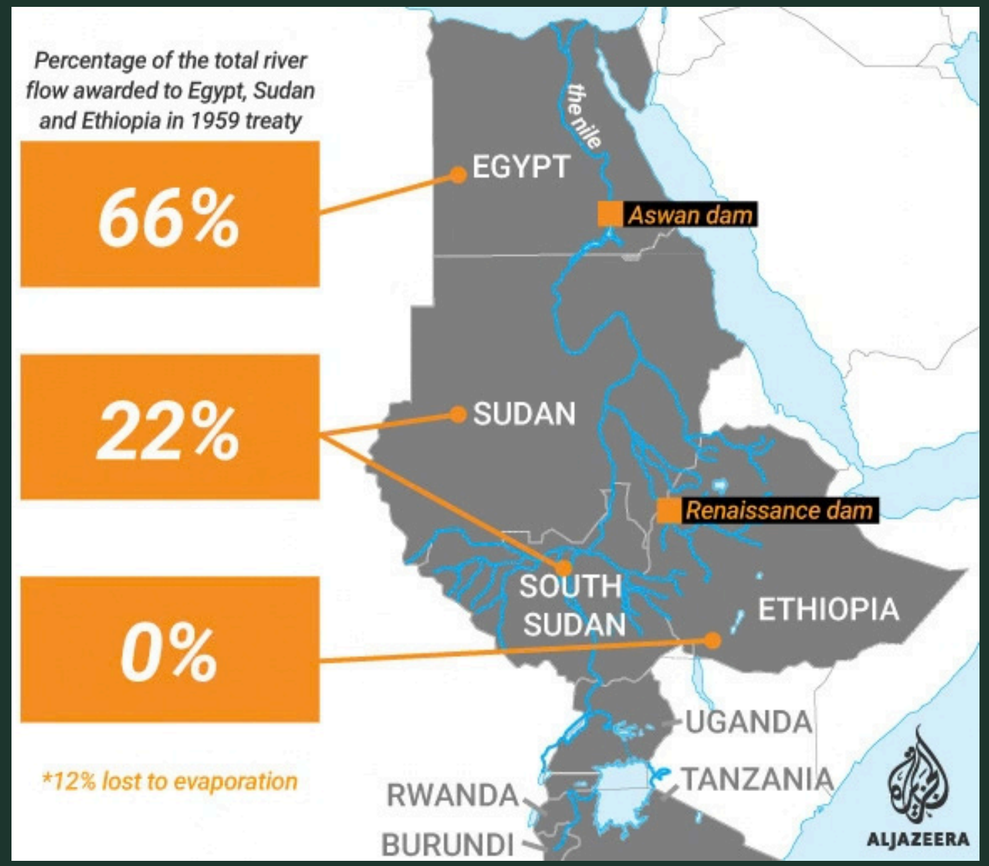
TO WHAT EXTENT DOES THE GERD ENABLE THE ETHIOPIAN STATE TO REINFORCE ITSELF, BOTH EXTERNALLY AND INTERNALLY?

OUTLINE

- I - THE GERD AS A REWRITING OF REGIONAL NILE POLITICS
  - A - The Legal Framework of Egyptian Hydro-Hegemony : Colonial Treaties and Their Contestation
  - B - Challenging the Egyptian Hegemony Over the Nile
  - C - Gaining Regional Political Leverage Through Hydropower
- II - THE GERD AS A TOOL TO STRENGTHEN THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT IN A FRAGMENTED COUNTRY
  - A - Framing the GERD as a Matter of Survival
  - B - Domestic Financing and Sovereign Power : the Unfulfilled Promise of Accountability
  - C - The Reinforcement of the Federal Government Over its Periphery
- CONCLUSION

I - THE GERD AS A REWRITING OF REGIONAL NILE POLITICS

A) THE LEGAL FRAMEWORK OF EGYPTIAN HYDRO-HEGEMONY : COLONIAL TREATIES AND THEIR CONTESTATION



1929 ANGLO-EGYPTIAN NILE WATERS AGREEMENT

- "NATURAL AND HISTORICAL RIGHTS TO EGYPT" OVER THE NILE
- GIVES VETO TO EGYPT

1959 NILE WATERS AGREEMENT (BILATERAL EGYPT-SUDAN)

WATER DIVISION :

- EGYPT: 55,5 BCM (66%)
- SUDAN : 18,5 BCM (22%)

⚠ ETHIOPIA : NO LEGAL RIGHT TO NILE WATER IN THE NAME OF "HISTORIC WATER RIGHTS"

SOURCE: ALJAZEERA

POST-COLONIAL READING OF THESE AGREEMENTS

COLONIAL LEGACY

- SUDAN & EGYPT WERE BRITISH COLONIES IN 1929
- AGREEMENTS MADE TO SERVE BRITISH INTERESTS
- REPRODUCTION OF COLONIAL HYDROPOLITICAL ORDER IN 1959

TWO RADICALLY OPPOSITE VISIONS



- AGREEMENTS AS HISTORICAL LEGACIES TO BE MAINTAINED



- RIGHT TO AN “EQUITABLE AND REASONABLE UTILIZATION OF THE NILE”

TRANSBOUNDARY RIVERS LAW



1997 UN WATERCOURSE AGREEMENT

- EQUITABLE AND REASONABLE UTILIZATION OF THE NILE
- OBLIGATION NOT TO CAUSE SIGNIFICANT HARM



COOPERATIVE FRAMEWORK AGREEMENT (CFA) AND 2015 DECLARATION OF PRINCIPLES

- ENTRY INTO FORCE : 2024
- TRACKS THE WATERCOURSE CONVENTION WORD FOR WORD
- EFFECTIVELY VOIDS THE COLONIAL AGREEMENTS
- NRBC FACES JURISDICTIONAL PROBLEMS OVER THE GERD
- EGYPT JOINING THE CFA AS A POTENTIAL SOLUTION?

B - CHALLENGING THE EGYPTIAN HEGEMONY OVER THE NILE

The GERD redefines Ethiopia's regional standing by directly challenging Egypt's long-held hydro-hegemony

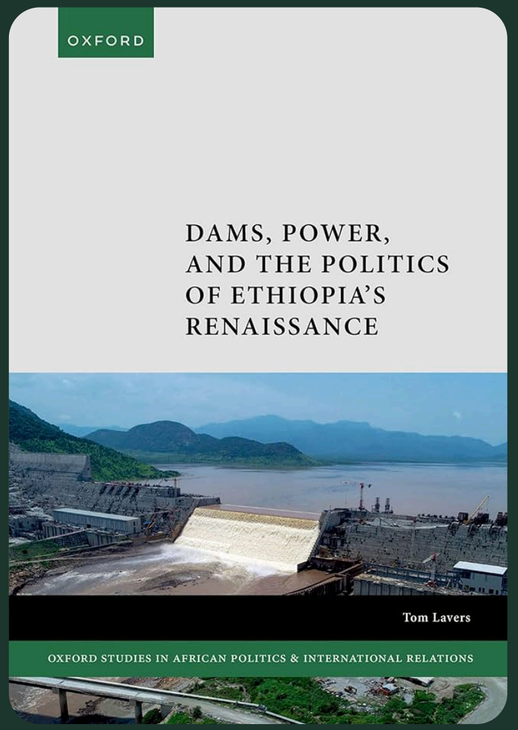


SOURCE: NATOASSIOCIATION.CA

For Egypt, this legal setup was seen as non-negotiable and fundamental to its existential identity, as reflected in Herodotus' quote: "Egypt is a gift of the Nile."

The geopolitical center of gravity in the Nile Basin has shifted from Cairo to Addis Ababa

C) GAINING REGIONAL POLITICAL LEVERAGE THROUGH HYDROPOWER





↘

ETHIOPIA HAS LONG AIMED TO BECOME A MAJOR ELECTRICITY PROVIDER IN EAST AFRICA



CASE OF SUDAN — COOPERATION AND ITS LIMITS

2013: CLOSER COOPERATION

↓

LATER POLITICAL TENSIONS

ECONOMIC INTERDEPENDENCE ≠ GUARANTEED POLITICAL ALIGNMENT

Sources: Lavers (2024); Woldemichael (2021).

EXPANDING ETHIOPIA'S REGIONAL ELECTRICITY NETWORK

ETHIOPIA
Hydropower

→

KENYA
Established agreement

→

TANZANIA
Trial supply via Kenya

73%

OF ETHIOPIA'S ELECTRICITY-EXPORT REVENUE CAME FROM KENYA IN 2024–25



2026

ETHIOPIA ASSUMES EASTERN AFRICA POWER POOL CHAIRMANSHIP



CHALLENGES

- POLITICAL INSTABILITY
- REGIONAL CONFLICTS
- INFRASTRUCTURE DELAYS
- LACK OF TRUST BETWEEN STATES

Affordable electricity → Economic interdependence → Potential regional influence

ELECTRICITY CAPACITY DOES NOT AUTOMATICALLY TRANSLATE INTO REGIONAL POLITICAL INFLUENCE. ITS IMPACT DEPENDS ON STABLE TRADE, INFRASTRUCTURE AND POLITICAL COOPERATION.

II - THE GERD AS A TOOL TO STRENGTHEN THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT IN A FRAGMENTED COUNTRY

A) THE GERD AS A MATTER OF SURVIVAL TO REMIND THE COUNTRY OF ITS GLORIOUS PAST

A VIOLENT CONTEXT :

- CIVIL WAR INVOLVING THE TIGREAN COMMUNITY
- WAR FOR ERITREA'S INDEPENDENCE





ABIY AHMED ANS ISAYAS AFEWORK, 2018

A) THE GERD AS A MATTER OF SURVIVAL TO REMIND THE COUNTRY OF ITS GLORIOUS PAST

SYMBOLIC MEANING OF THE "RENAISSANCE"



EMPEROR HAILE SELASSIE I

"RENAISSANCE" = A UNIFYING NATIONALIST NARRATIVE DESIGNED TO BUILD A COHESIVE NATION-STATE



A) THE GERD AS A MATTER OF SURVIVAL TO REMIND THE COUNTRY OF ITS GLORIOUS PAST

A NEED TO ASSERT ITSELF ON THE INTERNATIONAL SCENE



MELES ZENAWI

DOMINATING THE NATURAL ENVIRONMENT => A DEVELOPED COUNTRY => NO NEED OF EXTERNAL HELP

B) DOMESTIC FINANCING AND SOVEREIGN POWER : THE UNFULFILLED PROMISE OF ACCOUNTABILITY

AN UNPRECEDENTED AND SOVEREIGN FINANCING MODEL :

- EXCLUSION OF TRADITIONAL EXTERNAL AND MULTILATERAL LENDERS

- DIRECT MOBILIZATION OF DOMESTIC AND PATRIOTIC SAVINGS

- TARGETED EXTERNAL PARTNERSHIP



EXTRAVERSION AND AUTHORITARIAN LEGITIMATION (JEAN-FRANÇOIS BAYART):

- INSTRUMENTALIZING EXTERNAL THREATS FOR DOMESTIC POLITICAL COHESION
- PATRIOTIC DUTY VERSUS STATE COERCION

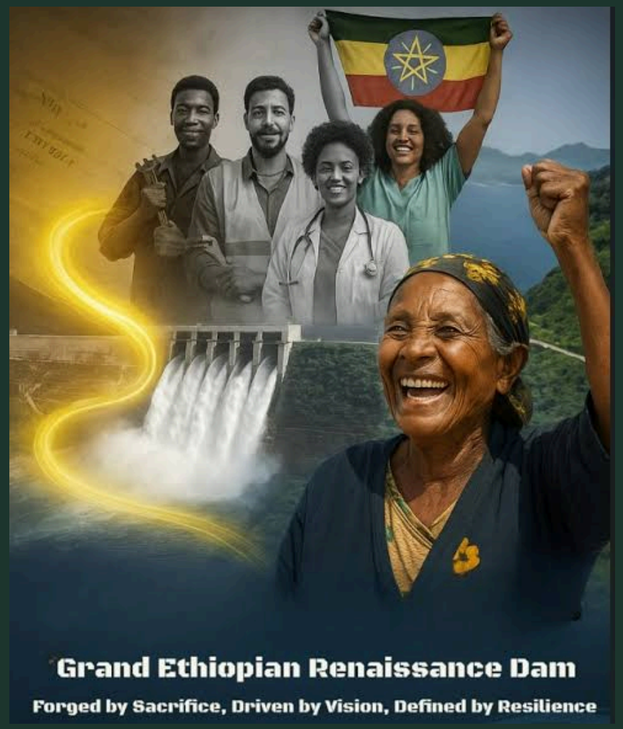


IMAGE BY THE MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS OF ETHIOPIA



BYPASSING CONDITIONALITY AND REFORMULATING "POST-CONDITIONALITY" (GRAHAM HARRISON):

- CIRCUMVENTING BRETTON WOODS CONDITIONALITIES
- INTERNALIZED POST-CONDITIONALITY WITHOUT DONOR CO-GOVERNANCE

THE ILLUSION OF ACCOUNTABILITY AND THE BROKEN FISCAL CONTRACT (THANDIKA MKANDAWIRE) :

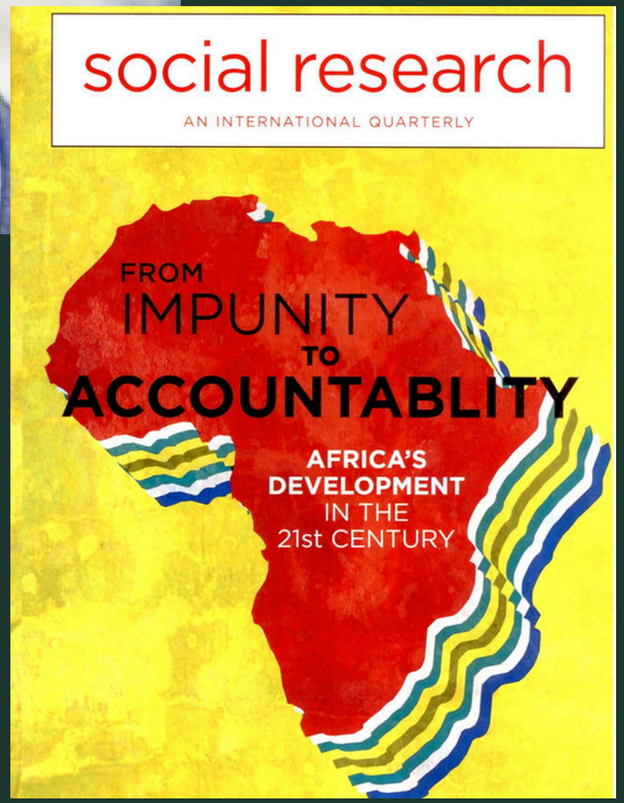
A THEORETICAL DEMOCRATIC PROMISE

COERCIVE EXTRACTION INSTEAD OF DEMOCRATIC RESPONSIVENESS

REINFORCEMENT THROUGH EXTRAVERSION AND SOVEREIGN AUTONOMY



PICTURE OF THANDIKA MKANDAWIRE

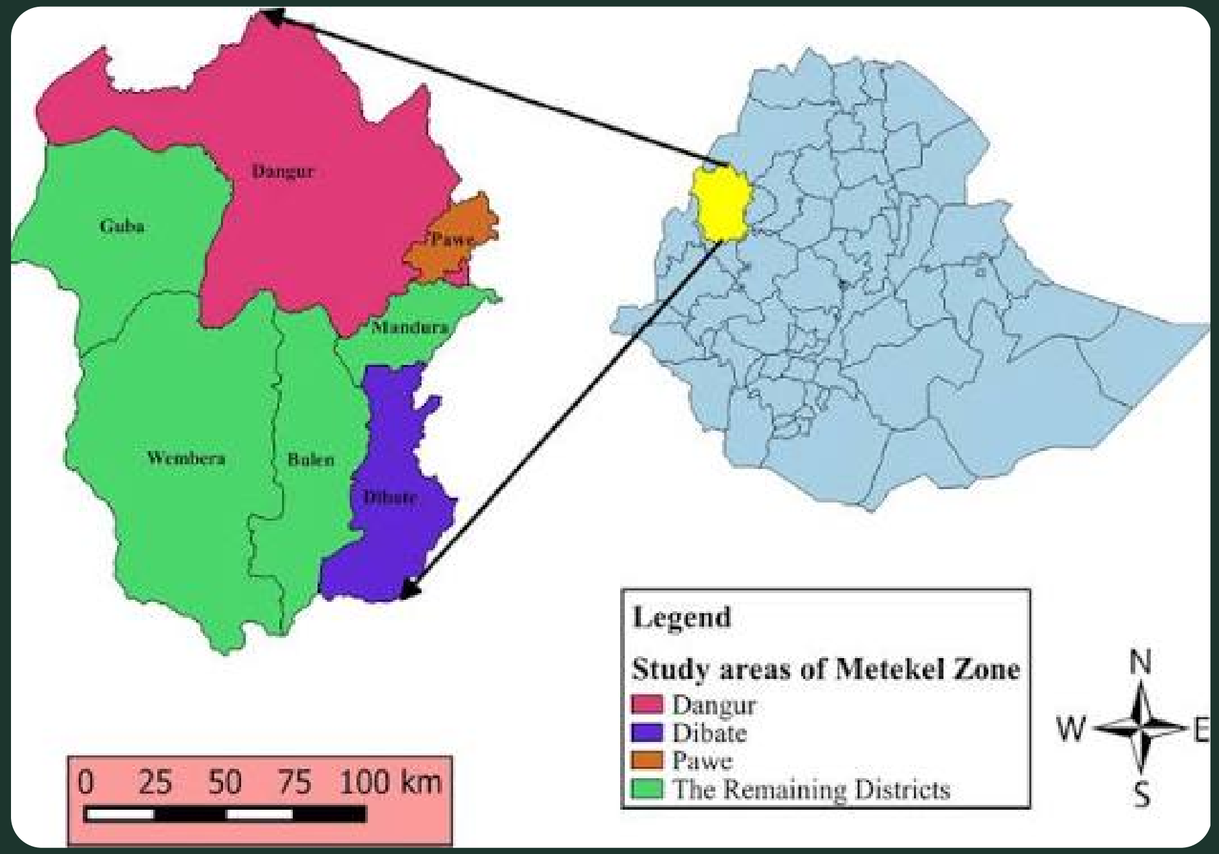


SOCIAL RESEARCH VOL. 77, NO. 4, WINTER 2010

C) THE REINFORCEMENT OF THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT OVER ITS PERIPHERY

HIGH MODERNISM :
→ “INFLATED CONFIDENCE IN TECHNOLOGY, SCIENCE (...)” TO IMPROVE LIVING CONDITIONS

GUMUZ = ETHNIC GROUP
→ METEKEL REGION
→ GUBA AND WOMBERA DISTRICTS



CONCLUSION

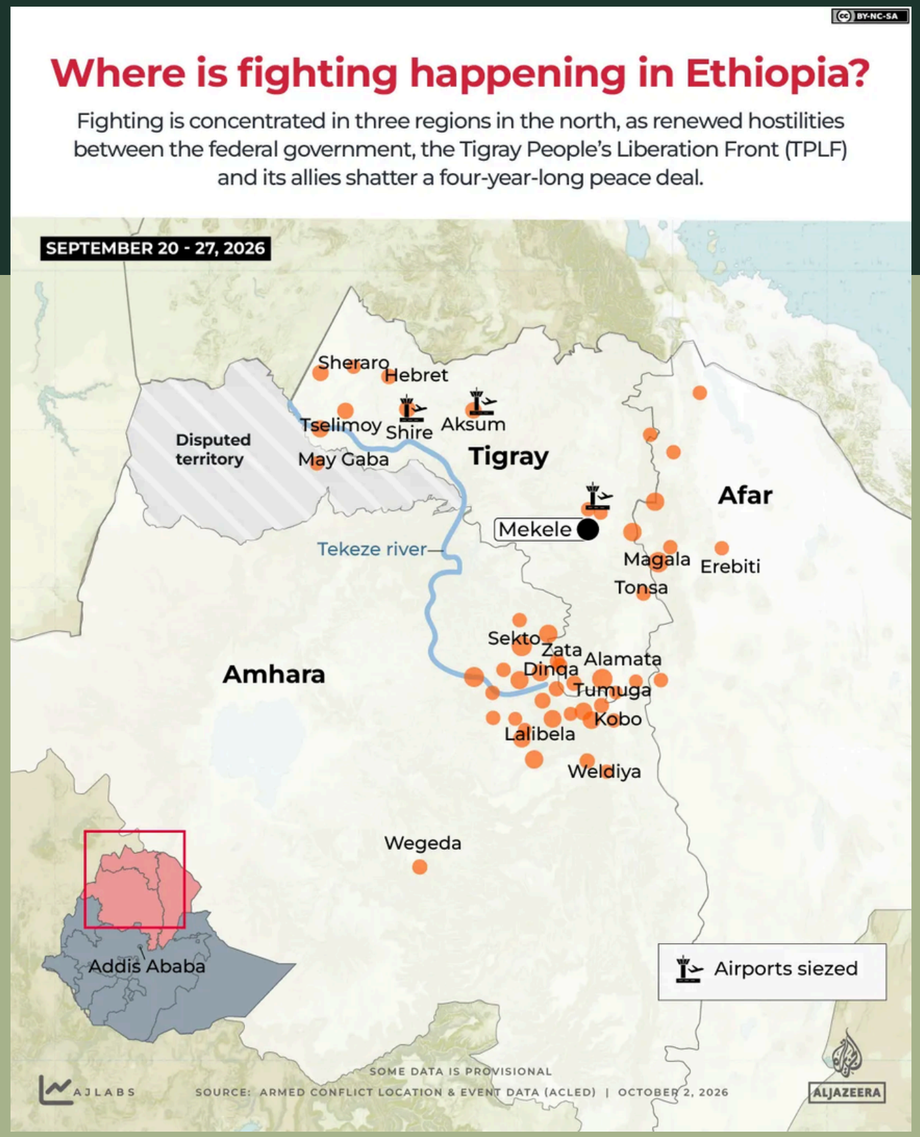
DISMANTLING NILE HEGEMONY

ENERGY DIPLOMACY & REGIONAL INTERDEPENDENCE

THE "RENAISSANCE" NATIONALIST NARRATIVE

SOVEREIGN FINANCING VS. UNFULFILLED ACCOUNTABILITY

CURRENT CONFLICT



The GERD successfully transforms Ethiopia into a regional energy power and dismantles historical Nile monopolies. However, by substituting democratic accountability with top-down coercion and failing to prevent the resurgence of internal armed conflicts, the project reinforces the state apparatus rather than its citizens, proving that mega-infrastructure cannot substitute for genuine political reconciliation.

SOURCE: ALJAZEERA

QUESTION

Does the GERD show us that top-down state-building can successfully create a national identity, or does it prove that infrastructure cannot fix deep political fractures?

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- AYENEW YESHIWAS, D., IMANA KENO, G., ENDALE ETEFA, T., & MAKAHAMADZE, T. (2023). HIGH-MODERNIST INTERVENTION AND THE PROLONGED FRONTIER CONFLICT IN METEKEL, NORTH-WEST ETHIOPIA: THE CASE OF THE GRAND ETHIOPIAN RENAISSANCE DAM. SMALL WARS & INSURGENCIES, 34(8), 1501–1531.
- BAYART, J.-F. (1999). L'AFRIQUE DANS LE MONDE : UNE HISTOIRE D'EXTRAVERSION. CRITIQUE INTERNATIONALE, 5(1), 97–120.
- BLANC, P., & RASHID, W. (2016). HYDROPOLITIQUE DU NIL: LA SORTIE DU STATU QUO HYDRO-HÉGÉMONIQUE DE L'ÉGYPTE. OBSERVATOIRE DES ENJEUX POLITIQUES ET SÉCURITAIRES DANS LA CORNE DE L'AFRIQUE. HTTPS://SHS.HAL.SCIENCE/HALSHS-02386452/DOCUMENT
- CARUSO, F. (2022). ETHIOPIA'S GRAND RENAISSANCE DAM: THE LAW, HISTORY, POLITICS AND GEOPOLITICS BEHIND AFRICA'S LARGEST HYDROPOWER PROJECT. ISTITUTO AFFARI INTERNAZIONALI.
- CARUSO, F. (2024). ETHIOPIA'S GRAND RENAISSANCE DAM: THE LAW, HISTORY, POLITICS AND GEOPOLITICS BEHIND AFRICA'S LARGEST HYDROPOWER PROJECT. ISTITUTO AFFARI INTERNAZIONALI.
- EASTERN AFRICA POWER POOL. (N.D.). THE EAPP.
- ETHIOPIAN NEWS AGENCY. (2026, JULY 9). ETHIOPIA ASSUMES EASTERN AFRICA POWER POOL CHAIRMANSHIP, PLEDGES TO ACCELERATE ENERGY INTEGRATION.
- ETHIOPIAN NEWS AGENCY. (2026, SEPTEMBER 14). GERD DRIVES RECORD EARNINGS AND REGIONAL ENERGY INTEGRATION, SAYS EEP CEO.
- ETICHIA, M., BASHEER, M., BRAVO VARGAS, R., RAMOS PULIDO, J., ENDEGNANEW, A., GONZALEZ CABRERA, J., HURFORD, A., TOMLINSON, J., MARTINEZ-CESENA, E., PANTELI, M., & HAROU, J. (2024). ENERGY TRADE TEMPERS NILE WATER CONFLICT. NATURE WATER, 2(4), 337–349.
- GRAND ETHIOPIAN RENAISSANCE DAM. (N.D.). ABOUT THE DAM.
- HARRISON, G. (2001). POST-CONDITIONALITY POLITICS AND ADMINISTRATIVE REFORM: REFLECTIONS ON THE CASES OF UGANDA AND TANZANIA. DEVELOPMENT AND CHANGE, 32(4), 657–679.
- INTERNATIONAL CRISIS GROUP. (2019). ETHIOPIA AND THE GERD. IN BRIDGING THE GAP IN THE NILE WATERS DISPUTE (PP. 3–12). INTERNATIONAL CRISIS GROUP.
- INTERNATIONAL WATER POWER & DAM CONSTRUCTION. (N.D.). GRAND ETHIOPIAN RENAISSANCE DAM: HOW AFRICA'S LARGEST HYDROPOWER PROJECT IS POWERING ETHIOPIA'S FUTURE.
- LAVERS, T. (ED.). (2024). DAMS, POWER AND THE POLITICS OF ETHIOPIA'S RENAISSANCE.
- LILIENTHAL, G., AHMAD, N., AWOKE, B. S., & ELFAKHARANI, A. M. A. (2023). THE BLUE NILE AND ITS WATERCOURSE THROUGH ETHIOPIA INTO SUDAN AND EGYPT: A PARADIGMATIC SHIFT IN WATER RIGHTS, AN ANALYTICAL OVERVIEW. TULANE ENVIRONMENTAL LAW JOURNAL, 36.
- MEKONNEN, T. (2021). DECOLONISING THE NILE RIVER: COLONIAL AGREEMENTS AS IMPEDIMENTS TO SUSTAINABLE BASIN-WIDE COOPERATION. ETHIOPIAN JOURNAL OF SOCIAL SCIENCES, 7(2).
- MKANDAWIRE, T. (2010). AID, ACCOUNTABILITY, AND DEMOCRACY IN AFRICA. SOCIAL RESEARCH, 77(4), 1149–1182.
- MOREDA, T. (2017). LARGE-SCALE LAND ACQUISITIONS, STATE AUTHORITY AND INDIGENOUS LOCAL COMMUNITIES: INSIGHTS FROM ETHIOPIA. THIRD WORLD QUARTERLY, 38(3), 698–716.
- MUTUA, J. (2025, SEPTEMBER 30). HOW ETHIOPIA SAVED KENYA FROM POWER RATIONING, BLACKOUTS. BUSINESS DAILY.
- NASA EARTH OBSERVATORY. (2022, APRIL 20). KEEPING A SATELLITE EYE ON GERD. NASA.
- NILE BASIN INITIATIVE. (N.D.). EASTERN NILE MULTI-SECTOR INVESTMENT OPPORTUNITY ANALYSIS: ATLAS OF MAPS.
- PARLIAMENT OF KENYA. (2025, MAY 8). EPRA DEFENDS GEOTHERMAL CURTAILMENT AND IMPORT STRATEGY.
- RODNEY, W. (1972). HOW EUROPE UNDERDEVELOPED AFRICA (CHAPTER 1). BOGLE-L'OUVERTURE PUBLICATIONS.
- RUBINKOWSKA-ANIOŁ, H. (2018). ETHIOPIAN RENAISSANCE OR HOW TO TURN DYSFUNCTIONAL INTO FUNCTIONAL. POLITEJA, 56, 109–122. [SUSPICIOUS LINK REMOVED]
- TAYIE, M. S. (2019). THE GRAND ETHIOPIAN RENAISSANCE DAM AND THE ETHIOPIAN CHALLENGE OF HYDROPOLITICAL HEGEMONY ON THE NILE BASIN. IN A. M. NEGM & S. ABDEL-FATTAH (EDS.), GRAND ETHIOPIAN RENAISSANCE DAM VERSUS ASWAN HIGH DAM (THE HANDBOOK OF ENVIRONMENTAL CHEMISTRY, VOL. 79, PP. 485–518). SPRINGER, CHAM.
- TIPTON, T. (2025). DENILE ON THE NILE: BALANCING ETHIOPIA'S EQUITABLE AND REASONABLE UTILIZATION OF THE NILE AND EGYPT'S DESIRE TO MAINTAIN THE STATUS QUO. CASE WESTERN RESERVE JOURNAL OF INTERNATIONAL LAW, 57(1), 587–617.
- VERHOEVEN, H. (2013). THE POLITICS OF AFRICAN ENERGY DEVELOPMENT: ETHIOPIA'S HYDRO-AGRICULTURAL STATE-BUILDING STRATEGY AND CLASHING PARADIGMS OF WATER SECURITY. PHILOSOPHICAL TRANSACTIONS OF THE ROYAL SOCIETY A: MATHEMATICAL, PHYSICAL AND ENGINEERING SCIENCES, 371(2002).
- VERHOEVEN, H. (2021). THE GRAND ETHIOPIAN RENAISSANCE DAM: AFRICA'S WATER TOWER, ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE & INFRASTRUCTURAL POWER. DAEDALUS, 150(4), 159–180.
- VERHOEVEN, H. (2025). DAMS, POWER, AND THE POLITICS OF ETHIOPIA'S RENAISSANCE. OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS.
- WEBUILD. (N.D.). GRAND ETHIOPIAN RENAISSANCE DAM PROJECT.

THANK YOU FOR YOUR ATTENTION!

WE ARE OPEN TO YOUR QUESTIONS!

