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Cultural Significance of River Abay in Ethiopia: Ethnography of Water-inspired Beliefs, Spiritual Practices and Symbolic Meanings Along the Banks in the Wetet Abay Area

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Bahir Dar University
Faculty of Social Science
Department of Social Anthropology

A Dissertation

On

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Beliefs, Spiritual Practices and Symbolic Meanings Along the Banks in the Wetet
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By

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August, 2026

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By
Abraham Genet

A Dissertation
Submitted to the Department of Social Anthropology
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in Social Anthropology

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August, 2026
Bahir Dar, Ethiopia

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgement	iii
List of Figures	v
List of Acronyms	vi
Glossary of Local Terms.....	vii
Abstract.....	viii
Chapter One: Introduction	1
1.1 Background of the Study.....	1
1.2 Rationale of the Study.....	7
1.3 Research Problem and Specific Aims	11
1.4 Research Questions	11
1.5 Research Site.....	12
1.6 Research Design, Data Collection Methods and Procedures	14
1.6.1 Interviews.....	15
1.6.2 Participant Observation.....	17
1.6.3 Secondary Data Sources.....	20
1.7 Folkloric Evidences	20
1.8 Data Analysis and Interpretation	21
1.9 Reflexivity	23
1.10 Validity	24
1.11 Ethical Consideration	25
1.12 Significance of the Study.....	26
1.13 Field Work Encounters and Limitations of the Study	27
1.14 Structure of the Dissertation	32
Chapter Two: Review of Related Literature	34
2.1 Rivers and Their Cultural Significance: A Conceptual Basis and Brief Cross-Cultural Review	34
2.2 The Cultural Significance of Abay	38
2.2.1 The Religious and Spiritual Elements.....	38
2.2.2 The Symbolic Aspects	46
2.2.3 The Ecological Aspects of Spiritual Beliefs	47
Chapter Three: Beliefs, Spiritual Practices and Rituals About Abay	50
3.1 The Religious Basis of Abay's Veneration.....	50

3.2 Abay’s Intersectionality with Local Spiritual Practices.....	52
3.3 The <i>Zar</i> and <i>Jinn</i> Spirits of Abay.....	53
3.3.1 The <i>Zar</i> Spirit.....	54
3.3.2 Abay and the <i>Jinn</i> Spirit.....	58
3.4 Abay as Site of Consecrations, Sacrificial Feasts and Rituals	66
3.5 Sacrificial Sites: What Makes Some Sites More Favored than Others?	77
3.6 Intrusions into the Unseen Realm, Warnings and Tragic Responses.....	81
3.7 Religious Assertions versus “River Worship”: The Contentious Elements.....	88
3.8 The New Year Celebrations on Abay	95
Chapter Four: The Meanings of Abay River as Symbol and Metaphor for Life: An Ethnographic Interpretation.....	102
4.1 Abay Symbolized as Powerful and Unifying Paternal Figure	103
4.2 Abay as Sacred Symbol	104
4.3 Abay as Symbol of Bounty and Generosity	105
4.4 Abay as Symbol of Unbearable Power	106
4.5 Abay as Symbol of National Icon, Representation and Unity	110
4.6 Abay as Place of Childhood Memory	113
4.7 Abay as an Image of Yearning Desire	117
4.8 Abay as an Aesthetic Symbol	119
Chapter Five: Spiritual Beliefs and Practices: The Ecological Aspects, Changes and Persistence	123
5.1 Ecologically Adaptive Roles of Spiritual Beliefs and Practices Attached to Abay	124
5.2 Reverence to Spirits, Fear of Punishment and the Protection of Trees.....	124
5.3 Recent Challenges to the Adaptive Roles of Spiritual Ecology.....	132
5.4 Implications of Depletion of Forests and Spiritual Beings along the River.....	137
5.5 Potentials for Forest Protection and Restoration.....	138
5.6 Change and Persistence in Spiritual Beliefs and Practices	139
5.6.1 Changes in Perception of Sacredness and Frequency of Periodic Sacrifices and Rituals.....	140
Chapter Six: Conclusion and Recommendation	146
References.....	152
Appendix A: Semi-structured Interview Guide	162
Appendix B: Participant Observation Guide	167
Appendix C: Additional Field Photos.....	171
Appendix D: Profile of the Research Participants	179

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List of Figures

Figure 1: Map that shows the location of Wetet Abay town-----	14
Figure 2: Preparation of sacrificial feast on the shore of Abay-----	77
Figure 3: Cooking sacrificial feast on the shore of Abay-----	77
Figure 4: The confluence of River Abay and River Jema-----	80
Figure 5: A sacrificial site at Wetet Abay, underneath a <i>chibiha</i> tree-----	80
Figure 6: <i>Dokima</i> tree along the shore of Abay, one of the most common sacrificial sites-----	81
Figure 7: Shore side <i>zigiba</i> tree that is believed to be home of invisible spirits-----	131
Figure 8: A glimpse of riverine vegetation-----	131
Figure 9: <i>Dokima</i> trees preserved along the banks of Abay-----	132
Figure 10: A riverscape image before and after expansion of cultivation by the riverside-----	137

List of Acronyms

CSA - Central Statistics Authority

ENDF – Ethiopian National Defense Force

EOC - Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity

WHO – World Health Organization

Glossary of Local Terms

Enjera - is a staple and popular dish for many Ethiopians, made from baking grains, notably *teff*.

It resembles flatbread. However, it is thinner, circled and full of holes known as “eyes”.

Jinn – An invisible spirit believed to have mystical superhuman powers. In the context of this research, *Jinn* is believed to inhabit an unseen world beneath the water of Abay.

Pagume - The Ethiopian thirteenth month, typically consisting of five days.

Qole – A generic term which refers to a kind of guardian spirit.

Silet - a deliberate pledge people make to offer to a supposedly superhuman power as gratitude following the granting or fulfillment of their wish.

Teff – a tiny grain native to Ethiopia that is widely cultivated in the country as a staple food crop.

Tehlil – Water regarded as holy and has healing powers by Muslims.

Tsebel – Water regarded as holy and has healing powers by Orthodox Christians.

Zar – A spirit believed to possess people, especially women. It is thought to reside in the wild, including along river shores.

Abstract

Far from being mere inanimate natural occurrences, river flows around the world are sites where natural phenomena intersect with cultural traditions. From this intersection and interaction a range of rich cultural values, beliefs, meanings and social significances emerge and persist. Drawing on this understanding of rivers as coupled natural and human systems, this dissertation is a broad ethnographic investigation and interpretation of the cultural significance of River Abay (hereafter Abay) in Ethiopia. Specifically, the research explored spiritual beliefs and practices, and symbolic meanings linked with Abay, as well as the distinct ecological elements of those beliefs and practices. Ethnographic, and to some extent historical information informing the study, was collected through a combination of in-depth interviews and participant observation among communities residing along the river in Wetet Abay town and its rural vicinities. Some popular Amharic proverbs, poems and song verses about Abay were also included and interpreted to provide the research a folkloric context, in order to better grasp the symbolic meanings associated with the river. Along with some empirical studies relevant to the topic, the firsthand data were analyzed through thematic and content analysis methods. The findings reveal that, in the eyes of local people, Abay is concurrently imbued with holy powers and untamed supernatural beings. This notion, in particular, has made Abay a spiritually significant site for invoking the mediation and protection of supernatural forces through rituals and sacrifices conducted along the river. Symbolically, Abay is perceived via a humanized lens, with its natural features profoundly embodied as metaphorical and figurative elements in the language used to express diverse phenomena and aspects of people's lives. The cultural values, especially the spiritual beliefs and practices associated with Abay, possess important ecological elements, contributing to conservation along the river, particularly in the protection of trees. The

findings imply that, there is an overall decline in the frequency and regularity of magico-religious rituals and sacrifices along the river. In addition, at the state level, the river's cultural features are overlooked in favor of focusing on its economic aspects. However, despite the decline of rituals and the policy neglect, the imagery of Abay as religiously holy, as well as home of powerful invisible beings affecting the welfare of humans remains enduring. Abay also persists as a common and distinctive natural and cultural icon for the Ethiopian people, where its real and symbolic presence has profound and lasting imprint in the traditions of local communities and the imaginations of individuals.

Key Words: Abay River; Wetet Abay; Spiritual Beliefs; Rituals; Symbolic Meanings.

Chapter One: Introduction

1.1 Background of the Study

Rivers around the world provided life, initiated civilization and influenced the cultures of people. Several studies, (e.g., Donnel, 2014; Wantzen, 2015; Gill, 2016) show that river flow is not just a natural phenomenon. More than that, river flow exists at the nexus between ecosystem functions and cultural interactions, connecting people across contrasting ecologies and inspiring diverse cultural values, beliefs and practices. In addition to being a natural phenomenon, river flow should be explored as an occurrence that carries intricate importance and meaning for both humans and the broader ecosystem (Wantzen et al, 2016; Anderson, 2019).

In addition to being a natural system, river flows should be understood from diverse perspectives including people's social, cultural and religious views and values and interactions that surround them (Erich, 2001; Gad, 2008; Oestigaard, 2009). This framing has generated a growing body of multi-disciplinary research that seeks to explore the human dimensions of river flows (Antweiler, 2013; Wantzen et al, 2016; Kumar 2017). In the Ethiopian context, however, there is very little written about how local people themselves perceive, think and talk about their lived interactions with river flows and the resulting long-term cultural and institutional impacts. The purpose of this research project is to explore the cultural significance of Abay in Ethiopia by collecting empirical data in the vicinity of a locality known as Wetet Abay, an area located in the highlands of north central Ethiopia. The area comprised of a small town and rural hamlets in the middle of the upper course of Abay. Abay is internationally known by the name the "Blue Nile" and biblically as "Ghion". In Ethiopia, the river is known by its popular name "Abay". Therefore, I shall make it clear from the beginning that when I say "River Abay" or just "Abay" I am referring to the "Blue Nile" or "Ghion". For the rest of this research work I used the name

that Ethiopians use to call the river—“Abay” rather than the “Blue Nile” or “Ghion”.

The conceptual and theoretical basis of this research originates from an anthropological perspective which emphasizes rivers as sites that harbor a complex interaction between natural processes and the cultural, social and spiritual life of people (Wantzen, 2015; Dahal 2018; Anderson et al, 2019). This makes sense for an emic understanding of Abay not just as a flowing water but also as a gift from “God” and a “living being” that “has life” and gives life to others (Oestigaard and Gedif, 2013; Donnel, 2014). These conceptual and theoretical lenses facilitated an exploration of the holistic interactions between local people and Abay, and enabled to understand the meanings that have emerged from these intricate interactions. Specifically, the findings of the study closely relate to two theoretical contexts. The first is the theoretical basis that goes back to Durkheim’s works that emphasize religious and ritual performances generate collective beliefs, emotions and interpretations (Summers, 2006). The second is associated with the theory of animism, which is a belief in supernatural spiritual beings inhabiting natural sites, such as rivers in my case (Read, 1915; Stuckrad, 2023). It is an important theoretical perspective since, in this study, numerous forms of ritual and sacrificial practices conducted at Abay are inextricably linked to animistic beliefs.

Nonetheless, in this research, theory is used as a lens for looking into the research question and relating that to the results, not as a container to pack in the possible findings. So, this research is not strictly framed into any particular theoretical model. Instead, theoretical and conceptual models in this research serve as a perspective to modestly shape and contextualize the gathering, analysis and interpretation of data on the research problem at stake—the cultural significance of Abay. Abay is Ethiopia’s largest and mightiest river. For Ethiopians, Abay is a national symbol of deeply-felt pride and glory. For millennia the river has been a vital national

subject and connection (and of course an issue of contention), thereby shaping Ethiopia's political, social and cultural relations with the downstream basin countries, especially with Egypt. These relations make Abay's cultural influence in Ethiopia bold and worth studying. Prior to delving into the cultural aspects of Abay that are relevant for the purpose of this research, in the following paragraphs, I shall provide some general information about the physical features of the river.

As the largest contributor of the Nile, Abay supplies not only abundant water but also large quantities of fertile silt drained from the Ethiopian highlands. Scholars and observers alike have recognized the vitality of these fresh water and soils for revitalizing agriculture in the two lower basin countries, Sudan and Egypt (Sutcliffe and Parks, 1999; Pfeifer et al., 2012; Conniff et al., —; Yenehun et al., 2021). The length of Abay from its origin in Ethiopia to its confluence with the White Nile in Khartoum is approximately 1450 to 1600 km (Abay Basin Authority, 2016). These figures are estimates as Abay flows through impenetrable deep gorges that are difficult to measure precisely. The Abay river basin spans vast geographic region and is subdivided into 16 major watersheds (Abay basin Office; 2020). The total area of the Abay basin in Ethiopia consists of 199,812km². This land mass occupies 20% of the country's total surface area, covering 60% of Amhara, 40% of Oromia and 95% of Benishangul-Gumuz regional states. The Abay basin also accounts for about half of the total annual water discharge from Ethiopia. In terms of population, about 28% of the entire population of Ethiopia lives in the Abay basin. About 91% of this population reside in the countryside and primarily depend on agriculture (Abay Basin Authority, 2016).

Abay originates at its headwaters called Gish in North Central Ethiopia from the mountains of Central Gojjam (currently administratively in West Gojjam Zone, Sekela district).

Flowing northwards, it then enters Lake Tana¹, and makes a “mystical” exit at the southeastern tip of the lake near Bahir Dar city. Thirty kilometers afterwards, Abay falls sharply into a deep gorge, making a spectacular waterfall locally known as Tis Abay Fuaquate (it means “Abay waterfall that smokes”). Tis Abay has long been recognized as one of Ethiopia’s popular tourist attraction sites. For most of its journey in Ethiopia, Abay winds westwards through the center of a gigantic deep gorge cutting the gorge in to northern and southern halves. The topography of the land alongside the flow of Abay is characterized by rugged mountainous in the Ethiopian highlands and flat topography in the Sudanese lowlands.

Abay is a river receiving plenty of perennial tributaries. In the upper course—from its rise at Gish in Sekela to its entrance into Lake Tana, the river receives several perennial tributaries such as the Ashar, Jema, Kilti and Koger rivers (Abay Basin Authority, 2016). In the middle and lower course—from its exit out of Lake Tana to its confluence with the White Nile in Khartoum, Abay draws in a number of tributaries both from its left and right sides. Beshilo, Jema², Muger, Guder, Dedessa and Dabus are among the main tributaries that join Abay on its left bank; while Andasa, Abaya, Sede, Gula, Temcha, Birr, Fettam, Chemoga and Beles represent its major tributaries from the right bank. Apart from the aforementioned rivers, the Dinder, Gelago and Rahad rivers, having their origins in Ethiopia, join Abay in Sudan before its confluence with the White Nile in Khartoum (Abay Basin Authority, 2016; Abay Basin Office, 2020). As an amalgamate of all these perennial rivers, Abay has long been perceived in popular Ethiopian imagination as symbol of might, too powerful to be conquered by human action. It is

¹ Lake Tana, Ethiopia’s largest natural freshwater body, supplies Abay large volume of water as the river leaves the lake. The lake consists of many islands and peninsulas that are home to several renowned monasteries and historical heritages. It is also home to significant biodiversity and natural beauty. Its natural, cultural, religious and historical attractions combined, the Lake Tana region is one of the top tourist destinations in Ethiopia.

²Jema is a namesake for two different rivers, both of which tributaries of Abay at different courses of the river, as described in the main text.

this physical enlargement and basin span of Abay that partially enables the river to be perceived as the “father of all rivers” and to be signified as a cultural, social and spiritual junction of the people who live alongside the river and its tributaries (Damtew, 2016; Azeb, 2023).

Let me return back from the description of Abay’s physical course to its cultural and social features, which is the main focus of this study. As I argue in this study, these features constitute Abay’s cultural and social significance both nationally as symbol of Ethiopia’s untapped development potential, and locally for people residing along its banks as an abode of powerful supernatural beings. The ethnographic and folkloric information I gathered attest to Abay’s profound influence on Ethiopians’ tradition and art—be it in belief systems, oral literature, proverbs, music, and so on. In addition, Abay possesses a substantial religious value, because, as described in the Bible, Abay is one of the Four Rivers that flow from the Garden of Eden. Abay is also perceived to be a great national emblem and hope for Ethiopians, as the river is a nationwide icon of affluence, unity and patriotism. It is widely believed in Ethiopia that the river’s name was changed from its Biblical name “Gihon” to “Abay” since the ninth century by Abune Zerabruk. As recounted in his miracles, Abune Zerabruk was a devoted Orthodox Christian monk who used to pray at the source of the river—Gish, who becomes a reason³ for the renaming of the river from its biblical name “Ghion” to its local/national name “Abay”.

³Abune Zerabruk (born at the end of the eighth c A.D.) was a dedicated and an invincible religious man who have heavily influenced the Christian beliefs and ritual performances that continued to date at Gish Abay. According to Oestigaard and Gedif (2011), the Abune (a respected Ethiopian Orthodox Christian religious title) prayed for about thirty years at the source of Abay, which was later to become Gish Abay. Abune Zerabruk also performed a number of miracles and religious achievements. According to oral traditions and empirical evidences such as Oestigaard and Gedif (2011), one of his miracles was the one that caused the river’s name to be changed to ‘Abay’. When the Abune’s religious influence grew faster, the then kings were not comfortable about his fame, so he was subsequently arrested. But before he was arrested, the Abune, believed to be according to God’s command given to him, prayed and entrusted his religious books up on the river by giving down the books to the spring, which is the source of Ghion. When the Abune come back after years of imprisonment, he prayed to God and eventually asked the spring to bring forth the books he had given to it, by saying *gish*, which in the language of Geez means ‘bring forth’. *Gish* is used to say bring forth for a female, however, currently, both the spring at the source and the river in general are perceived in male gender. The books came forth from the spring intact. In that miraculous moment there was an old

Abay's cultural and religious influence in Ethiopia is profound and deserves further empirical explorations by employing ethnographic methods. Hence, the central objective of this research project is to systematically explore religious beliefs, traditional⁴ spiritual practices⁵ and ritual performances⁶, by analyzing the spiritual attachments and interactions between Abay and the locals living along the river's course. The research also aims to scrutinize the symbolic meanings of Abay to the people residing along the river as well as to the general public in Ethiopia, through the jointly analysis and interpretation of ethnographic data and popular folkloric verses uttered about the river. To serve this purpose, a symbol is operationalized and understood as an image, object, person or concept that represents something beyond its literal meaning. In this regard, the study also makes reference to a closely related term—metaphor, which is defined as a figure of speech that draws a direct comparison between two dissimilar things. Additionally, the research examines the significances of beliefs, ritual practices and the locals' spiritual interactions with Abay for ecological conservation along the course of the river. Overall, the research project aims at providing improved understanding of the religious beliefs

man, thought to be the disciple of Abune Zerabruk, standing beside him. The Abune called the old man to witness the miracle by saying *Aba eyi*, which in Amharic means “father look”. Some clergies say that the phrase *aba eyi* was uttered by the spring itself to Abune Zerabruk. Any ways, from that time onwards the word *Aba eyi* was modified and become the Ethiopian name for the river as *Abay*. Together the three words of the Abune—*gish* and *aba eyi* become the name of the place as *Gish Abay*, where the River Abay has its source.

The following are my epistemological and ontological working frameworks in the context of this research for “traditional practices”, “spiritual practices” and “ritual performances”:

⁴ When I say “traditional practices” I am not excluding what may be termed as “contemporary practices”, practices that incorporate new forms of ideas and actions, or any practices that have continued in a modified manner. Even so, these newer forms of practices would have a traditional basis, meaning, they tend to be rooted from long existed, established practices. The research does not operate on the basis of this distinction, however. Rather, the focus is to collectively explore what is now practiced on the banks of Abay by the people, be it traditional or contemporary.

⁵ Spiritual practices are any forms of practices by individuals, groups or communities with an intention of connecting themselves (for various purposes) with the sacred or the supernatural component.

⁶ In the context of this research, ritual performances, like spiritual practices, are ways of creating bonds with the sacred and the supernatural for individuals, groups and communities. But, while spiritual practices are broader, ritual performances are different in that they are actions or events performed with the goal of achieving efficacy on a certain particular matter. Ritual performances also tend to be place and time specific and ceremonial.

and traditional spiritual practices associated with Abay, and people's cultural interactions with the river and the resulting symbolic meanings and significances that emanate from these interactions, through an ethnographic approach.

1.2 Rationale of the Study

Abay is an unfalteringly important river in Ethiopia in more ways than one including hydrologically, ecologically, historically, economically, politically and culturally. As an international river, Abay has been the single most important driver of Ethiopia's geopolitical relationship with Sudan and Egypt. Although largely overlooked by scholars and foreign policy experts alike, Abay has also been a site for the birth and development of a range of local and regional cultures, beliefs, rituals and spiritual practices. These cultural and social dimensions of Abay have remained understudied as the primary focuses of both scholars as well as policy makers have been on hydrological, economic and political aspects of the river. As Oestigaard (2011) correctly noted, after the sources of the Nile were discovered, most studies have focused on hydrology. There is little written on cultural and religious aspects of the river.

Accounts conducted by some sources provide exceptions to this lack of cognizance regarding the cultural aspects of the river. These include the accounts of European explorers and travelers, notably Paedro Paez and James Bruce. Paez documented the physical, social and historical features surrounding the spring at Gish Abay (Martinez, 2019). Bruce described his triumphant personal feeling upon his alleged discovery of the source of the Blue Nile for the "first time". He also noted that pre-Christian and Christian spiritual traditions were practiced at Gish Abay (Bruce, 1790). Since Paez's and Bruce's visit, in the later centuries, several other foreign explorers and scholars visited and attempted to document the river Abay and its source.

Among these explorers and scholars was Charles Beke, who visited Gish Abay in 1842. Beke scientifically documented the spiritual practices at Gish Abay and revealed that the people around the source performed both Paganic and Christian rituals—one intermingled in another (Beke, 1844). The research by Oestigaard and Gedif (2011) shows that Cheesman was the other explorer who visited Lake Tana and Gish Abay in the late 1920s. In his visit (together with his wife) Cheesman noted that the spring at Gish Abay is venerated to be holy, which is believed to have high healing powers. Cheesman also described about Abune Zerabruk, the monk who established St Zerabruk and/or St Michael church at Gish Abay. As described earlier in the background section, Abune Zerabruk is commonly thought to have changed the river's name from Ghion to its current widely recognized national name, Abay. Chessman's documentation demonstrates that Abune Zerabruk heavily shaped the modern day religious practices at Gish Abay after the source has been Christianized. The research by Oestigaard and Gedif (2013) also assert the historical relationship between Abay and Abune Zerabruk and the Abune's subsequent influence on the name and veneration of the river.

On the other hand, a book by Moorehead (1962) describes the course of the Blue Nile and the historical witnesses of the travelers, notably the adventures of James Bruce. Recently, Oestigaard and Gedif (2009; 2020) documented rituals, beliefs, sacrifices and traditions along Abay river and discussed the role of water in the history of the Lake Tana region in historical and contemporary contexts. Additionally, the study by Oestigaard (2011) shows that the source of Abay river—Gish Abay, had been a site of traditional ritual sacrifices, and the importance of the place for spiritual practices has continued in a modified manner after it has been Christianized.

More recently, Berhanu (2014), Damtew (2016) and Azeb (2023) published articles on the symbolic and social attachments of Ethiopians with Abay by analyzing some of the

traditional Amharic songs and poems uttered about the river (further discussion of these and the abovementioned studies shall be presented in further detail in the literature review chapter).

Apart from the aforementioned works, the cultural significance of Abay remains largely understudied. Although there is some more research on the topic of Abay's cultural relevance scattered across the fields of philology and folklore, most of these works were not published empirical sources and lack analytical rigor. Also, the previous empirical and published studies on Abay have largely emphasized its spiritual significance, with limited attention to the river's broader importance across interconnected social, cultural and ecological domains. In addition, as Oestigaard and Gedif (2011) and Oestigaard (2018) also noted, the recent research on the spiritual and ritual importance of the river tend to focus on its source—Gish Abay, while offering little insight into the perspectives of communities living along its banks.

Additionally, the Ethiopian government's narrative on Abay and its depiction as a core engine for national development appears to be one of the main reasons for the inadequate interest on the cultural and spiritual aspects of the river. Ethiopian government's development discourses portray Abay as a national resource that should be exploited to transform Ethiopia to a middle-income country and to guarantee regional security with the lower basin countries. A political economy centered analysis on Abay increasingly dominates Ethiopia's current local and national narratives of today's Abay. Unfortunately, such an emphasis tends to belittle, and sometimes marginalize traditions that were enriched through thousands of years of interactions between local people and the river. Abay's enormous cultural and spiritual significances for the local people whose livelihood have been intertwined with the river, are often omitted, and sometimes rejected as "primitive/uncivilized practices". In sum, Abay's cultural significances are denied of

attention in favor of imparting a unified discourse on the importance of damming it for achieving a rapid economic development.

This research aims to address this knowledge gap by emphasizing Abay's cultural importance in the realms of the religious, spiritual, ritual and symbolic aspects of the river. As I noted in the background section, the overarching goal of the research is to explore, document and analyze the cultural and spiritual connections of the locals⁷ with Abay and interpret the significances and the meanings that emerge from the connections. Specifically, the research is intended to ethnographically study the beliefs, practices and day-to-day interactions of people living along Abay with a particular focus on the vicinity of Wetet Abay. The research also seeks to uncover the cultural, religious, symbolic and social meaning(s) of Abay to people, as well as the implications of the local spiritual beliefs surrounding the river to ecological conservation.

The research site, Wetet Abay area, was selected after a series of firsthand preliminary research activities. This place is one of the most important locations on the banks of Abay where age-old religious and traditional spiritual beliefs and ritual sacrifices are practiced and still alive today. This makes Wetet Abay one of the most important sites for studying the religious and spiritual aspect of Abay. In this context, it is a place that deserves special attention comparable to that of Gish Abay. Additionally, Wetet Abay is located in the upper middle course of Abay, which is one of the least studied courses of the river. Some further information regarding Wetet Abay area is provided in the research site section.

⁷ The term "the locals" does not necessarily represent a group of people having homogenous beliefs and practices associated with Abay river. Thus, this ethnographic exploration is based on an understanding that people in the study site may be diverse and may possess a range of varied experiences, meanings and ideas with regard to their interaction with Abay.

1.3 Research Problem and Specific Aims

The dissertation is based on the overarching research problem—investigating the cultural significance of Abay in Ethiopia, with a particular focus in the Wetet Abay area. Within this overarching objective, the research specifically aims to:

1. Explore the religious and traditional beliefs, spiritual practices and rituals conducted by the banks of Abay
2. Identify and interpret the symbolic meanings of Abay both for the locals and Ethiopians at large
3. Examine the importance of traditional spiritual beliefs, ritual practices and symbolic values associated with Abay in the context of ecological conservation along the river

1.4 Research Questions

What is Abay's cultural significance in Ethiopia? This is the central research question. In light of this general research topic and the research location in mind, the study specifically aims to address the following questions:

1. What are the religious and traditional beliefs, as well as spiritual practices and rituals conducted by people, by the banks of Abay?
2. What are some of the most important symbolic meanings of Abay for the local people as well for other Ethiopians at large?
3. How Abay-inspired traditional beliefs, ritual practices and symbolic values influence ecological conservation along the river?

1.5 Research Site

As previously stated in the introductory sections, the study site Wetet Abay is an area found in the highlands of north central Ethiopia. It is located in the middle of the upper course of Abay. Here, the “upper course” of Abay refers to the areas through which the river runs before entering Lake Tana. Some sources refer this course of the river using the Amharic designation “Gilgel Abay”, which translates as the “Lesser Abay”. The most voluminous of the numerous other perennial rivers that flow into Lake Tana, Abay is already formed as a large river in this portion of its course. One can easily notice how fairly large Abay is in the accessible Wetet Abay area, and feel that the river in that course does not deserve to be referred as lesser⁸. As a result, for me, to refer it by the name the upper course of Abay, or simply Abay as the locals refer it, is more convenient than Lesser Abay.

Strictly speaking, the name Wetet Abay⁹ stands for a small town found along the bank of Abay¹⁰. The town is located around 500 km from Addis Ababa and 51 km from the regional capital, Bahir Dar. However, in the context of this study, the Wetet Abay area refers not only to the town and its close surrounds, but also to the town’s moderately farther rural environs, both upstream and downstream. The research location, in particular, comprises communities along the banks of Abay that are approximately up to 15 kilometers upstream from Wetet Abay town. I treated the town and its rural surroundings as a single research area since the communities that live in the town and the rural areas along Abay broadly have comparable and similar physical linkages and interactions with the river. Most importantly, these communities embrace similar traditions in terms of their religious, spiritual and symbolic connections to the river.

⁸ For more information see Appendix C, especially the Figures from C1 to C4.

⁹ The town is also popularly known as “Bikolo”. This name is believed to have been adopted from the Italians’ designation of the place as “Piccolo” during the second Italian invasion of Ethiopia. Currently, the town is officially recognized by its Amharic designation, Wetet Abay, which translates directly to “Milk Abay”.

¹⁰ Refer to Figure C1 in Appendix C for a physical reference of Wetet Abay town in relation to the Abay River.

The communities of the study area are ethnically homogeneous, reporting as Amhara and speaking Amharic as their first language. In terms of religion, EOC is the dominant faith, with the entire rural population adhering to it. There are also sizable Muslim inhabitants in the town of Wetet Abay (CSA, 2007). In addition to the two prominent religions, there is also the Bete-Israel¹¹ (people of Jewish ancestry) in the area, though they do not practice Judaism and are mostly Orthodox Christians. Regarding occupation, the residents of Wetet Abay town are involved in diverse jobs, such as trade, civil service and teaching, among others. The rural communities, on the other hand, are sedentary agriculturalists engaged in mixed farming, encompassing both crop production and keeping livestock.

It was not possible to precisely put the map of the study sites as the firsthand data collection followed localities located along the course of Abay. Also, demographics were difficult to calculate precisely since the communities studied dwell in separate districts on both banks of the river, in varying distances to its banks. Furthermore, given the foregoing concerns and the fact that this is an entirely qualitative ethnographic study, the aforementioned study site data may not be as that essential. However, pertaining to the map, though it was not feasible to accurately depict the study sites along the river, for general reference of the study area, I have provided the map of Wetet Abay town as follows.

¹¹ The Bete-Israel are commonly known as Felasha, which is an Amharic term for dislocated immigrants. However, because the term is considered contemptuous and insulting, the community prefers to be referred to as the Bete Israel.

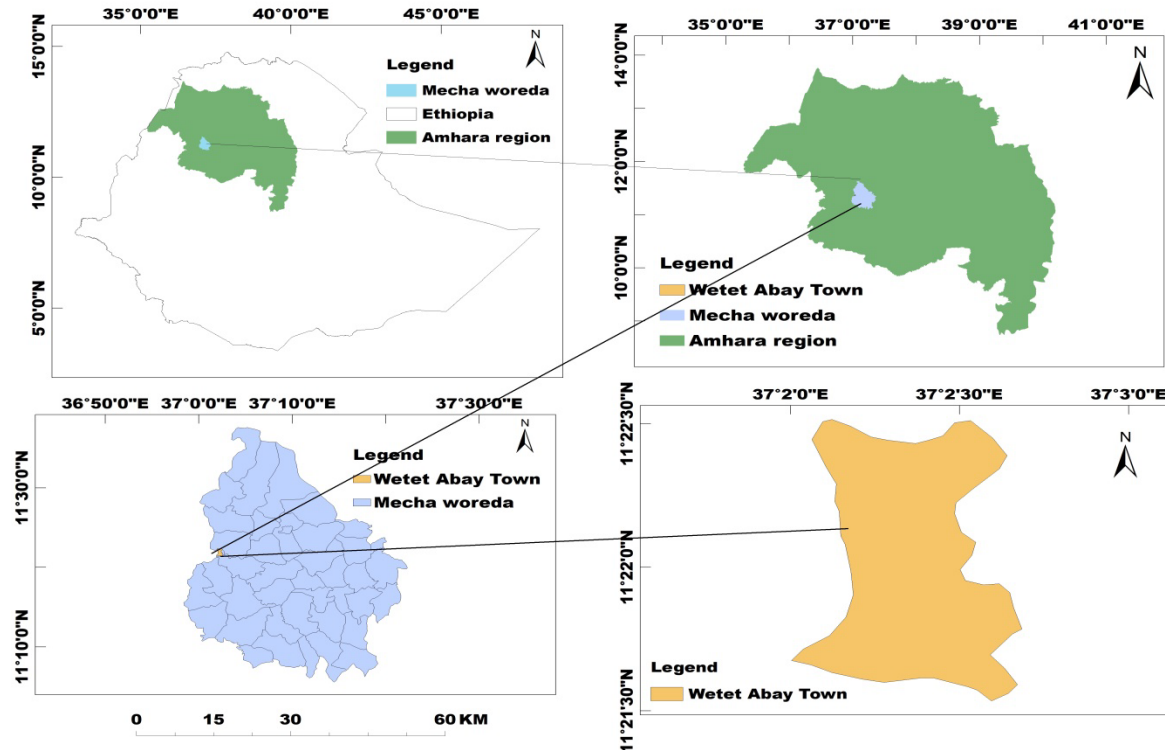


Figure 1: Map that shows the location of Wetet Abay town (Helen, 2026)

1.6 Research Design, Data Collection Methods and Procedures

This research adhered to a constructivist-interpretivist paradigm, which assumes that reality is socially constructed and that knowledge emerges through the interaction between the researcher and participants, with a focus on understanding lived experiences and contextual meanings. The research is based on a qualitative, ethnographic research design, which relies on subjective, inductive and process-oriented research (Hatch, 2002; Creswell and Creswell, 2018).

Ethnographic design is most appropriate for this study, as it enables to understand the mutual interaction between people and Abay, and to explore Abay inspired local beliefs, religious practices and symbolic meanings. It generated a holistic understanding on the interactions of Abay with season-to-season rhythms of local life. Furthermore, this approach helped unravel local people's own "emic" understandings of the meanings, world views, values

and practices that emerge from interactions between people and naturally flowing water. With this approach in mind, interviewing and participant observations were the primary data collection methods for this research project. In addition, some folkloric evidences about Abay and secondary data that are related to the research problem were important and supportive sources for the study. The significance of each of the above mentioned data collection tools and procedures for the research is discussed in some detail as follows.

1.6.1 Interviews

Interviews were employed using both unstructured and semi-structured guiding questions. Interviews permitted to generate detailed data on the beliefs, spiritual practices and rituals that are performed by the local people living along the banks of Abay. Through interview, I extracted thick data on the social, cultural and religious interactions of the local people with Abay, and examined the symbolic meanings that arise from these interactions. In addition, I also aspired to grasp the ecological aspects of the interactions, by exploring how the beliefs and spiritual connections between the locals and Abay contribute for ecological conservation along the river.

Informants were selected through purposive sampling based on their significance to provide data for the research questions. My list of informants comprised local people, including elders and religious leaders, with strong physical and cultural attachments with Abay. The research participants were both rural and urban inhabitants residing along Abay river, representing followers of the EOC and Islam religions. In terms of gender, I reached out both men and women informants who could provide relevant data (for further information see Appendix D). Throughout the interview process, I paid attention to people's stories and

narratives about Abay and their lived experiences with the river, aiming to comprehend its significance in the informants' hearts and thoughts. For the same reason, I also collected folklore data about the river (this is further elaborated in the section about folkloric evidences). From my background knowledge and field investigations, I have witnessed that individuals who have lived longer in the area have a richer knowledge of the practices, stories and narratives about Abay. For this reason, I have diligently focused in consistently interviewing such knowledgeable people as my key informants. Regarding the settings, interviews were conducted during ritual events, normal day-to-day interactions of the people with the Abay and in other relevant places and settings that I encountered during my fieldwork period.

During my preliminary visit to the research site, I created contact with people who are well informed of the locality and the community, who would eventually become my local guides and key informants. The network of my local guides, as well as the informal conversations I had with other people helped me build rapport and get access to informants, increasing my chances of finding other more relevant informants for the themes of the research. So, once some appropriate research participants were purposely selected for interviews, the other persons were gradually lured into the interview process by leveraging on the ties and networks of the earlier identified participants. Additionally, my prior personal and familial networks aided me in meeting individuals capable of providing information on the research questions (this is discussed in further detail in the sections on reflexivity and fieldwork encounters).

In addition to face-to-face interviews, I had to perform a significant number of phone interviews as the political conflict dominated much of my fieldwork period that prevented me from meeting informants anytime I needed them in person. For the same reason, I interviewed some of my informants in Bahir Dar, taking advantage of the chance en route when they arrived

for their own specific purposes. The execution of phone interviews was facilitated by the assistance of my local guides, as well through my own personal and familial networks. I collected much of the field data in 2024 and 2025. This is because the conflict did not permit spending extended periods of time in the field consecutively. So, I had to travel to the field in various times based on issues of safety, which created interruption and spanned the data collection time to years.

Firsthand data collection continued with informants and key informants until data saturation was attained on the research questions. A total of 43 people were interviewed. This number does not include the rich informal conversations I had in my lived background experience, prior to the start of the dissertation project. Out of the total number of interviewees, 12 were key informants, while the rest 31 were informants. Regarding the mode of interviewing, 27 people were interviewed in person, with the remaining 16 interviewed over the phone. Interviews were guided by a semi-structured interview protocol and recorded with a voice recorder (the interview guides can be found in Appendix A).

1.6.2 Participant Observation

As Gray (2004) correctly states it, field observation is not simply jotting down what we see; rather it is a complex combination of sensation such as sight, sound, touch and smell. For this research project, participant observation was vital as it is one of the most crucial ethnographic methods to generate meanings out of actions and manners in the field. It was used to grasp the attitudes and behaviors of local people as well as to interpret and evaluate the actions in practice concerning their interaction and attachment with Abay.

During the courses of my participant observation, I paid attention to the presence or absence of specific groups of people or individuals that may display stronger physical and/or spiritual attachments with Abay. Whenever the conditions permitted, I have also observed and participated in rituals and sacrificial practices conducted along the banks of Abay. I used various forms of participant observation that I thought necessary to gather valid data in different locations and scenarios. For instance, during ritual events my role as an observer was more important than as a participant. In such events I had active and open conversations with participants, but I maintained limited level of immersion, and my role as an observer or researcher was known to the participants. In other settings, such as when I walked along the banks of Abay to explore the river's general natural and cultural landscape, and people's interaction with river, I frequently conducted my observations unobtrusively, without revealing my role as a researcher. This was aimed not to alert people that they are being observed, to capture the real life situations naturally as they happen around the river. Whereas in some other contexts I stayed by the riverbank actively conversing and interacting with the people. In general, my historical and cultural background, as well as my knowledge of Abay's traditions, permitted me to be perceived by the locals only as a researcher, not an outsider. So, my prior experience aided the easy facilitation of my participant observations.

During participant observations, attention was given not only to visual data, but also to collecting data through multiple senses, which contributed to the holistic interpretation of the actions and behaviors of the people. Emphasis was also given to observations of the general setting surrounding Abay—the river's cultural and natural atmospheres, and any observable landmarks around, that may have the potential to reveal people's beliefs, ritual practices and interactions with the river. Most importantly, observations of Abay's cultural and natural

surroundings helped to reveal how peoples' spiritual interactions with the river influenced ecological conservation along its course.

During my participant observation, I took detailed notes regarding the cultural and physical settings surrounding Abay, as well as peoples' activities and behaviors, interactions, and ritual practices along the river. Additionally, pictures were taken on natural settings along the banks of Abay. Audio and photo recordings were also made during participant observations with the research participants, based on their consent. Observational checklists were prepared to help guide participant observations (see Appendix B).

In general, regarding data collection tools, each of the methods—interviews and participant observations, were deliberately employed individually as well as jointly to address the specific objectives designated to them. For instance, as I have tried to elucidate in each section, data pertaining to the symbolic meanings of Abay to the local people, as well as the significance of the local peoples' spiritual interaction with Abay for ecological conservation along the river, were mainly generated by interviews. However, significant information regarding the roles of the spiritual beliefs and practices upon Abay for the conservation of natural resources along the river was also acquired by observing the landscape along the river. Whereas data concerning the ritual and sacrificial practices conducted on Abay were gathered by using both interviews and participant observations. In most of the actual data collection process, the conditions demanded using both interviews and participant observation in a mutually complementing manner. For example, during participant observation in ritual events, it was possible and necessary to parallely record by making interviews and informal conversations. Therefore, in practice, the use of interviews and participant observations was interconnected, one complementing, balancing and triangulating the other.

1.6.3 Secondary Data Sources

Existing academic research on people-river interactions have served to define the conceptual and theoretical basis of the study. Scholarly reflections on methodological and ethnographic features have also been highlighted, from which this research project strengthens its practical and procedural justifications and strategies to collect field data. Similarly, available empirical literatures on the cultural significance of Abay, which are essential to identify the research gaps and to sharpen the focus of the study, were critically reviewed. In addition, some empirical researches that demonstrate the cultural significance of rivers from around the world were utilized to give the findings and conclusions of the research a universal and cross-cultural context. More specifically, certain prior empirical researches about the cultural aspects of Abay were combined with the firsthand data to strengthen the findings, especially with regard to the theme of Abay's symbolic meanings.

1.7 Folkloric Evidences

I discussed the folkloric evidence in a distinct section not because it was used as a different data collection method, but because it needed additional explanation. The folkloric evidences were gathered with the explicit aim of addressing the second research objective—which focuses on the symbolic meanings of Abay. The symbolic meanings of the river were understood not only from the perspective of the local people along the river, but also in relation to the larger Ethiopian public. This linkage was proposed based on the understanding that the cultural significance of Abay has unique features for the locals living along its banks, as well as shared components to the wider Ethiopian population. In addition, though the folklore sources were collected mainly from interviewing informants and key informants in my study area as

primary data sources, I also incorporated certain folkloric evidences from some of the most relevant published empirical sources, demanding the separate discussion of this section.

The folkloric evidences collected include proverbs, myths, poems and song verses uttered about Abay. I collected some pieces from the aforementioned folklore sources from informants, based on the criterion that the folklores are widely recognized and utilized in people's everyday language, that markedly reveal the symbolic meanings of the river. Having previous knowledge and experience in the studied community where the folkloric sources are used also helped me trace the most important ones that are fitting to my research objective.

The symbolic meanings of Abay inferred from the informants' folkloric evidences were broadly linked to Ethiopians at large, because the use of folk proverbs, poems, song verses, etc. is not limited to the locals living along the river, but is widely recognized among the larger (if not all) Ethiopian population. I combined the folkloric evidences with other relevant field data and some of the most pertinent published empirical studies. The integrated analysis of folkloric evidences, together with data gathered from interviews and participant observations, was significantly beneficial for the interpretation of the symbolic meanings of Abay

1.8 Data Analysis and Interpretation

The purpose of data analysis in qualitative research is to build meaning out of textual and image data by segmenting and taking apart the data, as well as by placing it back together. Whereas, interpretation is used to summarize and compare the findings to the literature, to reflect personal and research wise meanings, as well as to indicate limitations and future research directions (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). The approach I followed in analyzing and interpreting the findings of the study generally fits to this premise. As this research project is a qualitative

design, I kept on the work of data analyses simultaneously with the processes of data collection and write up. I employed both content and thematic analysis methods. These methods were the best fit to search for patterns and meanings in the interaction between local people and Abay across a data set. The specific data analysis processes that I have followed for this study are briefly described as follows:

The first step I took in the data analysis process was organizing data. The tasks I undertook in this step included transcribing interviews, typing field notes, scanning audiovisual materials and sorting out all such data according to their sources. The second step was looking upon all the data, reading and examining the information carefully and understanding it. This step was important to build a general sense and meaning out of the data I organized. In the third step I coded the data. The tasks I accomplished at this stage consisted of labeling data, assigning codes and categorizing the data by relating them into the objectives and themes of my research. In the fourth step I developed description of the setting, people, events and themes out of the materials I have coded. In the fifth step I did the job of data representation and discussion of the findings. The works I conducted in this step included detailed discussion of the themes and subthemes, presentation of multiple perspectives and building interconnections between the themes and subthemes. Finally, there comes interpretation of the findings. At this point, I moved back and forth to corroborate and synthesize the findings, explain the general meaning and sense of the research, and remark on the implications and limitations of the research.

As will be elaborated in the reflexivity section, I maintained a reflective stance in the analysis and interpretation of the research themes. To illuminate this with example, for instance, the interpretation of folkloric evidences was based the informants' understanding, as well as my own reflections both as a scholar and having background knowledge of the studied community.

In addition, while interpreting the findings, I emphasized on understanding the underlying and latent meanings of the research participants' words and behaviors, besides the visible and literal meanings.

1.9 Reflexivity

Reflexivity in ethnographic fieldwork refers to the critical awareness of how the researcher's personal backgrounds influence the research process, including data collection, interpretation and the production of knowledge (Creswell and Creswell, 2018; Lock et al, 2013). It also includes an awareness of how the researcher's prior knowledge of the issue under study, the site and the research participants may influence the process of data collection and interpretation. In the context of my research too, reflexivity is needed as the intensity of my prior experience on the research matter and longevity of my fieldwork poses a series of strategic, ethical and personal issues. So, in this study, I remained reflective on the various themes. The specific reasons for being reflective are explained as follows.

First, I was born and nurtured in a community along the stretch of Abay's upper course where the location of this research encompasses. Along this course, popular sayings about the river, beliefs, traditional worships and ritual behaviors were common. I recall that, as a young boy, I had engaged in various rituals, ceremonies and traditional spiritual behaviors by the banks of the river. As a result, my historical, social and cultural background has positively influenced my curiosity and focus of interest in the topic selection, data collection and interpretation of the findings. From my childhood experiences, I was especially aware of some religious beliefs, traditions and ceremonial activities that the locals along Abay used to execute. I had some basic recollection of where, when and how these traditional practices are carried out on Abay. These

features call for reflexivity, and as a result, I assert that, being reflexive has improved the research outcome.

Second, particularly my social and cultural background aided in generating historical information on the traditional beliefs and ritual practices carried along Abay. Additionally, my prior awareness of certain beliefs and behaviors on Abay assisted me in better understanding and interpreting their meaning and significance. In this sense, I can say that the issue is my lifetime research. However, it should be underlined that, typically, main focus was paid to accurately understand the behaviors and meanings of my contemporary research participants in the study area. Just because I am aware of beliefs and behaviors related to Abay from my previous experience, does not imply that I am aware of everything that I intend to research. So, aside from providing important insights and historical context, my prior knowledge of the research themes was not used as a criterion to evaluate my firsthand field data at the research location. Throughout the research, I have assessed the impact of my background knowledge, to produce as much objective accounts as possible. In addition, I relied on the multiplicity of perspectives gained from diverse research participants, to avoid my unintended personal biases that may arise during data collection, analysis and interpretation.

1.10 Validity

In this research, I paid special attention to the validity and credibility of the field findings, as validity is one of the central expectations and the strengths of qualitative research. To ensure the credibility of the research, specifically, I used two strategies: (1) triangulating the findings in the themes by examining and crosschecking evidences generated by the different data sources described in the methods section. (2) by means of rich and thick description. Thick description

(which is a detailed portrayal of the research site, the conditions and the contexts of actions and behaviors in the field [as Geertz, 1973 stated]) has become famous in ethnographic research since the 1970s. In this research project, providing a thorough account of the research setting and the conditions and contexts in the data collection process was important to depict the realistic and naturalistic situations in the field, and consequently to boost the credibility of the findings. Furthermore, my experiential alertness has contributed towards the validity of the research.

In addition, as part of revealing the contexts and conditions, in my fieldwork experience section, I disclosed the phenomena that were present during data collection. Illuminating these circumstances enhances the research's credibility by providing a clearer picture of the contemporary situations that were present at the research sites.

1.11 Ethical Consideration

Ethical matters are one of the most important issues in ethnographic research that must be carefully considered. For this research project, I received an approval letter from my department—Social Anthropology, and ethical clearance from the Ethical Review Committee of the Social Science Faculty, Bahir Dar University. As a researcher of ethnographic research approach, I was fairly deeply involved in the overall process of data collection with my research participants. So, when I set to the study sites I made it clear to my field guides about the purpose of my research and the activities I was going to do in the data collection process. The involvement of the research participants in interviews and participant observations was based on their informed consent. Likewise, privacy matters during observation and recording of ritual practices were carefully dealt and recorded with consent. In addition, I maintained the anonymity and privacy of the research participants during the analysis and interpretation of the field

findings by substituting their actual identities with pseudonyms (the lists of the research participants in Appendix D is also presented using their pseudonyms).

1.12 Significance of the Study

This research can have significant empirical and methodological impacts. Empirically, the research contributes to improved understanding of mutual relations between Abay and local people through their observable physical interactions, perceptions, beliefs and meanings. The research specifically provides the academic community, government sectors and the general public with relevant ethnographic data on the ways Ethiopia's greatest national river—Abay, has long influenced the cultural, social and spiritual life of people. This knowledge could positively inform local level interventions that seek to foster both cultural and biodiversity conservation while also helping to improve the wellbeing of the people living along the banks of the river.

The outcome of this research could also have a constructive impact on sustainable national and regional development policy and initiatives, because the research explores the local cultural nuances related to Abay that have often been easily overlooked by quantitative and macro level social impact assessment studies.

Methodologically, since research on the cultural significance of rivers (including Abay) in Ethiopia is scarce, the lessons and experiences that stemmed from this research can be crucial for scholars especially from anthropology and environmental humanities. In this regard, the research contributes towards conceptual insights, research interests and methodological applications with respect to the scholarship of people-river interactions.

1.13 Field Work Encounters and Limitations of the Study

The fieldwork I conducted for this study was shaped primarily by two factors. One was the outbreak of COVID-19 during the initial phase of my fieldwork. The other was the eruption of the Fano insurgency in 2023 that caused insecurity and mobility restrictions through most of the fieldwork period. Together, these unpredicted states have influenced not just the pace and duration of my fieldwork, but also my interaction with informants. The factors also reflect the limitations I faced and the overall external contexts of my fieldwork period. I will describe these important fieldwork encounters below, along with the contingency responses I made to complete the study by overcoming challenges.

COVID-19

Like in other countries around the world, when WHO declared Covid-19 as a global pandemic in March 2020, the government of Ethiopia sought to control the rapid spread of the pandemic by enforcing public quarantine. This measure, together with the heightened public apprehension about the nature of this unknown virus, made it difficult for individuals to interact in person and travel around. We were urged, and at times compelled by the state security, to stay at home. This scenario had an impact on my initial fieldwork in some way, as it limited my ability to travel to my fieldwork site and engage with locals in person. However, it was eventually revealed that the virus's impact in Ethiopia and broadly in the African continent was not as terrible and horrific as had been described. Initially, when the outbreak of the virus was declared pandemic by WHO, broadcasted widely and the tension of fear of the pandemic was at its peak, I attempted to collect relevant background field information mainly through phone interviews and “socially distanced” interactions. Later, and for the most of my fieldwork period,

public awareness of the virus virtually faded, and I was free to do in-person interviews—unless it was limited by the second major issue which is discussed below.

Armed Conflict

The second and the most pervasive factor that shaped my study was military conflict. The research was carried out throughout a period of time during which the study site was not entirely risk-free due to the violent political struggle that began in the Amhara region in 2023 between the Fano rebel groups and the government. The state's military primarily consisted of the ENDF, along with the regional forces and local militias that were progressively deployed in to the fighting over time. The conflict was unpredictable and prolonged partly because much of the fighting has been guerrilla warfare rather than conventional, and Wetet Abay was among the areas where such strikes frequently happened. The bridge in Wetet Abay is the sole bridge in the area over Abay river. This bridge serves as the essential route to and from Bahir Dar. Due to this, in Gojjam, Wetet Abay has been one of the main hotspots in the armed struggle, the control of which has a strategic importance to both the state forces and the Fano fighters. Tragic casualties have been reported from both sides due to several incidents of intense gunfire carried along the riverbank between the two forces. There were also instances in which civilians were targeted. For example, when the ENDF encounter unexpected fatalities as a result of ambushes by the Fano militants, they have occasionally retaliated by killing civilians they come across. Such incidents were reported several times by the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission, including the well-known incident that happened in the neighboring town of Merawi, as well as the one that occurred in Wetet Abay. Also, the Fano forces infiltrate in to the towns, assassinating government officials and individuals designated to take part in the state's command post

operations. In such conditions the civil war has continued for three years and can be termed that the conflict is at a standstill.

Problems arose not just as a result of the state's direct confrontation with the Fano forces. The ineffectiveness of the law enforcement system in managing criminal activities has led to rampant violence, theft, abduction of persons and demands of substantial ransoms for the victims' release. Additionally, some individuals sought to avenge past grievances and bloodshed when the circumstances appeared to be in their favor. Therefore, there were various risks I had to go through to acquire field data.

There were times that I was stranded on the road along with other passengers and even returned back home, on my path from Bahir Dar to Wetet Abay. This was mostly due to an unexpected escalation of violence between the Fano insurgents and the state forces along the road. Furthermore, both forces were frequently present at various points along the road, and passengers were subjected to inspection by both forces, causing stress while traveling. After arriving at the study sites, staying there was not risk free either. Conditions of safety were perilous, particularly in and around Wetet Abay. One day, I was seated on the roadside beneath the shelter of a shoeshine stand, waiting for my local guide to come and join me so we could head to the river bank together for some observations. Suddenly gunfire erupted nearby. There were also other guys around and some individuals were getting their shoes polished. We ran in to the nearest small brothel we found along the street and sought a refuge from the shooting. The woman who owned the brothel quickly closed the door and let us stay in until the firing stopped. Fortunately, the crossfire did not last long and resulted in no casualties. However, the situation was stressful, and I did not make it out to the river that day. My survival from such awful situations that occurred there was partly by chance.

Nevertheless, conditions have not always been harsh and the same. As I highlighted earlier, in the beginning of the armed conflict, Wetet Abay was one of the hotspots in the conflict and the situation around Abay was hostile. In due course, the condition in the locality was not as hostile as it used to be in the beginning of the conflict. In relatively stable circumstances, individuals can often enjoy time by the riverbank, and I have also utilized such stable situations to interview informants in person and conduct my observations along the river. However, even in these relatively steady conditions, people, particularly those who have traveled from far away, still harbor a valid fear of freely journeying to Abay. This risk was something I also personally faced. Being identified as a stranger by one of the fighting groups could result in being branded and captured as a spy.

The conflict influenced my research in various ways. First, as previously described, it paused personal dangers to myself while I traveled to the study sites for data gathering. Second, because of the tension created by the conflict, getting field data through face-to-face interviews was uneasy as the locals were reluctant, and to some extent apprehensive to meet a stranger like me. The conflict also affected the pilgrimage of people traveling to Abay for consecrations and ritual sacrifices, which is an important event for conducting my participant observations. In order to acquire the essential field data under the aforementioned circumstances, I acted by using a range of strategies that are described as follows.

My field data collection in the vicinities of Wetet Abay comprised prominently two sites. The first is Wetet Abay itself, including the town, and in a certain radius the surrounding rural localities. In spite of the unpredictable and tense conditions in Wetet Abay, the site remained to be the bulk of my firsthand data source, notably with respect to rituals and sacrifices conducted by the banks of Abay. To ensure my safety in Wetet Abay I utilized mechanisms such as relying

on the information of my local guides before venturing out to the river. To avoid being labeled as an outsider I was also accompanied by local guys each time I went to the riverside for my observations. Despite this, the conditions of the armed conflict were unpredictable and unprecedented. To compensate for this, I had to perform a number of phone interviews. As described in the methods section, I also met and interviewed some of my informants in Bahir Dar en route when they come for various purposes.

The second prominent study site, where another bulk of my field information came from, is a locality known by the name Nunu. This is where I was raised as a child. Nunu is primarily an agricultural community located along Abay river, upstream from Wetet Abay town. Though armed violence was prevalent throughout the region, the locality was not a hotspot like Wetet Abay, and safety conditions were generally better. Therefore, besides being a source of chief and authentic field data in itself, this study site has greatly aided in supplementing some of my field observations and capturing natural landscapes along Abay, which I was unable to do as freely as I would have liked in Wetet Abay. Furthermore, thanks to my childhood recollections and familial connections, I have a wide network of informants in Nunu who can provide me with plentiful field information. Hence, despite the troubles created by the conflict, the fact that I have a historical and cultural awareness of the traditions in the study areas still proved me to be an excellent candidate to undertake the research. As a result, my prior lived experience with the research issue helped me reflect on and track down informants and information that would have otherwise been missed, partially compensating the limitations described earlier.

In addition to the limitations caused by Covid-19 and armed conflict, reviewable prior empirical evidences on the cultural significance of Abay were insufficient. So, I had to rely primarily on my field information and to some extent on folkloric evidences for my analysis.

Furthermore, as is common with most Ethiopian graduate students, I had financial constraints during this study. Bahir Dar University granted me 45,000 birr for my dissertation, which is barely enough to cover the study's numerous costs. As a result, I had to cover significant expenses from my own pocket. Even so, it was difficult to meet the price of renting a motorcycle or a bajaj (three-wheel drive) to reach all of the rural settlements along the river. So, I had to trek to several of the villages in order to save money¹². However, there were still certain rural communities along the river that I could not reach out in the study; so, I relied on the information generated from the villages that I could access by using my maximum finance and effort.

1.14 Structure of the Dissertation

The dissertation is organized in six chapters. In the first chapter, the study problem is introduced, conceptualized and justified. This chapter also covers study questions, research design, data collection methods and various other methodological and related issues, including my fieldwork encounters and limitations of the study. A brief review of the existing literature on the study's conceptual and empirical themes is provided in chapter two. The research's core findings are discussed in chapters three, four and five. Chapter three is about beliefs, rituals, sacrifices and ceremonial customs conducted on sacred and spiritually venerated sites along the Abay. This chapter also discusses various related issues such as the repercussions of local peoples' traditional spiritual engagements with Abay, within and beyond the perceived boundaries of the supernatural realm. Additionally, the harmonious and controversial elements of the relationship between Abay's traditional and religious spiritual connotations are explored in

¹² For more information, see Figure C5 in Appendix C

this chapter. Chapter four is an interpretation of how the meanings of Abay river serve as symbol and metaphor in real life situations. This chapter discusses the multifaceted symbolic significances of Abay in the Ethiopian culture and society, drawing from both field and folklore evidence. In chapter five, the spiritual beliefs and practices about Abay are explored in terms of their significance for sound conservation of riverine trees and vegetative covers, particularly with regard to the protection of large trees along the river. This chapter also discusses whether, and to what extent, these spiritual beliefs, rituals and sacrificial performances have changed or persisted over time. Finally, in chapter six, a concise summary of the major findings and concluding remarks is presented. Additionally, in this chapter, a brief recommendation on certain issues of the study is provided.

Chapter Two: Review of Related Literature

2.1 Rivers and Their Cultural Significance: A Conceptual Basis and Brief Cross-Cultural Review

Freshwater bodies (including rivers) have been the source of life, supernatural connection and social identity formation since time immemorial (Oestigaard and Gedif, 2020; Ray, 2020). Worldwide, cross cultural researches show that freshwater bodies are one of the basic natural phenomena that gave rise to cultural prosperity, social organization and concern for ecological conservation (Paine, 2018; Agnew, 2020; Ghabin, 2020). In various religious beliefs, including the Abrahamic religions, water has a vital position in the creation and maintenance of life. For instance, in the Genesis of the Christian Bible, it states “....there was darkness on the water; and God’s spirit prevailed on the water. God said ‘let it be light’, and it became light” (Genesis, 1:6; Phillips, 2020). In broad terms, the above-mentioned cross cultural studies demonstrate that, ponds, springs, wells, lakes and rivers, apart from their life sustaining functions, bridge and mediate nature and culture.

When I compress my review specifically on rivers, several empirical researches indicate that river flows are not mere natural phenomena; instead, they should be scrutinized also from social, cultural, religious, historical and political complexities and in terms of connecting people and cultures (Donnel, 2014; Wantzen, 2015; Anderson et al, 2019). According to this view, research on river flows should focus not only on eco-hydrology, but also on socio hydrology—the need to understand river flows and systems as both social and natural, emerging in a continuous engagement over space and time (Wantzen et al, 2016; Pain, 2018). Donnel (2014) argues that rivers are located at the nexus of cultural values, ecosystem functions and technological innovations and adjustments. Rivers are also considered as sites of nature-culture

intersections. The research by Wantzen (2015) considers riverscapes (which are lines of aquatic and terrestrial conditions) as points of intersection between natural riverine processes and cultural interactions. Rivers have been playing significant roles in connecting peoples and cultures across regions (Anderson et al, 2019). “River flows connect people, places, and other forms of life, inspiring and sustaining diverse cultural beliefs, values, and ways of life” (Anderson et al, 2019: 3).

As mentioned above, there are apparent evidences that illustrate rivers around the world, including Abay, have played crucial role in the economic, cultural, social, historical and ecological lives of people. But, before making exclusive focus on Abay, I shall present brief comparative empirical evidence on the cultural significances of some of the major rivers around the world. For instance, a research by Paine (2018) explores the characteristics of some of the world’s major rivers such as the Ganga, Yangtze, Nile, Colorado, Hudson, Mississippi, Rhine, etc. Paine elucidated the historical roles these rivers played as arteries of remarkable civilizations and distinct cultures along their respective basins. Kumar (2017) shows that river Ganges, which is considered as sacred and holiest river in Hinduism, is vital in the symbolic, spiritual and social lives of Indians since time immemorial. Dipping/bathing in the Ganges River is believed to wash away sin. The Rhine, which crosses six European countries, is one of the vital rivers in the culture and economy of the countries the river passes through (Grazhdankin, 2012). Yangtze river is considered as the cradle of Chinese history, civilization and culture. Along its banks, Yangtze River is home to river crafts, folk customs, celebrities, peddler markets and tourist attractions (Yangtze River ORG., 2009). In the UK, Thames is an aesthetic, artistic, cultural heritage, transportation, tourism and recreational center of London, attracting millions of domestic and international visitors each year. The river is thus the hub of London’s social and

cultural life (Mayor of London, 2019). Amazon River, the world's largest river by volume of water, as well as world's second longest river, is home to diverse people whose economic, social and cultural life have long been influenced by the river basin (Daniel et al., 1979; Ross et al., 1980; Darna, 1992). A research by Anderson et al (2019) elucidates how the flows of the rivers of Kakaunui and Orari (New Zealand), Murray-Darling Basin (Australia), the Athabasca River (Canada) and the Patuca River (Honduras) are linked with the socio-cultural, spiritual and recreational lives of the people living along the rivers. In Nepalese culture, rivers are believed to be the centers of gods and goddesses; thus, people's sacred activities from birth to death, as well as religious and cultural rituals are conducted on riversides and ponds (Dahal, 2021). Africa's great rivers such as the Niger River, Congo River, the Zambezi River, the Nile River, etc. all play considerable roles in the economic, political, socio-cultural and spiritual life of the people living alongside the rivers (Anderson et al., 2005; Antweiler, 2013; World Bank, 2010; Oestigaard, 2009).

All of the cross-cultural evidences mentioned above reveal that rivers throughout our globe play crucial roles in the social, cultural and spiritual life of people. In this respect, in the subsequent few paragraphs, the Nile seeks special attention, as it receives its largest share of water, fame and significance from the Blue Nile (Abay).

The Nile, world's longest river, is one of the crucial rivers in the culture, history and civilization of mankind. It is an internationally acclaimed river that remained puzzling for millennia. The Nile has been the basis of life for Egyptians since time immemorial. The Greek historian Herodotus called Egypt "the gift of Nile", without which the people and their civilizations amid the vast desert would not have existed. In ancient Egypt, the Nile and its vast flooded delta created a fertile ground for intensive agriculture which subsequently led to

sophisticated sociopolitical and economic organization. Thus, the Nile had given rise to one of the oldest and magnificent civilizations in the globe. The river has had enormous importance in the religious, artistic, social and cultural life and settlement pattern of Egyptians from ancient times to the modern ages. Erlich (2001) and Gad (2008) revealed that the Nile heavily influenced the spiritual life of the Egyptians, the Nubians, the Meroe and various other civilizations that had existed in the present day Sudan. Erlich and Gad emphasized that for Egyptians the Nile had been central in their spiritual realm and belief systems. Oestigaard and Gedif (2013) confirm that the Nile has always been a culturally and spiritually venerated river in pre Christian, Christian and Islam Egypt alike.

Besides its spiritual importance, the Nile via its biggest water contributor, the Blue Nile, has been the main essence for the historical, political and cultural connection between Ethiopia and of Sudan and Egypt. Especially, the Nile has always been a critical and prominent component in the relationship between Ethiopians and Egyptians. Erlich (2001) and Grochowski (-) note that, Ethiopia and Egypt, the countries not sharing direct physical borders, are interwoven in a seemingly eternal nexus through the Blue Nile. According to Erlich (2001), Ethiopia's and Egypt's political and cultural relationship, be it hostile or friendly, is formed and shaped by the Blue Nile.

In addition, the Blue Nile has also played an essential part in the historical religious relations between Ethiopia and Egypt. This is because, for millennia, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church was dependent on Egypt—the Coptic Church of Alexandria, for getting patriarchs until the country began to appoint its own native patriarch in the mid-twentieth century. We know from history that Ethiopians utilized the threat of stopping the flow of the Blue Nile as a weapon to fulfill their interests in acquiring a bishop from the Coptic Church of Alexandria. This

demonstrates that Abay's institutional legacy in terms of cultural and political influence is not just limited to Ethiopia but extends to the countries its water flows in. In the sections that follow, I explore some of the most important literatures on the religious, spiritual and symbolic aspects of Abay, broadly focusing on the river's cultural influence in Ethiopia. Finally, I briefly highlight the conceptual frameworks and functions of spiritual beliefs with respect to their ecological dimensions.

2.2 The Cultural Significance of Abay

2.2.1 The Religious and Spiritual Elements

One can easily discern that published empirical studies generally on the cultural significance of Abay are scarce, a scarcity hugely incomparable with the immense cultural, spiritual and social influence of the river in Ethiopia. The scarcity is also paradoxical given that Abay is a river having an important place in the Abrahamic religions. For example, the Christian Bible's Genesis section states:

A river watering the garden flowed from Eden; from there it was separated into four headwaters. The name of the first river is the Pishon; it winds through the entire land of Havilah, where there is gold. The name of the second river is the Gihon; it winds through the entire land of Ethiopia. The name of the third river is the Tigris; it runs along the east side of Asshur. And the fourth river is the Euphrates (Genesis 2:11–14).

Similarly, in Islam the Qur'an describes rivers of water, milk, wine and honey in Paradise, though it does not identify them as the rivers Gihon, Pishon, Tigris and Euphrates (Qur'an, 47:15). While there is no explicit evidence in the Abrahamic religions' scriptures that the biblical Ghion is the River of Milk, later Jewish, Christian and Islamic traditions have symbolically associated one of the rivers of Paradise with milk, which is identified as Ghion (Wensinck, 2012).

The documented modern empirical sources on the cultural features of Abay started out with the firsthand documentations of travelers and explorers. In the centuries that followed after the days of the travelers and explores are produced only a few empirical studies by scholars. I shall discuss these sources—the account of travelers and empirical studies by scholars as follows.

European travelers Paedro Paez and James Bruce, upon their face to face encounter of the source of Abay river, have documented their personal feelings about their 'discovery' of the source of the Nile and some of the spiritual practices that were conducted at the source of the river—Gish Abay. For instance, at the time Bruce visited Gish Abay, though the church had established itself at Gish, the pre-Christian traditions were still alive. Presumably, the Pre Christian (*paganic*) practices might have been incorporated with Christianity and reinterpreted together with the biblical cosmology of Abay (Oestigaard, 2018). James Bruce wrote about his visit of Gish Abay:

It is easier to guess than to describe the situation of my mind at that moment – standing in that spot which had baffled the genius, industry, and inquiry of both ancients and moderns, for the course of near three thousand years. Kings had attempted this discovery at the head of armies, and each expedition was

distinguished from the last, only by the difference of the numbers which had perished, and agreed alone in the disappointment which had uniformly, and without exception, followed them all (Bruce, 1790, cited in Oestigaard and Gedif, 2011: 3).

However, although his imprint on the Nile quest is undeniably famous, nowadays, Bruce's allegation to be the first European to discover the source of the Blue Nile is no more a true claim. Because, before Bruce, several Portuguese Jesuit priests have revealed their feelings and observations upon their discovery of the source of the globally famed and mysterious river—the Nile, the river that had been baffling nations, historians, kings, writers and explorers for millennia. Among these Portuguese Jesuit priests, who left their documentation about the source of Abay were Paedro Paez and his contemporaries Father Lobo and Father Manoel, de Almeida. Paez is believed to be the first European to visit the river's source at Gish Abay. The book by Oestigaard and Gedif (2013) also confirm that Paez was the first European to visit and describe the spring at Gish Abay. Paez says:

The river, at this day, by Ethiopians is called the Abaoy; it rises in the kingdom of Gojam, in a territory called Sabala, whose inhabitants are called Agows. The source of the Nile is situated in west part of Gojam, in the highest part of a valley, which resembles a great plain on every side, surrounded by high mountains. On the 21st of April, in the year 1618, being here, together with the king and his army I ascended the place, and observed everything with great attention; I discovered first two round fountains, each about four palms in diameter, and saw, with greatest delight, what neither Cyrus king of the Persians, nor Cambyses, nor

Alexander the Great, nor the famous Julius Caesar could ever discover. The two openings of these fountains have no issue in the plain on the top of the mountain, but flow from the foot of it. The second fountain lies about a stone-cast from the first... (Oestigaard and Gedif, 2013:11)

Since Paez's and Bruce's visit, in the later centuries, several other foreign explorers and scholars visited and attempted to document the river Abay and its source. Among these explorers and scholars was Charles Beke, who visited Gish Abay in 1842. Beke scientifically documented the spiritual practices at Gish Abay and revealed that the people around the source performed both the Paganic and Christian rituals—one intermingled in another. Beke describes:

On questioning my guides as to the celebration of religious ceremonies, they scorned the idea of their performing anything of the sort, being Christians; but they admitted that yearly in the month of Hedár, or Tahsás (about the end of November), after the rainy season, and when the ground is sufficiently dry to allow it, an ox is slaughtered on the spot by the neighboring Shum, and its blood is allowed to flow into the spring, its flesh being eaten on the ground. I could not learn that any particular ceremonies accompany this act. Also at the close of the Abyssinian year (the beginning of September), on the eve of St. John, sick persons are brought hither and left for seven days, which they say ensures their recovery. Logs of wood have from time to time been laid around the source to serve as a bed for these sick visitants...These practices are evidently remains of a higher degree of veneration paid to the spot at a period when the inhabitants of the country were not converted to Christianity (Beke, 1844, cited in Oestigaard and Gedif 2011: 5).

The research by Oestigaard and Gedif (2011) divulge that Cheesman was the other explorer who visited Lake Tana and Gish Abay in the late 1920s. In his visit (together with his wife) Cheesman revealed that the spring at Gish Abay is venerated to be holy, and is believed to have high healing powers. Cheesman also described about Abune Zerabruk, the monk who established St Zerabruk and/or St Michael church at Gish Abay. His research shows that Abune Zerabruk heavily shaped the modern day religious practices at Gish Abay. Oestigaard (2011) also reveals that the source of the Blue Nile—Gish Abay had been a site of traditional ritual sacrifices and the importance of the place for spiritual practices has continued in a modified manner after the place has been Christianized.

With regard to the ‘discovery’ of the source of Abay, as a scholar and as an Ethiopian familiar with the river, I feel compelled to ask a critical question. For whom the source of Abay had been unknown? For the curious Europeans and for people in the rest of the world who knew the Nile in its fame and glorious imaginations, as well as for those who knew the river physically but didn’t know where this great river starts to flow, the term ‘discovery’ may be appropriate. But, for the generations of the local people who lived with Abay river and possibly for most Ethiopians, presenting the discourse that the source of the Blue Nile was discovered in the 17th century by Europeans amounts to an insult, because the locals and Ethiopians at large have always known where Abay rises. Therefore, we need to be clear and certain that when we talk of the discovery of the source of the Blue Nile, we are talking from the perspective of the outside world other than Ethiopians.

Abay’s place as a mighty and holy river in the hearts of the local people existed and continued before and after the source of the Blue Nile was allegedly discovered by Europeans. From the analysis of the recorded historical events that took place upon the source of Abay, we

can understand that the religious holiness of the spring at Gish Abay in particular, and subsequently the whole course of Abay river in general, derived from two bases. The first is from the Biblical Ghion river, which is one of the four divine rivers flowing out of Eden to water the Garden of Paradise. Ghion's divine character is milk. According to the priests of Gish Abay, when Jesus was born, for one day, the Four Rivers watering the Garden were changed to their divine qualities. Accordingly, Ghion (Abay) was changed to milk (Oestigaard and Gedif, 2013). Also, this appears to be one reason for the name of the small town, my research site, to be called Wetet Abay (literally meaning *Milk Abay*). The second basis for the holiness of Abay derived from the story of Abune Zerabruk, a man believed to be born in eighth c. A.D in the vicinity of the river's source. Following his religious perseverance and great pray, it is believed that God gave Abune Zerabruk the power to heal the sick using the water of Abay. Due to the miracle of the Abune's seven holy books preserved intact after having been hided for years beneath the surface of the river, Abune Zerabruk and the source Gish Abay have become inseparable and are greatly venerated.

Due to Abune Zerabruk's spiritual dedication and the subsequent miracles happened at Gish Abay, it is widely believed among Ethiopian Orthodox Christians that Abay's water has the power to heal the sick and the misfortune by drinking, baptizing or sprinkling its holy water. This practice is continuing to date, long after the Abune has passed. It is popularly believed that, since Abune Zerabruk's miracle the name of the river was changed from Ghion to Abay, as revealed from the introductions in the previous chapter. Just like the popular and religious sources that are found especially from Gish Abay, the research by Oestigaard and Gedif (2013) also assert the historical relationship between Abay and Abune Zerabruk and the Abune's subsequent influence on the name and veneration of the river. The two historical foundations that triggered the

spiritual honor of Abay are in fact complementary and religious. Indeed, since the divinity of Abay is described in the Old Testament long before the birth of Jesus Christ, Judaic sacrificial traditions might have already existed upon the river earlier before the Christianization of the region. Still, the earliest of all the historical events may be that, before the Judaic and Christianic adoration of Abay, animistic worships and sacrificial practices on the spring at Gish and/or at the rest of the river's course might have existed for long time. If so, the Judaic and Christianic veneration and rituals of Abay would have thrived phase by phase upon the animistic traditions in a modified form. However, the last claim does not escape from being a scholarly speculation for which we don't have clearly recorded evidences. In any case, so far we know in a recorded history, we can assert that Abay has always been a river of great cultural and spiritual significance.

For my literature review on the religious and spiritual significance of Abay, I have relied mainly on the works of these scholars—Oestigaard and Gedif. While it is unfortunate to frequent the works of two individuals on Abay—a river of great national and international acclaim, their scholarly works are vital and should be appreciated. These scholars have contributed substantial empirical research on the cultural aspect of Abay in the form of articles and books published from 2011 to 2020. Especially, the book published by Oestigaard and Gedif (2013) is of great importance. Covering areas from Abay's true source—Gish Abay to the river's outlet from Lake Tana, it is the widest of the existing research on the cultural and religious features of Abay. Together with their article published as book chapter (Oestigaard and Gedif, 2020), this book is an important ethnographic research that documented rituals, beliefs, sacrifices and traditions along the Blue Nile and discussed the role of water in the history of the Lake Tana region in historical and contemporary contexts. It reveals that Abay's sacred place in the Abrahamic

religions has further elaborated the river to have a vital importance in the local beliefs and practices of people. For instance, the importance of water in Orthodox Christianity has made Abay's water to be considered as holy water (*tsebel*). Thus, people use the water to cure from their illness & misfortunes. This book also shows how the local Abay based animistic practices—worships, rituals and sacrifices have influenced the local practice of Christianity and Islam, which are monotheistic religions. For instance, in Wetet Abay area, Christians as well as Muslims offer animal sacrifice to Abay praying for prosperity, health and protection from the spirit dwelling in the river.

The other important issue worth mentioning from Oestigaard and Gedif (2013) and Oestigaard and Gedif (2020) is the spiritual connection of the Negede Woyito community with Abay. The Negede Woyito are people with a distinct cultural group living on the shores of Lake Tana and along Abay river in its outlet from Lake Tana. They are officially Muslims. But they value their own traditional belief system more than their official religion. The Negede Woyito believe in a male spirit called Abinas, a spirit living in Abay. As this spirit is believed to be the source of health, well-being and prosperity, the Negede Woyito make animal sacrifices on the waters of Abay and Lake Tana to appease the spirit so that it gives them what they need to live. The processes of these and the earlier discussed religious interfaces upon Abay has cumulatively resulted in religious syncretism—the combination of different religious beliefs and traditions to create a distinct spiritual tradition. In Ethiopia, this is evident in the incorporation of animistic traditions and sacrificial rituals by Jews, Orthodox Christians and Muslims that existed in the Old Testament. Religious traditions along Abay and in the Lake Tana region demonstrate this condition (Oestigaard and Gedif, 2013).

2.2.2 The Symbolic Aspects

With respect to the symbolic importance of Abay, from a common sense, we know that Abay is a river of immense symbolic importance to the people of Ethiopia in general. In popular characterization, as we know it today, Abay is perceived in a graceful masculine character. Empirically, Oestigaard and Gedif (2011, 2013) have revealed that Abay has masculine association and is a male river. The scholars stress that Abay symbolizes greatness, strength, bountiful and splendor. However, in Geez language Abay also means motherhood, representing fertility and femininity. But, the river is popularly perceived in masculine characteristics as we know it in our society. And it should be noted that, in Ethiopia, both males & females can be named by the name of Abay. Abay, though a river characterized in masculine imaginations, the use of its mighty and bounty symbolisms are extended to both genders.

In recent times, Berhanu (2014), Damtew (2016) and Azeb (2023) published articles on the symbolic and social attachments of Ethiopians with Abay by analyzing some of the traditional Amharic songs and poems uttered about the river.

In Berhanu (2014), he showcased and analyzed various folk songs that depict Abay as a powerful entity, an unrecognized asset, and a stunning natural wonder, as well as expressing sorrow by criticizing Abay in a personified manner over the lost chances to harness the river for the country's growth.

Damtew's research (2016) divulges that the local people's emotional, spiritual and symbolic attachment to Abay river is profound. The people's sense of identification with it, and their use of the river's valor as an emblem of pride are paramount. By analyzing the Ethiopian artistic and spiritual genres of songs and proverbs such as *fukera*, *kererto* and *menzuma*, he also stated that, paradoxically, oral traditions reveal the presence of a popular feeling of resentment

on the Abay river because of its minimal economic significance for the Ethiopian people.

Azeb's research (2023) on other hand, disclosed how Ethiopians have built a special cultural affiliation with Abay over generations by praising the river through their popular songs and poetry couplets.

Abay is a river of enormous cultural, social and artistic significance in Ethiopia. However, as part of the scarcity of published empirical research on cultural significance of the river, there are no sufficient sources to review on the river's symbolic meanings and representations too.

2.2.3 The Ecological Aspects of Spiritual Beliefs

In many cultures around the globe there are natural forms including rivers, mountains, lakes, ponds, trees, etc. that are considered sacred sites (Aniah et al, 2014; Yoseph et al, 2020). Religious traditions, supernatural connections, spirituality and ritual sacrifices are the cultural instruments for the protection of these sacred sites and resources alongside the sites (Suprianto, 2023; Kala, 2017). Conceptually and theoretically, spiritual ecology forms the basis in the spiritually backed ecological conservation of various forms of cultural landscapes, particularly in the protection of forests in areas deemed to be sacred sites by the local communities (Pater et al, 2021; Zhu et al, 2022).

Numerous cross-cultural studies conducted globally support the beneficial effects of traditional spiritual beliefs on the conservation of natural resources, such as those found along riverbanks. For instance, Suprianto (2023) revealed that protecting rivers through traditional beliefs and rituals entrusted upon them is one of the vital means to protect natural resources on the rivers. Amah (2024) noted that the preservation of freshwater and marine habitats has long

been greatly aided by customs and beliefs that are firmly anchored in the respect for water spirits. There are forests all over the world that have been preserved by communities because of their perceived religious or spiritual value, and these forests may be the earliest example of protected area management (Wassie et al 2005; Sheridan and Nyamweru 2008; Reynolds et al., 2017). Also, a research by Chunhabunyatip et al (2018) shows that indigenous people's spiritual beliefs backed them to keep protecting the natural resources of their land. Other cross cultural findings confirming this reality include Klubnikin (2000), Eneji et al (2012), Kala (2017) and so forth. So, in terms of protecting rivers and other resources alongside, these spiritual traditions, along with the application of formal laws, can be ecologically valuable alternatives.

In addition, the aforementioned literatures demonstrate that, rivers and human cultures are intricately integrated components mutually influencing one another. Rivers gave rise to beliefs, rituals and traditions. In turn, these beliefs, rituals and traditions contribute for the protection of rivers and other natural resources surrounding the rivers. This fact clearly indicates that the biological and cultural diversity surrounding rivers is impacted by environmental deterioration, and improvements to the ecosystem tend to increase both ecological and cultural diversity along the rivers.

Though, reviewable empirical sources particularly on Abay are lacking, from the deep spiritual impacts of the river, the frameworks and the cross-cultural empirical reviews on the ecological implications of spiritual beliefs bear a potential resemblance to the case in Abay. In addition, even if it is difficult to find distinctive evidence on the Abay-related spiritual beliefs and ecological conservation, there are several empirical studies on the Ethiopian case that elucidate the vital roles of spiritual beliefs and practices for ecological protection, such as safeguarding forests (Mergo et al., 2012; Maru et al., 2020; Ahmed, 2022). A research by

Shiferaw et al (2023) demonstrated the roles of sacred forests for conservation and managing sustainable nature-culture interactions in the pursuit of spiritual ecology and sustainable living. In several localities of Ethiopia, the role of spiritual ecology particularly for the conservation of forests is also acknowledged by several empirical research such as Wassie et al (2005), Woldemedhin and Teketay (2016), Doda (2019), and so forth.

Overall, pertaining to the review of extant literature, empirical ethnographic research on the cultural, religious and symbolic significances of Abay is inadequate in many areas along the river in general, and in Wetet Abay in particular. Although Oestigaard and Gedif (2013) have touched Wetet Abay in their book, the spiritual beliefs, rituals and sacrificial practices in the vicinities of Wetet Abay are not presented in much detail and depth.

Particularly, a critical limitation that should be addressed is a paucity of literature on the ecological implications of Abay-related spiritual beliefs and ritual practices. Because Abay is a river of immense spiritual significance, and its flow intersects with the cultural and physical lives of people living along its banks, the roles of spiritual values associated with the river in the conservation of resources along its banks must be investigated. As nature and culture are intricately connected with each other, there is a need to systematically analyze the beliefs, rituals practices and symbolic aspirations upon Abay in relation to the conservation of trees and other natural resources along the river, which is one of the objectives of this research.

Chapter Three: Beliefs, Spiritual Practices and Rituals About Abay

This chapter discusses the specific ways in which Abay is perceived as a highly venerated river. As I argued in the introduction, many Ethiopians, whether living nearby or far, consider Abay as holy, imbued with supernatural powers to cure illnesses, and bring good fortunes while also preventing bad ones. This perception is reflected in numerous public pilgrimages, organized rituals, sacrificial feasts and ceremonies seasonally held along selected banks of the river. The chapter contextualizes this perception both in local spirituality (tradition) and religiosity. The latter, I argue, has to do with the genesis of Abrahamic religions which bestowed a holy status to Abay. The former is grounded in the professed intersectionality of Abay as an abode for invisible supernatural entities. Although analytically distinguishable, these two sources of veneration are mutually complementary. I discuss both sources, beginning with the religious basis. Then follow the traditional spiritual dimensions of Abay, discussed with ethnographic information on the timing, place and intended purpose of various rituals, sacrificial practices and ceremonies. In this chapter, I also address related topics such as the assumed boundary of interaction between humans and the unseen world of supernatural spirits, focusing on the perceived consequences of crossing the assumed boundary. Additionally, I attempt to shed light on the contemporary contentious features between religious purity and traditional spiritual practices.

3.1 The Religious Basis of Abay's Veneration

Both Orthodox Christianity and Islam sanctify water as sacred and pure. According to the genesis of these Abrahamic religions, Abay is believed to be one of the four rivers that flow from the Garden of Eden (Genesis 2:11–14). For this reason, both Christians and Muslims in Wetet Abay area esteem Abay as holy, flowing from paradise. This perception is also shared by the

Bete Israel living in the study area.

Specifically for followers of Orthodox Christianity, which is the dominant religion in the study area, Abay is believed to have been sanctified by the Ethiopian saint Abune Zerabruk at its source—Gish Abay. This historical phenomenon is emphasized in various sections of the preceding chapters. According to the story¹³, which is believed to have taken place in the 9th century and written in the Chronicles of the Abune, Zerabruke entrusted his holy books deep in the spring of Gish Abay when he left the area for preaching Christianity elsewhere. The spring miraculously kept the books intact for seven years and the Abune found all of them when returning to the locality.

This origin story is reinforced by another miracle believed to have happened on the birth of Jesus Christ. Orthodox Christian priests in Wetet Abay area (and elsewhere) believe that River Abay welcomed the birth of Christ by changing itself into milk for one day. In return to this, the story goes, Abay is divinely imbued with *tsebel*, a power to cure illness when one drinks and/or washes with its water. Similarly, Muslims believe that Abay's water is *tehlil*—holy, having healing powers.

Leveraging on the above story, the Abune Zerabruk church in Wetet Abay distributes highly valued *tsebel* by tapping water from Abay River, for healing and hazard prevention and for baptizing services, such as christening rituals. The church taps water from Abay very early in the morning before no one touches it. It is believed that the river's water is more potent in healing a range of human ailments when tapped early in the morning before birds drink from it. As a catalyzer to strengthen the perceived healing powers of the *tsebel*, priests read selected texts from religious books over the tapped water that is kept open in various containers before them.

¹³ The full narration of this story is available in the book of the “Chronicle of Abune Zerabruk” published in Amharic language by the Ethiopian Orthodox Church in 2023.

The books are chronicles that are read on specially observed dates dedicated in honor of angels, saints and martyrs. These include the chronicles of St Michael, St Mariyam, St George, Abune Zerabruk himself and others, written in honor of great spiritual battles of those angels, saints or martyrs, all owing to the will and power of God bestowed to them. While the clergy reads the holy books over the tapped water, the cure-seeking patients or believers sit near them silently and listen until the end. The clergy then let the believers sprinkle or baptize by the *tsebel* naked. While baptizing the believers the clergy tap their bodies by a cross. The believers also drink from the *tsebel*. The baptizing and drinking of the *tsebel* is done to get cured from various ailments—whether physical or mental.

3.2 Abay's Intersectionality with Local Spiritual Practices

As highlighted in the above section, people from near and far venerate Abay deeply. Many informants emphasize that this veneration is not merely river worship, as it may seem to outsiders. Rather, they assert that, it encompasses multiple dimensions—religious, historical, social and animistic traditions—all passed down through generations as part of their ancestral heritage.

Like in several other traditions around the world, Abay as a water body, is believed to be the abode of invisible spirits and therefore considered sacred (Aniah et al, 2014; Kala 2017; Yoseph et al 2020; Suprianto, 2023). These features of Abay both as divinely holy and abode of mighty untamed spiritual beings have made the river an important site for conducting various rituals, sacrifices and ceremonies. By performing these activities, people seek to invoke the perceived powers of spirits either to gain something desirable or just to ensure protection against

harms including natural disasters. In this regard, the spirits identified as *Zar* and *Jinn* hold significant impacts in the traditional beliefs of people with respect to Abay.

3.3 The *Zar* and *Jinn* Spirits of Abay

It is believed by the local people that *Zar* and *Jinn* are invisible spirits believed to be dwelling in and around Abay river. Peoples' beliefs about these spirits and their assertion that the spirits dwell in Abay have a substantial influence on the veneration and spiritual attachment of people to the river, as well as broadly on the relation between people and the river. Significant contexts of the people's day-to-day interactions with Abay are also manifested through their beliefs upon those spirits that are believed to inhabit the river. Although at times the local people lack clarity of distinction between the *Zar* and *Jinn* spirits, often, both of these spirits have unique images and characters held in the minds of the people.

The local popular beliefs emphasize that, besides Abay, *Zar* dwells in other rivers too, as well as broadly in other sites of the wilderness. While *Zars* are believed to dwell around trees, caves or other pocket and hidden sites along the shores of rivers, *Jinn* is believed to reside inside river waters. In the forthcoming sections, I attempt to explore peoples' beliefs about the two spirits, the manifestations of their beliefs and the implication of the beliefs in the spiritual perceptions and relationships of the local people with Abay.

3.3.1 The *Zar* Spirit

That humans can be possessed by a category of spirits, broadly known as *Zar*, is a widely spread domain of life in many Northeast African and Middle Eastern countries—including Ethiopia (Torrey, 1967; Young, 1975; Degarege, 2023). As noted by many observers, the *Zar* cult continued to be practiced, sometimes publicly, and other times covertly, often at the margins of the three dominant religions of the region—Christianity, Islam and Judaism (Young, 1975; Natvig, 1987; El Hadidi, 2016). One common feature of the *Zar* cult is the perception that the spirits need to be appeased with periodic rituals and sacrificial gifts. If treated properly, and become satisfied, the spirits are expected to behave benevolently, safeguarding the possessed person from illness and misfortune. If not, however, these spirits are believed to be malevolent, negatively affecting the health and wellbeing of the possessed. The relevance of this perception is evidently reflected in the high prevalence of perceived spirit-possession related ill-being among socially marginalized and poverty-stricken women, and to an extent men. In an attempt to address their suffering, victims of such spirits often consult *Zar* cult mediums that are believed to have power in influencing spirits by conducting the necessary adoricism or exorcising rituals.

In the vicinities of Wetet Abay where this study was conducted, *Zars* are personified as human-like beings in physically look, but prettier than the average human. More specifically, *Zars* are portrayed as being attractively, tall in size and uniformly light brown in skin. Female *Zars* are thought to have long and charming hair. Though *Zars* are normally thought to be invisible spirits, there are many instances that they are claimed to be seen by virgin boys and virgin girls at riversides. Local popular beliefs and

informants' expressions commonly demonstrate that *Zars* are the most revealed from the invisible spirits believed by the local people to exist around the natural environment. It is a commonly recalled occurrence by informants that the revelation of *Zars* even for young boys and girls lasts for a brief moment. Those people who said they saw *Zars*, or heard from other people who claim they saw them, likewise articulate that *Zars* are seen doing daily activities, just like the chores of the local people. One of my key informants, an elderly man¹⁴, recounts that during his childhood, he has seen female *Zar* collecting firewood around the shore of Abay. He states:

In the afternoon, I went to Abay to water our oxen, which had been plowing our field all day. Nobody was there, and there was no movement around. Close to the evening, it was calm, failing time around the river. Suddenly, I saw a lady who breaks and clasps firewood around the river shore. She is very tall. Her face is glowing red. Her hair is long, braided and twisted.¹⁵ I stared at her, and she stared at me. I turned my gaze about. When I looked back at her, she was no longer there; she vanished in front of me just in the flash of an eye¹⁶.

In an attempt to further elaborate on his encounters with the supernatural spirits, the above key informant also shared another story. While collecting firewood, another occasion in his boyhood, he noticed *Zars* assembled and feeding under a tree near Abay. When he saw them, he assumed they were humans, so he walked to where they were

¹⁴ Various international and national classifications exist for age ranges within a population. For general communication, in this research, I employed this classification to indicate the age range of my informants and key informants: young (18-35); adult (36-64); elderly (65 and above). The precise age of the key informants and informants is provided in Appendix D.

¹⁵ He referred her hair style as *kundala* (ቀንዳላ), as it is locally known

¹⁶ Interview, Orthodox Christian, December 2025, Nunu

sitting to eat with them, but was warned and halted by his adult uncle, who informed him that those he saw were not humans. He claims that when he returned his gaze to the tree, the *Zars* were no longer there. He says he had seen them on the opposite bank of the river for a brief time before losing sight of them.

In another interview, a woman shared her childhood experience with *Zar*. She talked about finding coffee cups on a river shore when she was a young girl. She took the cups home but was warned by her mother to place back the cups where she found them. Her mother immediately conducted a ritual by baking a fresh *enjera* and making a coffee ceremony to calm down the potential anger of the spirits, because that kind of utensil found on the river shores is believed to be the property of *Zars*.

As mentioned earlier, many of the informants stated that *Zars* are seen by virgin boys and virgin girls at river shores engaging in activities such as making coffee ceremony, grinding grains or undertaking other everyday chores. Accordingly, *Zars'* lifestyles and the utensils they keep are just like the people living in the locality. They do have similar traditions and speak same local language.

While the firsthand experiences of people who claim they have ever seen *Zars* cannot be underestimated, the tendency of depicting *Zars* having same lifestyles and traditions as the local people may be the result of human imaginations of portraying something hidden in the image and likeness of themselves. In Christianity God is portrayed in the image and likeness of humans and same depiction might have taken place regarding these invisible spirits.

The local people around Abay generally believe that, despite both dwell by the river Abay, *Zar* and *Jinn* are two distinct types of spirits. However, as highlighted in the

beginning of this section, there are also informants who get vague at clearly distinguishing *Zar* and *Jinn*, and there are also overlapping and elusive conceptions about the two spirits. Some people conceptualize *Zars* and *Jinns* by mixing up their characters and images. For instance, one of the key informants, an adult man, described his childhood experience of being dragged down by a spirit when he was swimming to cross a river. He says, while swimming his foot was chained by a thread and pulled down. He struggled by pushing towards the shore to avoid drowning. The thread was snapped and remained on his foot. When he slipped out of its grip and stepped on to the land, the ghost desperately emerged from the water and tried to recapture him by racing after him. In that moment, he claimed to have seen the ghost tangibly walking on land. He says:

She doesn't walk like a human but hover like a rainbow. She is extraordinarily tall; her height measures to a eucalyptus tree. Her hair is twisted, sparkled with jewelry and slackens on the ground. Her hand is amazing, it is not like ours, rather, it looks like a net or a sifter. She was naked. Her color is like a blazing fire. She desired me badly; so, dreadfully followed me from the river to my home¹⁷.

He asserts she was a female *Zar* who wanted to suck his blood. According to him, it is a female *Zar* that drowns and sucks males' blood, and a male *Zar* that drowns and sucks females. Based on the local popular beliefs it is *Jinn* that drags down and drowns people in the rivers to suck their blood. But, because of her image, this guy believes that who he encountered was a female *Zar*. There are also informants who believe that both

¹⁷ Interview, Orthodox Christian, December 2025, Nunu

Zar and *Jinn* pull down especially virgin boys and girls in the rivers and suck their blood. Others tend to conceptualize *Zar* and *Jinn* as just one and same spirit and use their names interchangeably.

Similarly, local people say that the spirits dwelling in Abay sing and it is common to hear their drums. Some argue that, that is song of *Jinn*. And other people say that *Jinn* doesn't sing, rather the songs are of *Zars*. Many of the informants assert that they have frequently heard of the drum beats of spirits around Abay and even have sung with them following the rhythms. But, people are not sure whether the drum is conducted by *Zars* or by *Jinns*.

Some of the informants envision that *Zars* and *Jinns* are two separate types of spirits, but they are similar beings to the extent that they can interbreed. Still, some people who do not have any know how in distinguishing *Zar* and *Jinn* just label both of them together with all other spirits that are believed to be “cursed by God” to live hidden in the wilderness.

However, despite certain obscure conceptions, from the general local perceptions, characterizations, beliefs and practices that surround *Zar* and *Jinn*, the two spirits deserve to take analytically distinguishable stance and need to be discussed separately.

3.3.2 Abay and the *Jinn* Spirit

The most significant spirit believed to dwell in Abay river is *Jinn*, which supposedly plays a considerable role especially in influencing the well-beings of local people and their cattle. Due to this, above all of the spirits believed to inhabit Abay such as the *Zar* spirit, it is the beliefs and practices surrounding the *Jinn* of Abay that appear recurrently, and are widely

entertained throughout the discussions of the findings of this research.

The belief in *Jinn* is a long-standing folk tradition that has roots in pre-Islamic and Islamic Arab cultures, as well as Ethiopian spiritual practices (Dein & Illaiee 2013; Østebø 2014; Degarege 2023). The *Jinn* folk tradition is also widely recognized among Orthodox Christians, Muslims, and various other Ethiopian communities.

In Wetet Abay area, people distinguish *Jinn* from other malevolent spirits for being neither ordinary nor inherently harmful. Instead, the *Jinn*, ostensibly being imbued with mystical superhuman powers, could help people when pleased to do so. The *Jinn* of Abay is commonly personified and referred to by the name “Ghion”, a namesake with the biblical name of Abay. It is believed to be an invisible being identified in male gender, living underneath in the river’s banks. Local people do not often intend to talk separately about the *Jinn* of Abay as a sacred component, seemingly not to deviate from their mainstream religious beliefs. But, when they talk of Abay or Ghion as a personified entity, tacitly they are also referring to the *Jinn* believed to reside in the river. The *Jinn* is inseparably thought as a single entity together with the grace of the river.

As highlighted above, the *Jinn* of Abay is believed to inhabit an unseen world beneath the water. This belief is reinforced by accounts from individuals who claim to have witnessed this hidden realm. Though the *Jinn* of Abay is believed to be not inherently malevolent, it is common to hear from the locals that, at times *Jinn* grab individuals entering the river. While most incidents of people reportedly dragged and drowned by *Jinn* are fatal, there are also cases of survivors. Those who have returned alive share vivid descriptions of what they experienced beneath the water during their ordeal. This was the experience of an elderly man who was one of my informants. He states:

I and my contemporaries grew up swimming on Abay. It is especially heroic to swim in the rainy season when the river overflows torrentially with currents. One day, on a deep section of the river, I was pulled down and lost beneath the river. I remember when something grabs my armpit. The folks, who were surrounding me, later told me that I emerged forth from the depth of the river after an hour. I had fainted. They thought I had died. I was awakened on the shore of the river in the middle of a gathering of people, who were my families and villagers who shouted and marched to the river when my lost was reported. When I turn to conscious state people were wondering and asked what happened to me. I began to recall what I saw beneath deep the water. I saw a stunning whole world. I saw a large and strikingly gorgeous herd of cattle. They have everything we have on land; what we have here they have in more abundance and beauty¹⁸.

Informants in and around the vicinity of Wetet Abay highlight that though *Jinns* are hidden from the visual sense of humans, they can be noticed through the senses of sound as well as smell. One way they can be heard is when they are singing. Many of the informants state that they have heard of the spirits' song at certain times in their lives. For instance, an elderly woman who was one of the key informants shared her childhood experience as follows:

Back then, as children, we used to spend much of our time around Abay, mainly looking after cattle. In the midday we usually hear a beat of drum and a song around trees on the narrow forested islands—the aits in the center of the river. We don't see it; we just hear it. We (the shepherds) approach the source of the drum sound and resonate together. They (the spirits) don't counter us. After a

¹⁸ Interview, Orthodox Christian, March 2024, Nunu

while, the song stops and we disperse. Outsiders couldn't comprehend this, they don't trust you. But, I know it; I have experienced it¹⁹.

Similarly, another informant, an adult man, recounted his childhood experience as follows:

When we look after cattle around Abay it was common for us to hear a drum and song along the river. There are specific places that this happens, usually on deep sections of the river and around large trees found on the river shore. They (the spirits) sing three times a day—in the morning, midday and at night. During the rainy season, their drum also serves as a predictor of what will happen to the river the following day; if they drum all day, we know that the river will overflow the next day. Besides the drum, we hear a yowl that goes on with the rhythm of the drum. When we hear them we hold up and sing with them. But, we don't see them. It seems the sing comes from deep inside the river, sometimes from around trees. We approach to the place where the sing seemingly comes from; when we reach that place the song starts to come from another direction. We go to that direction and listen; again, we hear the song and the drum coming from another side. It is difficult to exactly locate the place of the song. Apart from hearing their singing, on some areas along the shores of Abay, we encounter the smell of incense and sandalwood smoke²⁰.

¹⁹ Interview, Orthodox Christian, May 2024, Wetet Abay

²⁰ Interview, Orthodox Christian, June 2024, Nunu

In many ways, the *Jinn* of Abay is particularly important to individuals and families living along the river's course. If a calf with no or very short tail and short ears is born, for example, people interpret the deformity by supposing that the cow was impregnated by a *Jinn* not by a bull. A calf with such uncommon features is respected; it is believed to bless and bring good fortunes to the rest of the herd. It is believed that if Abay's *Jinn* welcomes one's household, their cattle herd would be more fertile and healthier than others. Underlying this viewpoint is the belief that the *Jinn* of Abay intimately knows local people and cattle. In this logic, the *Jinn* is expected to protect all herd and people from harms, unless it is angered or denied of expected ritual offerings. If people deny what they used to sacrifice for it, the *Jinn* may be annoyed and hurt people and their cattle. Many of the informants emphasize that if people want to abandon their sacrifices to the river, they should not cut it at once. Instead, they should reduce their sacrifices slowly from time to time and gradually lessen their attachments with the river spirit; because cutting the sacrifices households used to offer to the river all at once irritates the *Jinn* that may cause tragic consequences to the family members or to their cattle. Even the clergy, while they condemn their laity from sacrificing to Abay, they advise people to stop it gradually rather than straight away, to avoid the consequences that stem from the anger of the river spirit.

Though the locals along Abay's course hold an intimate physical, psychological and spiritual attachment with it, the amity of the *Jinn* is not limited to the local people living around the river. Individuals from afar also come and fawn on with the *Jinn* of Abay to get various favors. The sanctification and adoration of Abay by casual travelers is another example that the river's reverence extends beyond the local people. When travelers carrying food and beverage are to cross Abay, they drop a little from every item they carried in to the river while stepping

into the river's bed. Also, travelling *Azmaris*²¹ have a tradition of hallowing Abay whenever crossing it. When reaching at Abay, an *Azmari* would pause and greet by bowing down in front of the river. Standing at the river, the *Azmari* would then perform a song accompanied by their traditional instrument—*masinqo*. Raising the name “Ghion”, *Azmaris* magnify the mighty and blessedness of the river by uttering a verse with a rhythm. After they complete their song, they pick up something from the ground (may be a wood or a grass) and throw it in to the river before they set their foot on to the river. After they cross, prior to completely leaving the river and continuing their journey, they also make a brief pause on the opposite bank of the river and again hallow Abay, pleading it to make their way and destination safe and successful.

As highlighted by many of the informants, the *Jinn* of Abay is better communicated through the mediations of a class of sorcerer-like specialists called *debtera*²². Some in the *debtera* group may not be necessarily engaged in mediating with the *Jinn* but it is generally assumed that they can magically call invisible spirits including *Jinn*. Those who engage in doing so are locally referred to as “*Jinn Sabi*”, literally one who pulls *Jinn* (out of invisibility). In most cases, the mediator comes to Abay either alone or together with a help-seeking client attendant to call *Jinn* by using some formulaic magical words and divining procedures. The purpose of the mediation is to seek the *Jinn*'s superhuman power in diagnosing the causes of the client's suffering and prescribe solutions for betterment, often in the form of increased personal wealth and health or protecting the community from predicted man-made and natural hazards.

Informants also noted that mediating *Jinn* can be risky (for both the divining specialist

²¹ *Azmari* (አዝማሪ) refers to a traditional singer, typically using a single-stringed bowed lute instrument called *masinqo*.

²² The term *debtera* (ደብተራ) does not always refer to sorcery. In the Ethiopian Orthodox Church *debtera* stands for highly trained clergyman, but unordained.

and fortune-seeking clients). In the worst case, if the *Jinn* is not satisfied by the rituals conducted to it during the mediation, it may hit the mediator and paralyze their body. One of the key informants, an elderly man, recounts what he knew regarding this:

Jinn mediators coming to Abay is familiar, but they (mediators) say that calling Jinn and communicating with is quite difficult and risky. I knew a man who travels from Sudan to Wete Abay to call and summon the Jinn of Abay. He was an elderly man, an Ethiopian who was living in Sudan. He knows the Arabic language. Some individuals in Wetet Abay were acquainted with him and requested that he teach them how to call and communicate with Jinn. He replied: "I am worried about myself, let alone teaching you. Talking to Jinn is very hard and dangerous. It (the Jinn) raises question over question. It requests several things simultaneously. It is unbearable. You wouldn't get a way to escape. It is a terrifying condition, you get tensioned. If you don't comply with its requests it gets angry and may hit you". That man was talented and courageous. He used to make occasional visits to Wetet Abay from Sudan for this purpose. Every time he goes to Abay to call Jinn, he returns safely. Now, it has been a long time since he came to Wetet Abay; probably he died in Sudan²³.

The assertion from the voice of the above key informant, that directly contacting *Jinn* is risky, is also shared by many of the residents in the study area. As indicated earlier, the local people along Abay assert that the outcome of making direct communication with *Jinn* can be hazardous. Accordingly, the attempt to openly communicate with *Jinn* may backfire and end

²³ Interview, Muslim, September 2024, Wetet Abay

tragically. The following is a terrible story of a sorcerer who attempted to contact *Jinn* in Abay. Another informant, an elderly man, recalls the story:

Mediators come to Abay to summon Jinn. However, the Jinn they are summoning can sometimes inflict damage on the sorcerers and mediators. For example, I recall what occurred to a sorcerer who traveled from another place to Abay. He went up to the riverbank where Abay and Jemma meet, and began calling Jinn. While doing this, he was struck by the Jinn and debilitated. We are not sure what enraged the Jinn or how it happened, but the man was paralyzed in his hand and leg and returned home crippled²⁴.

All of the preceding veneration and mediation narratives of Abay, due to its religious virtue of holiness and its spiritual significance as the dwelling of a powerful spirit, have provided fertile ground for the institutionalization of periodic rituals and sacrificial offerings to the river. The next section discusses these aspects of Abay-related traditional practices.

²⁴ Interview, Orthodox Christian, September 2024, Wetet Abay

3.4 Abay as Site of Consecrations, Sacrificial Feasts and Rituals

ከረበህ አባይ ህደህ ስጋ ብላ – *If you are hungry, go to Abay and eat meat.* (A folk saying advising the hungry to feast on free sacrificial at Abay).

Based on their cultural significance, the rituals and sacrifices I discuss in this section can be arbitrarily categorized as pilgrimages/periodic sacrificial offerings, healing/well-being beseeching rituals and magico-religious ritual practices. Though analytically important, these practices are overlapping and not exclusive. Together, these practices are meant to prevent hazard and misfortunes, while guaranteeing the well-being and health of organizers and attendants. Moreover, consecration exists as a common motive across many of the rituals and sacrifices. In addition to their religious functions, the rituals and sacrificial practices are also socially significant. The most important of the latter include fostering social bondage among people and reaffirming shared local identity as “children of Abay”. In the discussions that follow I explore some of these ritual practices and sacrificial feasts together with their common reciprocal element—consecration.

Consecration, locally referred to as *silet* (ሰለጥ), is a deliberate pledge to offer to Abay that people make as gratitude upon the granting of their wish. In short, it is a reciprocal exchange between the person pledging and the supposedly wish granting superhuman power of Abay. Though the English term “consecration” is not as expressive as the locale one, I chose to use it, as it appears to be the closest translation of *silet* to the English language.

Requests for which consecrations are made to Abay include preventing future hazards, curing illness, achieving personal life goals, preventing infertility in women, acquiring more wealth, increasing herd fertility, etc. The time and place of executing consecrations is decided by

the fortune-seeking persons during their first pilgrimage to Abay. During this time, the pilgrim typically utters his/her pledge including the time they would return back if their wish is granted. Consecrations, rituals and sacrificial feasts are so interrelated that the performance of the latter two is often the result of the former executed into action. While different depending on the wish of individual fortune-seekers, most of the ritual offerings to Abay involve animal blood sacrifices. In some cases, however, both the consecration pledges and resulting rituals may not necessarily involve blood sacrifices.

Locals in the vicinities of Wetet Abay recall that, in the past, particularly prior to the 1974 Ethiopian socialist revolution (which denounced religious and spiritual traditions), rituals and sacrificial feasts on Abay were common. Slaughtering and smoke were a day by day phenomenon seen on the banks of Abay. Regardless of their religion, local people as well as people coming from farther areas make pledges to the river and organize rituals and sacrificial feasts upon the granting of their pledges. Indeed, several informants assert that, with regard to sacrificial feasts, people that pilgrim from farther localities have more appearances on the river bank than the locals living along the course of Abay.

In terms of social unit, most of the consecrations, sacrificial feasts and rituals take place at household and extended family levels. There are also sacrificial rituals that are conducted at village level, and occasionally at communal levels. In this discussion my main focus is on consecrations, rituals and sacrificial feasts conducted at household and family levels.

Though rituals and sacrifices along Abay may take place year round, certain months appear more preferred than others. Usually people don't frequent the river for sacrifice during the rainy season. Also, by default, regardless of their religion, it is the rule that people do not go to the river bank for sacrifice during the fasting months of Orthodox Christians. This is because

the ritual and sacrificial practices along Abay are generally tuned to respecting the calendars of the Orthodox Church for making slaughters, besides the practices often labeled as unreligious by the mainstream religions, including by the Orthodox Church itself. The making of sacrifices in line with the feasting seasons of the Church is not surprising however, given as a religious majority the bulk of the practitioners of the sacrificial rituals are Orthodox Christians. The locals' spiritual engagement with Abay grows after the days of the month of *Pagume*, with sacrifices on the river bank typically beginning in September, following the Ethiopian New Year. Thus, the peak months for performing sacrificial rituals on the river are the times following the New Year, Christmas and Easter, as well as on the days preceding the commencement of the Christmas and Easter fasts. In these days, spotting fire and smoke has been a common phenomenon on both sides along the shores of Abay.

While rituals and sacrifices are common at every course of Abay, there is a physical rationale that made Wetet Abay and its vicinities one of the most important sacrificial sites. This is due to its accessibility. Wetet Abay is a town found on the main road connecting Bahir Dar to Addis Ababa and many districts between the two cities. So, people can come anywhere by car transport and conduct their consecrations and sacrifices to the river without the need to make a foot trek. In addition, people can easily purchase the food and beverage stuff and the utensils they need for cooking on the river side from the town.

People who come to conduct sacrificial feasts from farther areas keep special connection with shepherds hanging along the banks of Abay, because it is the shepherds that indicate them the safe roads to enter to the river bank and exit from. The shepherds also show the ideal sites to cook and perform rituals. The shepherds themselves are alert, that when they see a smoke from afar they go to join the feast; they are welcomed by the holders of the feast.

Animals that are commonly sacrificed to Abay include cock, sheep or even a bull calf. The type of sacrificial animal depends on the type and magnitude of the matter persons pledged during their consecration. A bull calf is slaughtered for communal sacrificial rituals. If a bull calf is to be slaughtered it must be virgin²⁵. In addition, the bull calf to be sacrificed should be aesthetically beautiful. One example of such valued beauty is a bull with completely red color. The bull calf can have other colors also, but, whatever colors it may have it should have attractive looking. A virgin bull calf is considered pure and is therefore chosen for sacrifice to the river. Sometimes, through the vision of individuals or communicated by a mediator, the *Jinn* itself may demand the type of sacrifice to be offered to it. For instance, it is common to hear from people that the *Jinn* request a bull calf the length of whose horns and ears are equivalent. This kind of bull calf is commonly sacrificed when the *Jinn* divulges its resentment due to different reasons. One of the key informants, an adult man, states:

The Jinn of Abay is good for cattle. It is believed that cattle can see the Jinn physically and react to it sympathetically. People offer sacrifices to the river to keep their cows fertile and produce as many calves as possible during their lifetime. People also tap water from Abay and let their cattle drink it for cow fertilization and overall herd safety. For this purpose, people have to continue offering something to the river. Whenever the Jinn is denied of these offerings it becomes irritated. When the Jinn is infuriated it is heard bellowing like cattle. This time people find a virgin bull calf having equivalent horns and ears and sacrifice at the river to calm down the Jinn before it causes misfortunes²⁶.

²⁵ *Yalshena woyfen* (ያለሽና ወይፈን) is the local Amharic term for this type of bull calf that is favored for sacrifice

²⁶ Interview, Orthodox Christian, May 2024, Wetet Abay

Regarding sacrificial animals offered to Abay, as most of the informants emphasized, goat is generally not chosen for sacrifice to the river. Choosing sheep over goat for sacrifice parallels with the belief descended from the Abrahamic Holy Scriptures that label sheep as symbol of purity and goats as symbol of sin.

As indicated in the beginning of this section, people make consecrations, sacrifices and rituals for gaining a positive response on wide range of matters they encounter in their lives including illnesses. As far as human illness is concerned, scabies is found to be one of the most common illnesses for which people make consecrations and conduct healing rituals on Abay. Children are the most vulnerable sufferers from scabies. Accompanied by their parents, the sufferers wash or rinse in the river and make a promise. For curing scabies the most common promise offered to Abay is a cock; sometimes offering even bread can be enough for this illness. Though people often do it this way, slaughtering a cock and feasting it on the river side is not always a must. Some people just cut the cock by knife, let its blood spill into the river and leave it dead on the river side. Similarly, if someone's promise to the river was to offer bread, they can either eat the bread on the river side after throwing a small piece in to the river, or they can simply leave the full bread untouched on the river side. If someone is to place their offers on the river side and leave without feasting it, they have to put their offers on a place where other people couldn't easily access it, to prevent the offer from being treaded and damaged. Generally, People execute their offers in line with the kind of promise they made to the river before. A scabies story narrated by an informant, a young woman, reveals the condition practically. She states:

Recently my baby boy suffered from worst scabies. Since I live in Bahir Dar, I have tried many medications from biomedical centers. I have also taken him to

tsebel in several churches. Both of these couldn't help him. Later, I was advised by a relative who lives in Wetet Abay to take my son to Abay. Accompanied by my relatives I took him to Abay and washed his body in the water of the river. In the meantime, I made a consecration to Abay, promising to slaughter a rooster if my son gets cured from his disease. The condition of my son start getting better and better and eventually he cured. After a year, I returned back to Abay with a rooster and utensils to execute my promise. Together with my relatives we ignited fire on the bank of Abay; we set up temporary hearth. We slaughtered the rooster sanctifying it in the name of Ghion, draining the blood in to the river. Then we cooked the chicken and feasted all of it there. None of the remnant from the slaughter can be taken back home. All must be finished or left there²⁷.

While nurturing their children, moms in particular plead Abay to help them with a variety of issues. Another informant, an elderly woman, shares the following story:

It was years before. Back then, we used to celebrate Kidus Yohannes²⁸ on Abay. We had a water powered mill on the river. So, we rejoice Kidus Yohannes with a ritual feast at our mill as well. At the time, my baby boy had little appetite. His contemporaries ate healthily and grew robust. I felt dissatisfied and envious of this. One year, as we celebrated Kidus Yohannes, I made a consecration to Abay. I promised that if my son developed an appetite and ate properly, I would slaughter a cock to Abay for following year celebration. While uttering the promise I washed his body and let him drink from the river water. Following the

²⁷ Interview, Orthodox Christian, August 2024, Wetet Abay

²⁸ The popular name of the Ethiopian New Year among Orthodox Christians

promise, my son's eating habits improved. The following year, on the day of Kidus Yohannes, I went to the river with a cock. In addition, I took areki²⁹ and coffee, as well as all of my coffee-making stuff. My family and I carried out my consecration by slaughtering a cock, preparing it, and dining on it. We thanked Abay and enjoyed.³⁰

Some people have built special sympathetic attachments with Abay and conduct sacrificial rituals on the river because of certain phenomenon that happened in their lives. My key informant, an adult man who was also my field guide, shared his story, a story that he refers as “Abay’s miracle”. He says:

When I was a child I found one birr missing on the ground. I took it and bought a hen with ninety cents. Since it is alone I deployed my hen with another man's swarm. The man's thirty poultry died from fowl pest. Later, my hen also became ill. I carried her to Ghion and made a consecration, saying, “If Ghion cures my hen, I will sacrifice for it”. Then, I immersed the hen in the river's water, and two worm-like creatures came out from her nose. The hen was cured and subsequently had twelve broods. The chickens were gorgeous and distinct from other people's chicken. When my hens reached adulthood, I sacrificed one to Ghion and feasted with my family besides the river.³¹

Abay is also believed to cure sudden sicknesses whose cause is not known. For instance, whenever someone gets sick suddenly and acutely there is a tradition of taking

²⁹ Local alcoholic drink

³⁰ Interview, Orthodox Christian, September 2024, Nunu

³¹ Interview, Orthodox Christian, January 2024, Wetet Abay

the ill to Abay and crossing the river three or seven times. It is believed that the sick crossing the river drives the ailment to leave the person. This was done especially when someone is bitten by a rabid dog. Indeed, this practice is not unique to Abay, people do it in other rivers too. Nevertheless, the belief that Abay has a special potency is strongly held in the hearts of people.

Many of the informants say that, nowadays, such sacrificial feasts on Abay are rare and people who perform the sacrificial feasts on the river bank tend to do it hiding from the sights of other people. Though it is generally factual that the sacrificial practices on the river are diminishing, the assertions of informants that people nowadays do not do the sacrifices openly may be misleading. This is because, I have participated in an open sacrificial feast organized by a certain family group on the bank of Abay, a participant observation case worth narrating as follows.

The sacrificial feast took place in January 2023. It was organized by a family of Bete Israelis. The family group that attended the sacrificial feast numbered roughly fifteen persons, with around half being elderly men and the remainder being younger men and women, teenage boys and girls, and infants carried by their mothers. There were guys who came to help with the butchering, as well as underprivileged men who came to eat from the feast, awaiting the owners' desire. So, including me, there were around twenty people at the feast. The elders reside in Israel, from where they have come to perform their sacrificial feast on Abay. They were the primary sponsors of the feast. The remaining family members are locals from Wetet Abay. I was informed about the organization of the sacrificial feast ahead of time by my local guide, a man who is also family member of the feast organizers.

On lunchtime, the family group marched to the river from Wetet Abay, carrying a sheep, utensils, *enjera*, ingredients and other cooking supplies. I met them under a tree locally known as *chibiha*³², which is located on Abay's shore immediately above the bridge. My involvement as a researcher and participant was known to the family members. They were genuinely open, allowing me to record and ask them everything I felt necessary. We gathered under a tree shade on the river side. This was the dry season. The river is clear and flows charmingly over the vivid black bed rocks. The river side was littered with fallen dried leaves and thinly scattered bulrush grass. The family group selected and cleaned areas to sit, cook and slaughterer the sheep. The elders said a blessing over the sacrifice, and the sheep was slain. The sheep was lying on the riverbank, its face towards the river. The men who slaughtered the sheep allowed the fresh blood to seep into the river water. The sheep was then receded from the riverbank and butchered beneath the shade of a tree. In the meantime, ladies ignited a fire and formed a trivet from the adjacent stone. Both ladies and younger males begin cooking the meat on two different hearths.

Once they made the blessing the elders settled on a hillock facing the river within the reach of the tree shade. I joined the elders and interviewed some of them. One of them was a 65 year old man, as himself stated. Now living in Israel, he was formerly a deacon in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. He said he was also a traditional healer. I asked him why they conduct this sacrificial feast. He replied:

Abay is potent and famous than all other Ethiopian rivers. It is Abay that is identified with the name of Ethiopia internationally. It is crucially vigorous river whose mystery is concealed. It is a river of the Paradise. We have faith on Abay. Its water has power; we drink it, we wash with it. Abay supports people; it fulfills

³² *Chibiha* (ችብሃ) is the local name for *Ficus thonningii*, an evergreen lush tree native to Africa

*their requests. All the sick that come here get healed. It is Abay that collected us now. Abay doesn't eat or drink. Rather, we gather and feast on its bank in the name of consecration and sacrifices.*³³.

The other elder rationalizes their customary practice saying:

*First, as a child, we grew on Abay swimming, playing, washing, etc. Abay raised us, our oxen, cows and so forth. Abay is a site of consecration. It is a place of sacrifices. This is a tradition. People consecrate for their illness or to get rid of other bad luck, and even to get fortunes. They are healed. In the previous time, if you miss your ox you bring the suspected person to Abay and let him make an oath. The truth would be revealed. Abay is honored for having this power*³⁴.

The verbatim quotes of the above two ritual participants reveals that, it is not clearly demarcated whether the veneration of Abay by people is attributed to its religious holiness or to its being a site of the powerful supernatural spirit—the *Jinn*. Both religious and animistic components can be found in their devotion to the river and in the rituals and sacrifices they make along its banks. Their beliefs and practices exhibit typical religious syncretism between traditional animistic beliefs and the mainstream Abrahamic religions.

In this sacrificial feast, I also learned about the interval and the purpose of sacrificial feasts. According to the participants, some people make sacrifices every four years, three years or annually. There are also persons who make a single sacrifice to accomplish their consecration. So, the pattern of carrying out sacrifices is primarily determined by the wishes of the people.

³³ Interview, Orthodox Christian, January 2023, Wetet Abay

³⁴ Interview, Orthodox Christian, January 2023, Wetet Abay

This Bete Israel family conducts a ritual feast whenever they visit Ethiopia. This means they do not have set intervals. They make the sacrifice in order to receive Abay's assistance and protection. One of the elders says, "When we come here, we all return healed and with our troubles answered. Abay's mystery is unreachable. It helps us and our families wherever we travel"³⁵.

The cooking was completed, and the food was served in two forms. A portion of the beef was roasted on an iron griddle, while the remainder was prepared as sauce. We were divided into two groups for circle and eating commensally—the elders group and the rest of the family. I joined the elders group. Aside from the family members, all of the other men who attended the feast were also served food.

The sacrificial feast was concluded with the elders uttering a blessing. We all stood up for the benediction. The elders ended their blessing by pleading for the safety and health of their entire family and promising to make the same sacrifice the next time. I have learnt that this Bete Israel family prepares the sacrificial feast because they think Abay protects them and gives them a generation back year after year. Contrary to my expectation that the elders would honor Abay/Ghion, they primarily complimented their God for keeping them safe to this day and allowed them to gather together. The actions of their ritual performances show obvious marks of reverence for the river. Open veneration of Abay is concealed in the words addressing God, but evident in the established and formalized ritual acts. In the overall performance of the sacrificial ritual, duality in spiritual beliefs and religious syncretism is revealed practically.

³⁵ Interview, Orthodox Christian, January 2024, Wetet Abay



Figure 2: A Bete Israel family preparing sacrificial feast on the shore of Abay (photo by Abraham Genet)



Figure 3: The family cooking sacrificial feast on the shore of Abay (photo by Abraham Genet)

3.5 Sacrificial Sites: What Makes Some Sites More Favored than Others?

As highlighted in the earlier section, the preference of Wetet Abay for making consecrations, rituals and sacrifices is largely attributed to its geographical position (located on the main road) and infrastructural availability (being a town) along the course of Abay. That is

the mechanical reason for Wetet Abay to be a pilgrim destination, a site that is otherwise devoid of dense vegetation, featuring only a few human-planted and naturally occurring trees along the shore—a valued criterion to perform rituals and sacrificial feasts in other courses of the river. So, in creating this section my purpose is to show the criteria beyond mere physical accessibility—the social and cultural norms that influence local communities in valuing and selecting specific landmarks along Abay for conducting rituals and sacrifices. These norms are highly related with the third objective of the research—which will explore the roles of local spiritual beliefs and practices for ecological conservation, especially trees along the banks of Abay. There are particularly two valued features along Abay where people concentrate for making rituals and sacrifices.

The first one is the confluence of rivers. The place where Abay meets another large river is considered to be the abode of the powerful spirit—the *Jinn*. In the vicinity of Wetet Abay this has made the confluence of Abay and Jema river to be a significant ritual and sacrificial site. A few kilometers upstream from Wetet Abay, Abay creates an impressive cataract. Just below this cataract, the Jema River merges with Abay, creating a stunning and picturesque view. That stretch of Abay—from the point where the two rivers merge, down to the bridge and past the town of Wetet Abay—is one of the most frequently used sacrificial locations along the river.

Due to its strategic drainage position in northwest Ethiopia, Abay is a river collecting water flows ranging from small springs to a number of large rivers in its lengthy and winding path. Essentially, sooner or later, all water flows in this area ultimately find their way into Abay. Religions and traditions have given Abay a superior position, that once a tributary enters Abay, it adopts both the name and essence of Abay. The tributaries in their own are ordinary rivers (not holly), no special reverences given to them and not preferred to get sacrifices. However, once a

tributary flows into Abay, it is sanctified and becomes holy. This is why the location where two rivers converge—like the junction of Abay and Jema—is one of the most significant sites for making sacrifices by the shores of Abay. It is not just *Jinn* that is believed to exist in a place where Abay river converges with another river, but it is supposed that the *Jinn* residing there is more powerful than the *Jinn* dwelling in other parts of the river.

This assumption applies not only to the *Jinn* but also to other types of spirits thought to inhabit the Abay region. In connection with this matter, an adult man who was one of my key informants, states: “The hidden spirits residing in Abay above the bridge (that is nearer to the junction of Abay and Jema) and those dwelling downstream from the bridge are not the same. They vary in the power they possess”³⁶.

The presence of large trees lining along Abay river is the second important criterion for locating a site to perform rituals and sacrifices. The local community generally views these ancient, towering trees as homes for spirits—not necessarily for *Jinn*—but as dwellings for guardian spirits, particularly *Qole*. Besides this spiritual belief and supernatural factors, trees along the river’s course are graces; beneath their shades people choose to conduct sacrifices and rituals. The banks of Abay, upstream from Wetet Abay, are relatively adorned with pristine nature. There are abundant big trees, medium sized vegetation and bulrush along these courses of Abay. People who make consecrations and sacrifices along these courses of the river are mainly the locals, that conduct their sacrificial gatherings and ritual festivities underneath these trees—predominantly *dokima*³⁷, that uniquely thrive on the shores of Abay and other rivers else.

³⁶ Interview, Muslim, September 2024, Wetet Abay

³⁷ *Dokima* (ዶቅማ) is the local name for the *Syzygium guinneense*, an evergreen tree native to Africa. Its size ranges from a medium sized to large tall tree. It bears edible black (when ripen) berries



Figure 4: The confluence of the rivers Abay and Jema (coming from the north is Abay, from the west Jema, and heading to the east is the converged flow). This is one of the most common sacrificial and ritual sites on the banks of Abay (photo by Abraham Genet)



Figure 5: One of the most common sacrificial sites at Wetet Abay, underneath a *chibiha* tree (photo by Abraham Genet)



Figure 6: A huge *Dokima* tree along the shore of Abay, one of the most common sacrificial sites on the river's banks (photo by Abraham Genet)³⁸

3.6 Intrusions into the Unseen Realm, Warnings and Tragic Responses

I have emphasized at the beginning of my findings that the *Jinn* of Abay is not regarded as an inherently malevolent spirit. Instead, when approached appropriately and satisfied with offerings, it can be advantageous in numerous ways for the local community and their livestock, as well as for individuals who pilgrim to Abay in search of a connection with this supernatural entity. The rituals and sacrifices carried out along Abay that are discussed in detail in the preceding sections are founded on this central belief concerning the *Jinn*. However, there has always been an assumed boundary between humans and the spirit world, and whether perceived or real, crossing that boundary is often met with irritating outcomes. In this context, forming a relationship with and seeking blessings from the *Jinn* is believed to be acceptable, but intruding

³⁸ Figures C7 and C8 in Appendix A provide additional visual data on the sacrificial and ceremonial sites along the shores of Abay

into its own realm is considered dangerous.

This section discusses the activities that are considered to intrude into the domains of the unseen world and the anticipated consequences faced by those who intrude. The consequences range from cautionary signs to tragic outcomes on property and human lives. The analyses and interpretations presented here are grounded on the stories themselves that I gathered from my sources, who recounted specific events that occurred either to themselves or to others in relation to their engagement with Abay. It should be noted that in the discussions, the intrusion into and anticipated consequences by the unseen supernatural powers includes not just the *Jinn* but other spirits believed to inhabit Abay, most importantly the *Zars*.

My interpretation of the informants' accounts is that, intrusion in to the unseen world of spirits can at least be described in three forms. The first one is in terms of space. This was revealed by a story from a key informant, an Orthodox Christian elderly man referred here after as Alemu. Alemu stated what happened to his family because he built his home by the riverside. Though as a child he was raised in the vicinity of Wetet Abay, he lived in the nearby neighborhood district of Yilmana Densa with his wife and children before moving back to Wetet Abay town. He also had a daughter after relocating to Wetet Abay, who would eventually become the story's central subject. His house at Wetet Abay was by the riverside just above the bridge. He worked as a teacher, and one of his colleagues (an elderly man named Simegnew, an Orthodox Christian whom I later met as my informant) claimed to keep a close eye on the behaviors of hidden spirits, such as *Zars*. As Alemu explained to me, Simegnew used to stay inside his home and smoke incense in the afternoon as a way to communicate with the ghosts. Alemu states "when I was building the house by the riverside he warned me 'Mr Alemu, I foresee something, please don't build your home there. At that location you cannot cop up. You

would be in danger from the spirits of Abay”³⁹. In response, Alemu said, “how can Abay hurt me? I am Abay’s child. This is where I was nurtured. I grew up drinking its water and swimming and washing in it. Even my blood cloth during my birth was washed in the river”⁴⁰. Simegnaw reiterated:

*It might not be an issue for you, because you were raised on Abay, you are not new, and the spirits are familiar with you. However, since your children are unfamiliar with this site, it would be dangerous for them. Here, the spirits of Abay can bring bad luck to your children. If you don’t offer them a sacrifice every day, the spirits will become hostile*⁴¹.

Alemu responded once more: “Abay would not do harm to my children”⁴². So, he disregarded his colleague’s advice and constructed his house by the riverside.

The daughter Alemu fathered after he relocated to Wetet Abay, hereafter referred by the name Workinesh, grew up and started school. One day, something happened on Workinesh that haunted the family. In the home compound, they found her sobbing clutching the window. Her father, Alemu says “we discovered that something prompted her to visit the river at an unexpected time”⁴³. She remained by herself there. This indicates that, her family perceived, she spent time in the river with the spirits. It is upon her return from the river that the family found her in tears. She felt uneasy. Her situation caused worry in the family. Alemu concludes the story by highlighting what he sought as a solution to restore the healthy condition of his daughter that suffered from a psychological disturbance since her lone day by the river.

³⁹ Interview, December 2024, Wetet Abay

⁴⁰ Interview, December 2024, Wetet Abay

⁴¹ Interview, December 2024, Wetet Abay

⁴² Interview, December 2024, Wetet Abay

⁴³ Interview, December 2024, Wetet Abay

I had an uncle whose name is Merigeta⁴⁴ Tiruneh. I consulted him about the matter, and he suggested me to make a sacrifice on the river's shore where Workinesh had been alone. We sacrificed a rooster to the river to appease the spirits. Following the sacrifice, her condition improved, and she eventually returned to normalcy. However, even as an adult, she continued to occasionally experience the same type of mental condition⁴⁵.

The story reveals that, sharing a permanent home by the river is seen as an intrusion into the spirits' domain, which would cause them to react angrily and endanger human health, even though physical contact with Abay in daily life is quite normal, including the making of sacrifices.

The second form of intrusion, as I learned from the story that follows, could be phrased as “interfering in the execution of offerings meant to the supernatural spirits”. This story was shared by another key informant, an adult man who was also my field guide, referred by the name Anteneh. According to Anteneh, the incident took place during the time of the Ethiopian military regime (Derg), and though he was not the subject of the story he personally knew the occurrence. He states that, back then, the local men with guns guarded the Abay Bridge in Wetet Abay in shifts, day and night. One day a man arrived with a sheep to sacrifice for Abay following the fulfillment of his consecration he had made to the river before. But, one of the men from among those that were guarding the bridge prohibited the former from slaughtering the

⁴⁴ In the Ethiopian Orthodox Church's tradition, the *Merigeta* are clerics who are specially trained but may not be ordained like priests. In liturgical schools, they are the ones who instruct pupils according to their areas of specialization. During mass, they lead the song. In addition, the *Merigeta* are frequently thought to have the ability to communicate with supernatural entities. Partly this might be the reason many of the *Merigeta* work as traditional healers.

⁴⁵ Interview, December 2024, Wetet Abay

sheep by the river bank, believing that he might be a spy of EPRP⁴⁶, a party which by then was a rebel group fighting to overthrow the Derg regime. The guard who prohibited the man from slaughtering the sheep had a very good cow. Just on that day, his cow, which was grazing near Abay, slide down the gorge and perished. The guard was shocked. He later believed that this had happened to him as a result of his prohibition of a sacrifice that was ought to be offered to Abay. So, he appeased Abay by offering a sheep as sacrifice, out of fear that he might also suffer another catastrophe.

The third form of intrusion extends beyond merely encroaching into the realms of the unseen spirit world. It entails meddling with and upsetting the very circumstances that the spirits inhabit. It is believed by the locals that often, individuals, particularly children, may interrupt the actions of these supernatural entities in nature because they are not easily able to identify what is designated for the spirits. Conceptually, I built this form of intrusion grounding from a tragic story that happened eighteen years ago in Wetet Abay, which is commonly reported by multiple informants. One time, when two young boys went for fishing in Abay, they discovered two burning incense sticks that had been impaled on the riverbank. Who started to burn and placed the incense sticks there was unknown to the boys. They just picked up the smoking sticks, played with them and eventually threw them into the river because they had no idea what it may be like. The boys became gravely sick after returning home from the river, experienced hallucinations, and died a few days later. They were buried one after the other. It was commonly believed by the locals back then, as it is now, that this happened to the boys because they angered the spirits residing in Abay by damaging the incense smokes that belonged to them. The youngsters that perished did not tell anyone about their encounters on the river. But later, some persons who

⁴⁶ Ethiopian People Revolutionary Party

were near the boys by the riverside claimed to have witnessed a brown, grey-haired old man emerging from the water and strike the boys as they flung the incense sticks. Accordingly, the boys had passed out for about an hour by the riverside before leaving for their home. The aforementioned being that beat the boys is believed to be the supernatural spirit that reacted angrily against the boys for their annoying behavior, even though the people saw him as an elderly man and reported him as such. After making multiple attempts to meet the individuals who were supposed to have witnessed this incident, I learned that they had joined one of the battling groups in the civil war and had recently been killed in a combat that took place in Wetet Abay along the river.

The aforementioned story is widely known by the residents of Wetet Abay and recalled even after years it had happened. It is talked by people as an unwavering evidence not just for the existence of supernatural spirits in Abay, but as a reference to the furious, darkest side of spirits. The fact that both boys had the same activities by the riverside, fell ill shortly after their experience, and within a few days died one after another left no room for people to rationalize the fatality on other factors.

A few months after I gathered the story, I came across an elderly woman as my informant. It was a surprise. She was the mother of one of the boys who died in the story. The woman, hereafter referred to as Wubit, was a bit different from my female informants in that she was a well-known swimmer. As a child and adult, Wubit regularly swam in Abay. She had a very strong spiritual connection with Abay. Now, she no longer worships and praises Abay, not just because she has grown old but for another reason. Wubit revealed to me about her son when she explains in deep sadness the reason why she terminated her engagements with the river. She states:

Unlike these days, during the time of our parents there were no sufficient parish churches accessible to nearby the community. So, Abay had been just like a church for the community. We had deep spiritual commitment to Abay. We used to praise and venerate it; we sacrifice and gathered along its banks. People make consecrations to Abay and heal from various ailments; even infertile women get a child. Personally, I used to worship Abay; I used to slaughter for it as sacrificial. I had relied on its potency. There was nobody I trust like Abay; even if I were to enter its overflowing stormy waters, I would never have questioned that it would carry me away. But, it took the life of my young son. Ever since, I felt Abay like an enemy. I do not want to see it. It is eighteen years since my son died and my body never came in to contact with the river's water⁴⁷.

As a researcher, I believe that the causes and consequences in the happenings of the stories could be real or perceived, but all of the events in the stories actually occurred. From a skeptical point of view, we can challenge and assert other potential causes for the outcomes happened to individuals in the latest narrative, as well as in the two stories that came before. However, in my view, people's perceptions and interpretations of the events are more important than attempting to logically experiment their explanations. Here, I acknowledge Clifford Geertz's famous statement that anthropology is an interpretive discipline seeking meaning rather than an experimental one looking for law (Martin, 1993). As an anthropologist, my job here is to represent local peoples' worldviews that bound their spiritual beliefs associated with Abay. Surprisingly, one of my informants, an adult man who felt skeptical about the repercussions of

⁴⁷ Interview, Orthodox Christian, May 2025, Wetet Abay

the stories dealt also stated that “the meaning is more important than the truth”⁴⁸.

Overall, the tales discussed mirror that, the beneficial outcomes of the *Jinn* and other supernatural spirits believed to reside in Abay is not always to be taken for granted. Instead, the events in the stories and the interpretation of the outcomes show both the positive and negative repercussions in the beliefs, spiritual connections and daily interactions of people with Abay.

3.7 Religious Assertions versus “River Worship”: The Contentious Elements

The veneration of Abay is far deeper and widespread than the religious meaning bestowed to the river. If the religions are to dictate their followers to value the holiness of Abay in the strict sense of the religious texts, the way people venerate the river has become excessive and gone out of control. Basically, we cannot consider religions as a basis for the proper reverence of Abay, since the animistic traditions of river worship, including that of Abay, are likely to have predated the advent of Christianity and Islam in Ethiopia. Instead, we need to examine the nexus as well as the disunion between the animistic traditions and the religious practices with regard to the spiritual devotion of people to Abay. In their spiritual practices, individuals do not often markedly separate between religious beliefs and animistic traditions. Consequently, the animistic traditions of venerating Abay and the religious holiness of the river are dissolved in to a single and unique tradition of revering the river.

However, particularly in recent times, religious leaders and individuals who identify themselves as devoutly religious are becoming increasingly aware of the animistic practices and trying to line a boundary between the religious holiness of Abay and the customs of venerating the river itself. This seems also to broadly relate with the contemporary fundamentalist

⁴⁸ Interview, Muslim, May 2024, Bahir Dar

movements of both Christianity and Islam across the globe. Within this wider context, the pressure of the local religious leaders combined with the influence of modernization is urging followers to adhere as closely to religious practices as possible. As a result, many local residents along Abay seek to “refine” their spiritual values by discarding long-standing traditional beliefs and practices which are variously labeled as “irreligious”, “river worshipping”, “primitive worship” and so forth.

Religious leaders from the Orthodox Christian community in Wetet Abay area state that, tapping water from Abay and drinking it as *tsebel* is acceptable, as Abay is considered holy owing to its designation in the Bible as a river of the Paradise. In addition, if individuals call and praise the name of God for creating the river when they make use of the river’s water for healing, that is also not wrong. However, the clergy emphasize that, what is done by people is different from this. They insist that people offer sacrifices and organize feasts on Abay in the name of Ghion, and by that name the attendees are referring to the *Jinn* believed to be living in the river. Some individuals even swear in the name of Ghion. The clergy condemn such beliefs and customs related to Abay. One of my key informants, an elderly man who was a priest, asserts:

Christians, Muslims and followers of any other religions alike come to Abay to make consecrations and to conduct sacrificial slaughters and feasts. There are people who even come from abroad to make a sacrificial ritual on Abay. These days, in Wetet Abay, we (the clergy) don’t allow people to make sacrifices by the riverside that is adjacent from the Abune Zerabruk church to the bridge⁴⁹.

The other informant, a young man who was likewise a priest, says:

⁴⁹ Interview, April 2025, Wetet Abay

*Since the area is estate of the Church, we prohibit everyone from conducting sacrificial rituals on the river. If a non-Christian wishes to perform sacrificial rituals in the other banks of the river—other than the one adjacent to our Church compound, it is up to them, we don't reprimand them. In General, we condemn and advise our believers—Christians, not to do such things on any bank of the river*⁵⁰.

Nevertheless, the Church's condemnation is not rigid towards its followers. Hence, with certain influences coming from their Father Confessors, the decision to continue or abandon the sacrifice acts by the river is mostly up to the rights of individuals and families.

Much like Christians, Muslims have also moved away from the traditions of revering and sacrificing to Abay, a practice once they were frequently indulged with. Because of population and cultural dominance in the locality, it appears that the beliefs, rituals and sacrificial practices associated with Abay are predominantly embraced by Christians. However, this thought should not be deceptive. Indeed, according to sources from some informants, historically, Muslims used to venerate Abay even far greater than the Christians did. These reports suggest that Muslim individuals would visit Abay and often genuflect in respect before the river. While traveling, persons pause at the river, bow down and perform a ritual washing before continuing their journey. Even those travelling by car would drop when they reach Abay and give a similar reverence to the river before resuming their route. I obtained these pieces of evidence primarily from informants who are not Muslims. However, Muslim informants did not embrace this information, declaring that it is incorrect. Through my probing questions directed to both

⁵⁰ Interview, April 2025, Wetet Abay

groups—Muslims and Christians, I have understood that the Muslim informants rejected the aforementioned claims about worshipping Abay mainly to protect their religious values. So, it appears that the information is certainly not fabricated, but represents real historical practice.

Nevertheless, nowadays, similar to the Christian religious leaders, Islamic religious authorities are also engaging in the same act of banning their followers from performing rituals and sacrifices on Abay. One of my key informants, an elderly man who was a sheikh state that “we still use the water of Abay as it is religiously holy and capable of curing various illnesses. But, slaughtering for the river is a disliked act. Only Allah has the power to cure and take life”⁵¹. Likewise, several other Muslim informants assert that Allah instructed them to exclusively worship Him. Consequently, for Muslims who strive to adhere closely to their faith, offering sacrifices to the river is regarded as idolatry.

In fact, the prohibition of religious authorities is not seeking their believers completely cut their spiritual attachments with the river. As mentioned earlier, religious leaders from both Christianity and Islam express that while the water of Abay is holy and using it for healing as *tsebel* or *tehlil* is quite normal, making sacrifices to the river crosses a line in their faiths—it constitutes a form of worship engaged to the river itself. Religious leaders assert that the river’s water is sacred and possesses the ability to heal on its own without demanding sacrifices to the river. Some of the clergy even express their further tolerance that, still any one, individually or in group can vow a dedication to Abay by promising to offer something—for instance sacrifices, but the slaughter and feast should take place at home rather than by the riverside.

The other important factor I discovered that distances individuals from their traditional spiritual connections to Abay is age. Across all of my informants (female and male; rural and

⁵¹ Interview, September 2024, Wetet Abay

urban; Christian and Muslim) I learned that older people are more religious than their younger counterparts. Individuals, who were raised along Abay, deeply engaged in the customs of sacrificing and celebrating by the riverbank, now in their later years appear to be quite devout to their religions. Some recall their experiences on Abay with a sense of nostalgia, feeling joy about those memories. But, they now refer to these traditions as pagan practices. For instance, one of my informants, Simegnew, who was mentioned as a former colleague of Alemu in the preceding section, was deeply engaged in the belief in supernatural spirits. As mentioned in that section, Alemu stated that as a young man, Simegnew used to burn incense and sandal as a kind of worship and communication with spirits. I cross-examined Alemu's allegation with other sources and found it to be factual. Simegnew even cautioned Alemu against building his home by the side of Abay, claiming that he saw the spirits there that may inflict his family, and we learned from the story that his warning was real. Now Simegnew has grown older. When I met him as my informant, I found him being appearing deeply devote to his Orthodox Christian religion. He is holding a stick with a cross-shaped edge, the type of stick monks carry with them. He routinely rehearses verses from the Bible during our conversations. When I probed him about his previous engagement with the supernatural spirits, he just not disregarded his previous experience; he simply denied it. He stated: "...I do not know about spirits. I have not had such encounter and experiences"⁵².

Some individuals among such elderly informants claim that the hidden forces (such as the *Jinn*) resemble like the worldly powers they are familiar with, having hierarchies ranging from God's angels of the light (like Michael and Gabreal) to angels of darkness (Satnael and his accomplice) down to weaker spirits that inhabit various environments like rivers, large trees and

⁵² Interview, *Pagume* 2024, Bahir Dar

mountains. They say that these spirits have little power and mostly they are malevolent. They are wicked; they cause illness and various misfortunes. For instance, if someone visits a river at a time perceived to be inconvenient (such as in mid noon) he/she might get inflicted by the spirits. Based on information from various sources, this is why people avoid building their homes (especially in earlier times) close to water bodies, as they feared the harms of those spirits. However, many of the informants also believe that, if individuals show compassion to these spirits, particularly by appeasing them through blood sacrifices, they may do a favor temporarily. However, if their expectations are not met, they could turn to be malicious towards those who sought their favor. All these accounts reflect the reasons, especially from the older informants, for deserting their traditional beliefs and sacrificial rituals in favor of their religious dedication. A story from one of my informants, a young man, reveals an event that took place in Wetet Abay, demonstrating how people exhibit empathy and loyalty to their faith as they grow old. He states:

Once, a man residing in Israel sent forty thousand birr to an elderly man living in Wetet Abay with the purpose of purchasing an ox and sacrificing and feasting it on Abay on his behalf, fulfilling a vow he had previously made to the river. But the old man didn't want to slaughter an ox on Abay, believing that doing so is against his religion. As a result, he decided to volunteer the money meant to buy the ox. He publicly donated half of the money to the Church and the remaining to the beggars. We don't know if the owner of the consecration—the man living in Israel—heard this or how he reacted⁵³.

⁵³ Interview, Orthodox Christian, January 2024, Wetet Abay

The aforementioned story reveals how individuals' dedication to their faith can take precedence over traditional ritual practices when they grow old, to the point of undoing the promise of persons who trusted them to execute their consecrations.

Nevertheless, besides the increasing reprimand of the religious leaders, still people have continued making their consecrations by uttering the name Ghion, which is implicit yet unequivocal reference to the *Jinn* of Abay believed to be dwelling in the river. Sometimes people openly refer it as *ye Ghion qole* (*qole* of the Ghion). Surprisingly, what I learned from most of my informants is that consecrations have a successful outcome. The informants claim they have got what they pleaded Abay. They vigorously assert that Abay heals. Even religious leaders and devoted practitioners who denounce the custom acknowledge that the spirit of the river actually responds to those who honor and placate it. One of the informants I interviewed for this issue was an elderly woman who used to perform consecrations and sacrifices to Abay. She now claims that offering sacrifices to the river is wrong and contrary to her Christian religion. But she still insists that: "there is a lot of healing there (in Abay), numerous miracles happen"⁵⁴.

Overall, the spiritual and ritual practices along the banks of Abay represent a situation in which religion and folk customs are blended, creating a form of religious syncretism. But from time to time, religious awareness and modernization are disrupting this amalgamation, especially the former trying to purify religion from the impacts of traditional beliefs and ritual practices that are bound to Abay. This scenario has resulted in the chronological weakening of peoples' traditional spiritual connections, which in turn diminished the regularity of ritual performances and sacrificial offerings which were once very common by the banks of the river. The decline in

⁵⁴ Interview, Orthodox Christian, September 2024, Wetet Abay

the frequency of ritual and sacrificial practices along Abay, together with the factors that account for the decline are discussed in further detail in the fifth chapter of the study.

3.8 The New Year Celebrations on Abay

The traditions of local communities celebrating the Ethiopian New Year along Abay have largely vanished. Much of the information for this discussion is derived from the past accounts of my informants, along with my own childhood memories. Therefore, my findings about the New Year celebration by the shores of Abay reflect more of a historical reality than typically a contemporaneous tradition.

The New Year celebration along the banks of Abay hold deep significance as it represents the shift of individuals and families away from the anxieties of uncertainty experienced during the previous year and into the New Year, which is portrayed as an escape from death and a continuation of life year after year. That is why, on the days of *Pagume*, the locals wash every family member's clothes as a symbol of receiving the New Year in purity⁵⁵. The New Year stands to signify delight and optimism as it marks the transition from the gloomy, rainy summer⁵⁶ to the vibrant autumn, during which the environment begins to flourish. Summers are often characterized by intense rainfall, thunderstorms and floods that cause rivers to overflow. Especially for those living in rural areas, this situation restricts communication among individuals and families residing across large rivers like Abay. Starting in May, Abay shifts to a deep brown, laden with sediments. This pattern usually persists until October.

By the beginning of September, the river's strength begins to subside. This depends upon

⁵⁵ Refer to Figure C7 in Appendix C for an example of visual data

⁵⁶ In the Ethiopian context the term "summer" represents the main rainy season

the weather of the season. Sometimes it continues to rain heavily through September as well. Anyhow, for most of the time the river's mighty flow starts to calm down from September onwards. The wet ground begins to dry. The landscape around the river greens with lush grass and other types of vegetation. The view becomes glowing and lively with the blossoming of flowers. The Ethiopian New Year is not just a number shift from the old to the new calendar; it symbolizes a transition from the gloomy features of summer to the vibrant beauty of autumn, filled with a sense of optimism for better health, bountiful harvests and an overall enhanced quality of life, which makes the festivities profoundly meaningful and evocative. This is the reason behind the famous folk saying:

መስከረም ሲጠግ አደይ ሲፈነዳ - Meskerem siteba adey sifeneda

እንኳን ሰው ዘመዱን ይጠይቃል ባዳ - Enkuan sew zemedun yiteykal bada

It translates as:

When September dawns, as the daisy⁵⁷ blooms

Let alone their kinfolks, people visit those who are unrelated.

On September one, the Ethiopian New Year, the vibrant ceremonial celebration along the Abay opens up. From among the various ritual and sacrificial events that take place by the banks of Abay no event matches to the New Year celebration in attracting a large crowd and showcasing such brightness, joy and lavish feast. Traditionally, among Orthodox Christians the day is known by the name *Kidus Yohannes* (Saint John). This is because the day the New Year happens coincidences with the day Saint John was beheaded and become a Christian martyr.

⁵⁷ The Ethiopian daisy (*adey abeba* - አደይ አጠግ) is endemic to the country. It blooms a bright yellow vibrant flower in excess. It is a symbol and deeply associated with the Ethiopian New Year as the plant bruise widely covers the landscape roughly starting from the month of September

Nonetheless, although the name *Kidus Yohannes* is adopted from the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, the New Year festivities in the vicinities of Wetet Abay are considerably worldly, joyful and traditional than religious. In its spiritual aspect, the celebration of the New Year on the banks of Abay is emphasized to the rituals that adore and venerate the river. Otherwise, the day is indulged in feasting on the river bank and eventually taking part in ecstatic events such as swimming contest that often inevitably follows the feasts. The outdoor festival activities on the river bank are so deeply absorbed in ritualized feasts and fun, and in the midst of these ecstatic events no participant ever stands in memory of the martyred Saint John. So, hereafter in my discussions, I refer the name “New Year” rather than *Kidus Yohannes*.

On the day of the New Year, it is not only the locals that march to Abay, people from farther areas go to the river and sacrifice for it and feast by the river side. They perform this for the fulfillment of their consecrations they made to the river previously or just to express their gratitude in reverence of the river and the fortunes that the spirit of Ghion ensures them. The New Year celebration holds greater significance, depth and vibrancy for the rural inhabitants along Abay compared to those in urban areas. This is mainly owing to the fact that the holiday carries importance not only for the people but also significantly for the well-being of their livestock.

In the dawn of September first, the locals (especially boys and the youth) go to Abay and immerse in the river naked. Hours later, near noon, residents from the entire neighborhood make their way to the river carrying food and drinks for the festivities, bringing along their livestock. Every family member, including the youngest siblings, heads to the river. Nobody, including women, is left at home. Most of the time, every village has got a fixed site at the riverside for the New Year festivity to take place; so participants assemble at the village basis. *Guzguzo*, a special

food prepared for such holidays, is contributed from each household. *Guzguzo* is a local dish prepared by smearing a mixture of cheese, butter, yogurt or other types of items on freshly baked *enjera*. If the holiday occurs on fasting days (Wednesday and Friday) the *guzguzo* is prepared from non-dairy products such as *shiro* (a sauce prepared from pea flour) and *awaze* (pepper flour diluted by water and oil). Regardless of the spreading item, the *enjera* must be fresh, doubled, laid flat and spread evenly. That is what makes the food *guzguzo*. *Areki*, the local alcohol which can be distilled from each household, is another inevitable item taken together with *guzguzo* for celebration of the New Year on the banks of Abay.

Prior to settling on the riverbank, individuals circle their herd of cattle three times while holding their *guzguzo* and *areki*. This ritual action is performed to show gratefulness and to wish for their cattle to be fertile, healthy and blessed alongside them, and to survive safe year after year. Then the entire neighborhood gathers, making a seat on the site facing the river, usually under a shade of *dokima* tree that is commonly found along the shores of Abay. The seat is arranged based on age and gender. The elders express their appreciation for coming together on this day and extend their hopes for the same to happen in the coming year. They bless the food brought separately from every household. In general, it is the rule that attendees refrain from partaking in the food and beverages before every item is sanctified in honor of Abay. That means though the river does not literally eat it, every food and drink is symbolically dedicated to the honor of Abay. While not common in other farther vicinities, in Wetet Abay and its close surroundings, there is a tradition of preparing a separate small special *guzguzo*, a beloved variant which is made specifically for Abay, in addition to the usual *guzguzo* enjoyed by the participants. From each food item brought by families, a small piece is left on the riverbank or thrown into the river. Similarly, a small amount of *areki* from the bottle is poured into the river. Also, a small

drop from each of other beverage type brought for the celebration is poured in to the river. This is a ritual of sanctifying Abay and sacrificing to it. Usually, the spirit, referred by the name Ghion, is meant to receive the sacrifice; and implicitly, it is recognized that the spirit sanctified by the name Ghion is the *Jinn* of Abay.

Right after the complimentary and dedicating rituals honoring Abay, the food and beverage taken to the river by every household in the neighborhood is distributed to the participants based on age and gender. The feast and drink is lavish and every person is free to enjoy it, that even young children get drunk in front of their parents. Attendees continue to enjoy until the food and beverage is finished. Often, a picturesque swimming performance in the river by adults and young men follows after the meals. The celebration concludes with the elders bestowing their blessings, hoping to reach to the next year safe along with their livestock.

Families with farmlands by the banks of Abay also perform similar ritualized feasts on their fields during the New Year. The aim is to seek a plentiful harvest from their crops, similar to what they do to ensure their cattle remain fertile and healthy.

In the previous times, many households along Abay used to celebrate the New Year by performing animal sacrifices by the riverside and enjoying a feast there. The animals sacrificed can include cattle or sheep. In the past, on some banks of the river the feast and the New Year celebration on Abay was also accompanied by music. This has been especially customary among the rural communities residing along the river's banks, particularly in the areas upstream from Wetet Abay town. The villagers can bring along a tape (and a cassette) or an *azmari* that makes songs with the traditional Ethiopian instrument—the *masinqo*. The celebration in this way creates a lively atmosphere. The villagers assemble seeing one another from opposite banks of the river. They shout greetings, exchange frisky wit, sing festively and enjoy themselves. The

attendees consume a share of the meat by the riverside and take the rest back home to prepare and enjoy it together later in the evening. This is a different tradition to what most other informants said, that a meat slaughtered on Abay should be finished there and any part of it should not be taken home. My research participants were unable to provide a clear explanation for the differing practices found in various locations within my study sites with regard New Year celebration on Abay. From my perspective, the worldly nature of the New Year celebration appears to explain the custom of finishing or disposing of the slaughtered meat by the riverside, while also bringing some of it home for later consumption is the tradition in certain localities. But, with respect to consecration sacrifices, as explored in the preceding sections, people are strict so they are not going to commit any faults that may anger the spirit of Ghion. What makes consecrations different from the New Year celebration is that unlike the New Year celebration, consecration sacrifices are a direct promise of individuals to the river in return to the fulfillment of their requests; so, they are expected to carefully and strictly conduct their sacrificial ritual. In addition, as highlighted at the beginning of this section, though the brief moments of honoring the spirit of Ghion are always the initial acts done before the amusements, the New Year celebration along the banks of Abay is more of festivity and enjoyment than a spiritual devotion.

In terms of social significance, the New Year festivities along the banks of Abay also play an important part in reinforcing common and shared sentiments and social connections. This aligns with the theories of rituals that highlight how rituals enhance collective life and social solidarity.

To summarize, this chapter demonstrated that Abay is more than just a powerful naturally flowing river. Instead, it includes interconnected natural and social systems that generate and reproduce rich traditional beliefs, meanings and behaviors. The findings discussed in this section

indicate that the spiritual and religious importance of Abay river is bold. This boldness is demonstrated chiefly through the investigation of Abay's spiritual and religious value by scrutinizing the rituals and sacrifices performed at the river in relation to *tsebel* and the beliefs surrounding the *Jinn* of Abay. The discussions pertaining to the New Year celebrations and festivities along Abay are also deeply rooted in the above-mentioned beliefs and customs held to the river. Some sites along Abay are preferred above others for rituals and sacrifices due to specific spiritual, cultural and social factors. Pertaining to the interactions between humans and the unseen world of spirits, this chapter has highlighted the perceived boundaries between the two, along with the discussions of the activities that are considered to intrude into the domains of the unseen world, as well as the anticipated consequences faced by those who intrude. This chapter has also examined the connections and contentious aspects between animistic traditions and religious preaching regarding the veneration of Abay.

Chapter Four: The Meanings of Abay River as Symbol and Metaphor for Life: An Ethnographic Interpretation

As I attempted to operationalize in the introductory chapter, symbols often convey abstract or complex themes, whereas metaphors serve as linguistic devices that illuminate meaning through comparison. By engaging both concepts, this chapter is intended to shed light on the multifaceted symbolic significances of Abay broadly in the cultural and social life of Ethiopians.

The symbolic aspirations associated with Abay are not just derived from its natural might and inherent features. Instead, alongside with its natural features, the cultural prominence and symbolic meanings linked with Abay are also interconnected to the river's religious and spiritual value that are dealt in the preceding chapter. What distinguishes the symbolic aspects from its religious and spiritual dimensions is that, the symbolic feature of Abay is about how the river itself is imagined, pictured and its name and characters used in everyday thoughts and linguistic expressions of people. The river's extensive basin and lengthy course through its twisting path—primarily in the inaccessible wilderness—along with its significant religious and spiritual role rooted in the origins of the Abrahamic faiths, has made Abay to hold a profound cultural position in the symbolic expressions and everyday vernacular language among the people of Ethiopia, including the locals in the study area. Therefore, in this chapter, I explore some of the symbolic references of Abay by triangulating ethnographic information with the deeper meanings of selected Abay-related folk expressions and verses, as well as augmenting the discussions with findings from some relevant empirical studies.

4.1 Abay Symbolized as Powerful and Unifying Paternal Figure

In terms of gender, Abay is a river widely perceived in a graceful masculine personality. As Oestigaard and Gedif (2011, 2013) correctly noted, Abay is popularly imagined as a male river, having distinct masculine traits. However, Oestigaard and Gedif also revealed that, in Geez language Abay means motherhood, representing fertility and femininity. Nevertheless, the river is popularly perceived in masculine terms as we know it today among the people of Ethiopia. It is not common for Abay to be portrayed as a mother; it is subtle and concealed by its masculine character. This is strongly supported by rhetoric and popular imaginations, as well as field evidence from informants who live along the river's banks. Therefore, in the Ethiopian popular tradition, Abay is conspicuously and commonly perceived to represent a powerful masculine symbol. But, Abay is not just envisioned as a powerful masculine entity; the river occupies the highest position of patriarchy in the hierarchy of rivers.

Information gathered and interpreted from a variety of informants likewise reveals that, Abay is considered as “father of rivers”, as it collects many tributaries along its meandering course. Abay is symbolized as a father that unites otherwise sparse and unrelated tributaries. It is a natural platform in which many streams—big and small, meet and mix. Owing to this natural feature of Abay, the river is represented to serve not only as a paternal figure, but also embodies the qualities of unity and strength.

4.2 Abay as Sacred Symbol

Abay is a notable river that holds special meaning for many. It is the only river in Ethiopia religiously⁵⁸ deliberated sacred, matching a few other rivers around the globe. In general, Abay holds a profound spiritual meaning, especially to the locals residing along its banks. First-hand data from informants demonstrate that, for many of the local residents along the river's course, their devotion to Abay is akin to their reverence for a church, as the river occupies a cherished position in the hearts of the people. Abay has played a crucial role in the spiritual practices of those living along its banks. As it can be recalled from the preceding chapter, periodic rituals and sacrifices are frequently conducted at the river's banks. One of the informants, an elderly man, says: “symbolically Abay is like our father. As children, we even used to swear in the name of Abay, we say “የአባይ ቆሌ ይወቅ- *ye Abay qole yiwoq*”. Literally it means “*qole* of Abay knows I am telling the truth”⁵⁹.

In addition to its religious value, as extensively discussed in the sections of the previous chapter, Abay is believed to host a powerful supernatural being referred to as *Jinn* and the *qole* mentioned above is most likely linked to this supernatural being.

As it was also revealed from the perceptions of several informants, the portrayals of Abay as a paternal figure and as sacred entity are mutually reinforcing. Due to the strongly established religious and spiritual beliefs about Abay, the river is envisioned as a strong, personified figure, a formidable father who has the ability to safeguard as well as punish its children based on how they treat him.

⁵⁸ Here, by the term “religiously” I mean only the Abrahamic religions, acknowledging that other rivers in Ethiopia may hold spiritual importance for local people

⁵⁹ Interview, Orthodox Christian, January 2024, Wetet Abay

4.3 Abay as Symbol of Bounty and Generosity

The image of Abay shades grandiosity in the imaginations of people. Informants likewise state that when they envision Abay, they think something grand and magnanimous. Correspondingly, Oestigaard and Gedif (2013) emphasize that, Abay symbolizes greatness, plentiful and splendor feature. The following traditional proverb reflects Abay's bounty symbolization.

አባይን ያለፎ ምንጭ ያመሰግናል

Free translation

Phonetic transcription

One who has never encountered Abay praises a spring

Abayin yalaye minch yamesginal

As many other sayings that refer Abay, this proverb is not just about the river, it is a reminder of the need to see things comparatively and relatively. Understanding the true essence of things is not possible until one encounters something greater and different than their usual experiences. Emblematically, the proverb indicates Abay is a reference of abundance and magnificence.

In addition, the figurative representation of Abay also embodies a generous nature. As it stands for untamed mighty power, Abay also represents bigheartedness and kindness. When individuals convey that someone is generous, they literally say, “he/she is Abay.” The next folk proverb is another example that metaphorically demonstrates Abay's linguistic instrumentality to express a bountiful feature.

የአባይን ልጅ ውሃ ጠማው

Free translation

Phonetic transcription

A child of Abay is thirsty of water

Ye Abayin lij wuha temaw

Abay flows with abundant water. But a person living nearby (denoted as “child of Abay”) gets thirsty. This is paradox. The saying is not just about Abay and a person living nearby, it is rather a metaphorical expression of the lack of something in the midst of the abundance or accessibility of that thing. For instance, what if a shoe maker remains barefoot himself/herself? What if the son of a barber has unkempt hair, insisting he hasn’t been able to locate someone to tidy it up? All these assumptions are contradictions and absurdities. Amharic is a language filled with figurative expressions, and an individual’s speech of addressing something is more valued when it is allegorical than literal. When faced with paradoxes and contradictions like those described above, Ethiopians often use the metaphor *Ye Abayin lij wuha temaw*, instead of addressing the issue directly. Abay’s allegorical linguistic instrumentality has evolved significantly, and the river’s symbolic importance for richer and more compelling expressions is acknowledged in various other aspects.

4.4 Abay as Symbol of Unbearable Power

Abay is a representation of an entity of untamed mighty force that can wash away anything that stands on its course. In the rainy season the river is hard to cross. Modern concrete bridges are still rare on many courses of the river. On some places wooden bridges over Abay are built by the local communities, but it is a recurrent phenomenon that the unbearable flow of the

river during the flooding season grounds and sweeps away the bridges. So, during the rainy season, movement and interaction of people across the river is limited until the setting of autumn, where the condition starts to change. The following popular folk couplet expresses the condition:

አባይ ጉደል ብለው አለኝ ባታህሳስ

Free translation

የማን ሆኖ ይቸላል እስከዚያው ድረስ

I ask Abay to recede, it says on December

Phonetic transcription

whose gut could be enduring till then

Abay gudel bilew alegn betahsass

Yeman hod yichilal eskeziyaw diress

The above folk couplet is uttered by a person who needed to cross Abay during the rainy season for an urgent issue across the river. Unfortunately the person finds the river overflowing, and was told by Abay that the possibility of crossing it is not possible until December. Most of the time, the rainy season in Ethiopia ranges from June to September. But, in the couplet we learn that, to demonstrate Abay's unbearable natural power, the impossibility of crossing the river is extended as long as December.

Cross cultural evidence shows that, the Nile River plays the dual role of bringing together as well as dividing the communities along its course (Mohamoda, 2003). This is also true for the Blue Nile (Abay). Abay both connects and separates people residing across its banks. Frequently, those living on opposite banks find themselves helpless observers of the river's unruly force, contributing little to its controlling, but expressing their pity through songs like the one below.

Free translation

አባይ ወዲያ ማይ ዘመድ አለኝ ማለት

How futile to say I have relatives from across Abay

ዋ ብሎ መቅረት ነው ውሃው የሞላለት

You become sorry when the river is full⁶⁰

Phonetic transcription

Abay wodiya mado zemed alegn malet

Wa bilo meqret new wuhaw yemolalet

The influence of Abay in separating people across the river is significant. The above mentioned song lyrics obviously reveal that relatives on opposite banks of Abay cannot physically interact when the river is at its fullest. However, on a symbolic level, the lyrics also showcase a community being helpless victim of a force that is beyond their control.

In a close conjunction with Abay's unruly power that obstructs communication and interaction among communities on either side of the river, other folk sayings also demonstrate Abay as a symbol of trickery and revolt. The couplet that follows serves as a fitting example:

Free translation

አባይ በጣና ላይ ለምኖ ለማምኖ

Abay repeatedly pleaded with Tana

መንገድ አረጎት ቀረ ለንድ ቀን ነው ብሎ

Created an unending path, promising that

it would only need to pass for a single day

Phonetic transcription

⁶⁰ The English translation of the song is adopted from Berhanu (2014: 95-96)

Abay betana lay lemino lemamino

Menged argot qere land qen new bilo

The couplet described above is particularly well known among the local people residing around Abay and Lake Tana, who are aware of the river's ingress and egress from the lake. The couplet is meant to symbolically interpret the natural occurrence that took place when Abay river converged with Lake Tana. As it flows through its upper course, Abay meets the extensive Lake Tana. However, unlike other tributaries that drain in to Tana, Abay does not complete its journey by emptying into the lake. Instead, it resumes its long route by flowing out from the southern end of Lake Tana, at the city of Bahir Dar. Literally, the couplet illuminates that Abay possesses an inherent deceiving character, making it impossible to trust its words without facing irreversible consequences, as what happened to Lake Tana. On a symbolic level, the stanzas underscore the importance of carefully assessing someone's promise prior to accepting and putting it in to action, as such commitments may result in a lifelong liability for those who placed their trust in the person making the pledge.

The violent and unruly power of Abay river is a source of both esteem and criticism. It is condemned as it hinders communication and commerce between the communities on either side of the river. However, people do not always accept being helpless victims of Abay's wildly tough flows. Occasionally, the river's overwhelming force can be confronted by individuals with remarkable bravery. In this regard, in her analysis of symbolism and the power of Abay, Azeb (2023: 4) interpreted another popular folk poem as follows.

Free translation

አባይ ሲደፈርስ ሲመስል እንቆቆ

When Abbay becomes turbid

ጋሬጣው ጎጃሜ ገባው ባጭር ታጥቆ

When it looks like *embelia schimperi*

The formidable Gojjame-man

treads/enters it wearing a short

Phonetic transcription

Abbay sidäfärris simäsül ink'ok'k'o

Garet'aw Gojjame gäbbaw batf'f'ir tat'k'o

The above poem serves as lyric in many of Ethiopian traditional songs. The poem parallely praises the flooded turbulent flow of Abay and a brave and tough man entering the river to cross it swimming. Here we can discern that the flow of Abay is possibly the most powerful natural phenomenon in the locality the poem is created. So, Abay is depicted as a device of metaphor that challenging the river's stormy flow is symbolized as man's great courage and resiliency.

4.5 Abay as Symbol of National Icon, Representation and Unity

Abay stands to represent Ethiopia. Perhaps Abay is the only river in Ethiopia many persons are named with it. Though the river is popularly recognized in masculine terms, both genders are identified by the river's name; for instance, *Abay* (for both male and female),

*Abayne*h (for male) and *Abaynes*h (for female). This is because, incomparably with other rivers, Abay is adored and loved river for its might and holy power.

Many of the informants tend to symbolically link Abay to Ethiopia, perceiving the river as a demonstration of autonomy. Ethiopia has not been colonized, and so is Abay independent, as it gathers numerous tributaries, yet remains a tributary to no other river. All the rivers that meet Abay forfeit their names at the point of merging and are renamed as Abay.

As described in the first chapter, flowing northwards from its source at Gish, Abay enters Lake Tana around a locality known as Kunzila. The river then exits from the lake at the city of Bahir Dar. It is widely believed that Abay crosses Lake Tana without mixing with the water of the lake. The river is honored for this mysterious and exceptional character. By the local people living along Abay and Lake Tana, this feature of the river is profoundly associated with symbol of independence and willpower. One of the informants, an elderly man, states:

*One of Abay's enigmatic natures that gained it a great acclamation is that it enters Lake Tana at around Kunzila. But the water of the Lake and the river do not mix, both are water but do not blend. This way Abay flows through Tana and leaves the lake making an exit at Bahir Dar*⁶¹.

In a related manner, Abay also serves as symbol of heroism and nationalism. For instance, during the second Italian invasion of Ethiopia, the gorge of Abay served as a vital defensive shelter especially for the patriots of Gojjam and Wollo led by the famous patriot Belay Zeleke. Only individuals with spirit and courage dare to roam in the valley of Abay—a hot and inhospitable deep gorge. Abay, with its steep canyon, is symbolized with the bravery of the then

⁶¹ Interview, Orthodox Christian, January 2024, Wetet Abay

patriots who sacrificed to defend their territory in the Ethiopian national sentiment. In this way, Abay is simultaneously equated and embodied as figure of unique national heroism, determination and pride.

Abay is a national emblem as well as a unique cultural and natural heritage for Ethiopians. I interrogated my informants to know their sentiments about the river by asking a question “what would you feel if Abay ceases to exist?” This question was a dreadful wonder to most of the informants. They felt emptiness. One of the informants, an adult man, stated:

If Abay ceases to exist, oh! I feel as if our country no more exists. Abay prevails through its tributaries. If Abay stops to flow, it means all other tributaries have stopped. It implies all the waters that flow to Abay including springs die out. This means all the drainage area would turn to desert. The loss is physical as well as symbolic. Abay is an icon for Ethiopians. What die is not only people, animals and fauna surrounding the river, but also tradition, spiritual connection with the river, pride, etc. Abay is a breath especially for the people living along the river. In the Bible, Abay is one of the Holly Rivers in the Garden of Eden in the name of Ghion; the Bible says Ghion surrounds the land of Ethiopia. Abay is our pride. How can I think Ethiopia without Abay?⁶²

Abay is one of Ethiopia’s most significant national icons in which all people and politicians of the country seek national accord and solidarity besides their cultural and political differences. The river is an instrument of national harmony. Abay is a unique river that joins Christians, Muslims and the Bete Israel in the context of venerating the river as holy, as well as

⁶² Interview, Orthodox Christian, December 2024, Wetet Abay

for ritual and sacrificial practices along its banks. In this regard, Abay is also a platform where urban and rural people meet for a common spiritual belief and tradition across its banks. Abay attracts the locals living along the river as well as people from afar. Individuals from diverse religious, social and economic backgrounds are all united in their deep reverence for Abay. Each of them regards the river as sacred, powerful and influential, making it a destination for ritual sacrifices, ceremonies and offerings. One of the informants, an adult man in Wetet Abay town states:

On Abay, you meet persons and families that pilgrim from near and far, and from all social backgrounds. Particularly, on the eves of the New Year, in the days of the month of Pagume, all of us used to go to the river in the dawn and immerse. You couldn't identify who is Muslim and who is Christian. We were interwoven to this extent. Our shared belief and reverence to Abay tremendously added to our unity and harmonious coexistence⁶³.

4.6 Abay as Place of Childhood Memory

Abay is a site of nostalgic childhood past. For the local residents along Abay, it characterizes their birthplace and nurturing, particularly for individuals raised in rural areas alongside the courses of the river. It is a socializing and recreational space where children look after livestock, learn to swim and as shepherds, interact with their peers while spending time along the river. Abay forms a natural boundary for social groups establishing among children and youths on both sides of the river. Children and youth sing songs and climb trees to forage for wild fruits. They also play hockey on the fields surrounding the river. Outstandingly, swimming

⁶³ Interview, Muslim, December 2024, Wetet Abay

is a scenic activity. In the past where modern bridges were rare over Abay, swimmers help transport people and their belongings by guiding them on traditionally made rafts. The river's current becomes very strong through the rainy season, so the swimmers swim alongside the raft just beneath it, pushing it forward and ensuring a safe crossing. A young man who was one of my key informants recalls his childhood experiences on Abay as follows:

As children, Abay was our world. We do everything looking after our cattle around the river. We play, swim and grapple. We spend our day wandering around the river shore. When the ripping season reaches we climb dokima tree and collect fruit. How sweet was that black fruit! When back to home our tongue turns to black. At times we also catch fish in the river. We remove the belly of the fish, wash it and consume part of it sitting on the river side; we eat it with salt that we brought from home demanding our mothers. I and my friend were powerful grapplers and skilled swimmers. Many times we were triggered to cross the river and assault other shepherds that were on the opposite side of the river. We catch and drown them in the river, it is only to scare them so they are afraid of us; otherwise we don't hurt them seriously. Next time they see us approaching them they scream and run before us. For us, going Abay and staying there was an amusement. The memory prevails in our heart forever⁶⁴.

Likewise, the other informant, an adult man who was raised along the course of Abay, shares his youth experience by the river:

⁶⁴ Interview, Orthodox Christian, December 2024, Wetet Abay

We tend to spend whole day around Abay. We don't realize how quickly time passes since we are too busy swimming, playing and doing other activities around the river. If we are hungry, we can eat fish or fruits, depending on the season. During the rainy season, Abay is so powerful that it transports a variety of items, including tree trunks. We head upstream towards the portion of the river known as Fagitaber, where we find a stem, climb over it, and follow the torrent flowing down. This was a heroic and hilarious event for us. When we reach at our destination, we exit from the river holding the stem; we take the wood to our village for fuel.Many things, many moments... when I look back to my childhood, it is Abay that comes in to my mind⁶⁵.

Swimming was a valued skill not only for individual development, but also for the service of the community. Another informant, an elderly man, recalls an incident from his youth experience on Abay:

In the winter where Abay is impossible to cross by foot, we were the most wanted. Travelers come with their stuff and cattle and solicit us to get them cross the river. It is we that get newly wedded grooms and brides cross the river when they are called for invitation to either of their parents' home. The travelers give us special food called guzguzo. There was lavish feast on Abay. We cross people and their stuff by pushing them on a raft, we also cross cattle by swimming besides them; otherwise they may go down with the river flow. I and my contemporary compatriots braved Abay. One day during a winter, a man from our locality—actually our relative, was returning from a market buying ox. He carried also

⁶⁵ Interview, Orthodox Christian, December 2024, Nunu

other stuff. When he reached Abay the river has overflowed. We were called. No one, not even other accomplished swimmers were daring to enter the river because it was overflowed with a terrifying current. But, I and my contemporary friend were courageous to face it. We took off our cloth and entered! First we crossed the ox. My friend leads, swimming before the ox, I follow guarding from the rear. This way we swum through the unbearable torrential current of Abay and crossed the ox safe. In the second round we let the man sit on a raft together with his stuff and swum. Everyone was amazed, it was an extraordinary bravery. Now I am old. At this stage of my life, I feel a sense of nostalgia for the moments we shared in Abay, it appears in my dreams⁶⁶.

As the voices of the informants illuminate, Abay is an intricate part in the physical, social and cultural lives of people along the river. It is a nostalgic site in people's childhood memory.

The symbolic and ceremonial practices performed on Abay during Ethiopian New Year and its eves are also a nostalgic memory to many people who grew up along the banks of the river. As revealed from the voices of several informants, annually on the month of *Pagume*, all the residents of Wetet Abay, rural and urban, regardless of religion, go to Abay in the dawn; they immerse and wash their bodies. It is a ritual bathing conducted days before the New Year that sets on September first; the bathing symbolizes entering in to the New Year with purification and good wish. Often, local people do this custom during their childhood and young age regularly. As recalled from the preceding chapter, especially in the past, people along the river used to organize lavish feast on the banks of Abay as a welcoming celebration of the New Year. All of these practices have created a nostalgic recollection of Abay in the minds of people.

⁶⁶ Interview, Orthodox Christian, December 2024, Nunu

4.7 Abay as an Image of Yearning Desire

Broadly seen in terms wistful imagination, an image of Abay as a yearning desire looks similar with the discussions in the aforementioned section—Abay as place of childhood memory. However, they are also two different ways of wistful thought and feeling. When I refer to Abay as a childhood memory, I am talking about people who have previously had experiences with the river at some time in their lives, but are yearning for the past since they are currently far away from it, either temporally or spatially. But, when I analyze Abay as a yearning desire, I mean the desire of those who have never really seen the river but have a recurring dream to see it. So, the former is recalling whereas the latter is seeking. Then, one may ask why individuals living far away from the river seek to see Abay? It is because Abay is a deep desire to see for individuals who only know the river in fame. People who live farther away from Abay are eager to get to know the river firsthand. In the minds of these people, the local people living along the banks of Abay are considered to have a special gift for seeing and experiencing with the river in their daily lives. In relation with the craving imagination of Abay there is a folk saying:

አባይን ያለየ ቀረ እንደተሰየ

Free translation

Phonetic transcription

one who did not see Abay remains in yearning wish

Abayin yalaye kere endetese

As highlighted earlier, though Abay is a river of national fame, not everyone gets the chance to witness its grandeur and beauty firsthand. Those living farther from the river that cannot travel to experience its true flow and splendor often find themselves lost in a world of longing and imagination. The proverb doesn't merely refer to Abay; it captures a deeper

sentiment, suggesting that the river symbolizes dreams and aspirations that remain unfulfilled. This leads to a perpetual state of yearning and desire for what one has not been able to attain.

Another closely related symbolically significant folk expression in this regard is:

አባይን ተሻግሮ አባይ አለ ወይ?

Free translation

Phonetic transcription

After crossing Abay, may there be another Abay?

Abayin teshagiyo Abay ale woyi

This folk proverb entails both probability and wonder, illuminating symbolic and factual interpretations respectively. The probability is desperation and has a deeper meaning that is used when someone is in profound sentiment after losing somebody or something very important in their life. It is doting of a lost chance, but still with a fraught emotion of connecting back with what is gone. Whereas, the wonder tends to have literal meaning, having to do with Abay's twisting natural course. A traveler may traverse Abay multiple times because of its meandering course through various landscapes. This is naturally astounding, but the situation can also reveal a concern about chance and optimism, as mentioned earlier, suggesting that what appears lost forever might be encountered once more. In general, the proverb represents astonishment, despair and hope—all of which can occur in a variety of situations in people's life.

4.8 Abay as an Aesthetic Symbol

It is a common phenomenon in our planet mother Earth that rivers and their pristine surroundings form a unique natural image and beauty. However, not a verse is made for every river for its aesthetic quality. Abay is one of the culturally iconic rivers around the globe that its natural features along its course are dignified as symbols to express aesthetic quality of not just the river directly, but something else, such as persons. In Ethiopia, Abay is praised to stand for aesthetic and fertility symbols both by the locals living along its course and by the general public, as well as by artists, including those who never have seen the river physically. For instance, the following song verse analyzed by (Berhanu, 2014: 95-96) reveals how Abay is culturally depicted to represent an aesthetic symbol.

Free translation

አባይ ዳር ያለሽው ቄጠማ

You water lily by the river Abay

ኔይ ልበልሽ ከሰማሽኝማ

I call on you to come if you can hear me

Phonetic transcription

Abay dar yalshiw ketema

Ney libelish kesemashignima

The above couplet is uttered not just to a flower or a reed by the banks of Abay. Instead, it addresses the beauty of a young girl and the charm she possesses, which tempts the singer to call her. The artist associates the girl to a water lily, employing this imagery to paint her. The verses also portray the splendor of Abay as a lush and rich place, where green grass symbolizes

its fertility.

Another Amharic song verse worth describing that praises Abay as an aesthetic symbol is:

Free translation

የአባይ ማዶ ጉባል፤ የአባይ ማዶ ጉባል

You girl who live across the river Abay

ሹሩባሽ ሲያባባል

how appealing is your dreadlock

Phonetic transcription

Ye Abay mado gubil, ye Abay mado gubil

Shurubash siyababil

In this couplet, the natural beauty of Abay is artistically depicted in verses that adore the girl's charming hair in conjunction with the magnificence of the river.

In addition to the popular folk verses, in Ethiopia numerous artists have directly praised Abay for its beauty and indirectly for its connotation as a symbol of aesthetics. Although it is not reasonable to analyze every song made about Abay, the track by artist Ejigayehu Shibabaw stands out and deserves mention. The verses by Ejigayehu that celebrate the gorgeousness of Abay are also referenced in Berhanu (2014: 100). Some of her captivating lyrics express as:

የማያረጅ ውበት የማያልቅ ቁንጅና - yemayarej wubet yemayalik kunjina - Timeless magnificence, unfading beauty,

የማይደረቅ የማይነጥፍ ለዘመን የጸና - *yemayderk yemaynetif lezemen yetsena* - That prevail for
ages never drying up,

በፍጥረት አዳም ገና በዘፍጥረት - *befitirete Adam gena bezfitiret* - From the creation of Adam,
from genesis,

ፈልቆ የፈሰሰ ውሃ ከገነኑት - *felko yefesese wuha kegenet* - A water that sprang from heaven,

ግረማ ሞገስ ያገር ጸጋ ያገር ልብስ - *girma moges yager tsega yager libs* - Graceful and blessed veil
of the nation,

አባይ የበረሃው ሲሳይ - *Abay yeberehaw sisay* - Abay the treasure of the desert.

The song verses described above reflect Ejigayehu's deep esteem for Abay, rejoicing its breathtaking magnificence and its standing as a timeless symbol of allure, elegance, and everlasting treasure, enduring from the beginning of time (in her context the genesis) to eternity. Additionally, Ejigayehu's verses transcend mere aesthetic significance of Abay, illuminating the deep interconnections and inter-dependencies of the various symbolizations of the river.

In sum, as part of Abay's cultural significance, this chapter sought to uncover the symbolic meanings of the river in the Ethiopian context. The information generated and interpreted from field data and folkloric sources revealed significant patterns in the perceptions and traditions of people regarding the popular imagination and symbolic depictions of Abay. The comprehensive results of the ethnographic data, folkloric evidences as well as some empirical studies have shown that, Abay plays crucial role in being symbol of fatherhood, mighty power and generosity, an icon of national representation, symbol of nostalgic memory and of aesthetics.

All such symbolic meanings and significances of the river are interconnected and widely entertained in everyday linguistic expressions and imaginations of people.

Chapter Five: Spiritual Beliefs and Practices: The Ecological Aspects, Changes and Persistence

As emphasized in the preceding chapter, there is an intricate connection between the spiritual beliefs and practices related to Abay and the ways the river is symbolically perceived and represented. Together, the mutuality of these two cultural aspects of Abay provides an important window for exploring local peoples' perception of the river as a coupled natural and human system. Examining the ecological aspects of spiritual beliefs and practices is crucial not only to understand Abay as an intertwined natural and humanized space, but it can also play a positive role in designing sound strategies for conserving natural resources along the river.

Building on spiritual ecology approach, this chapter generally discusses the potentials of those cultural and spiritual values for fostering sound natural resource conservation interventions, along with the analysis of change and persistence of the spiritual beliefs and practices that is presented as the last segment of the chapter. With regard to ecological conservation, my discussion mainly pertains to the protection of plant biodiversity, particularly trees along the river bank. I will also highlight some of the challenges, especially when it comes to using local values and beliefs to conserve forests. Additionally, I will briefly shed light on the local conditions that made conservation possible despite the challenges, as well as the various ramifications of the riverbank's forest degradation. Finally, I discuss how spiritual beliefs and practices on Abay have waned over time, but yet endured in some ways. Alongside with interviews, much of the firsthand information for this discussion was derived from my observations along the course of the river.

5.1 Ecologically Adaptive Roles of Spiritual Beliefs and Practices Attached to Abay

As it is also highlighted in the literature review chapter, the positive impact of traditional spiritual beliefs for natural resources conservation, such as those across riverbanks, is supported by numerous cross cultural researches worldwide (Reynolds et al., 2017; Suprianto, 2023; Amah 2024).

Broadly speaking, the contributions of the local spiritual beliefs and practices for natural resources conservation along Abay river is part of these global cross cultural reality. In the context of Abay in particular, the beliefs, practices and symbolic values entrusted on the river contribute to resource protection in two ways. The first and the most pervasive one is in reverence of the supernatural spirits. The second relates to peoples' appreciation of the riverbank's aesthetic features. Although the aesthetic characteristics commended to Abay complement the preservation of natural resources along the river and are worth considering, the first theme—the part of spiritual beliefs—is the main focus of this chapter.

5.2 Reverence to Spirits, Fear of Punishment and the Protection of Trees

Before diving into discussing the roles of the spiritual factors in ecological conservation, it is necessary to briefly describe the current status of the natural vegetation along the river's banks. Along the shore of Abay, especially upstream from Wetet Abay, *dokima* trees are common. By its nature *dokima* grows well in watersides. The *dokima* trees found along this course of the river are large and longstanding. Most of these trees grew up their roots and lower stems directly touching the river; others are just facing the river a few meters offshore, leaving a convenient place to rest under and observe towards the river flow as well as to have a glance on the scenes across the river. Together with the river flow these *dokima* trees make up an attractive

natural view. Besides other multifaceted natural and cultural functions, these trees play crucial ecological roles by preventing further erosion and expansion of the river bank during the rainy season. The trees also keep the riverside lively and splendid during the dry season by maintaining water and moisture. There are also small and medium sized trees that grow peculiarly along the shores of the river. They grow endemically along other rivers too. These trees—in their local names, include *kiha*, *gofer*, *qamo*, etc. *Qetema* (which can be closely translated as “reed”), a kind of grass which is tall and tick, is also among the vegetation that thrive along the shores of Abay. It is sprinkled especially for holidays to adore house floors.

Particularly in the past, where the local peoples’ physical connections with Abay was stronger, natural resources in and along the river’s banks were also source of food, particularly for children, such as the shepherds. An adult man who was one of the key informants, states:

During our childhood Abay was our source of food. We used to eat wild fruits from trees such as dokima, kega and agam. While spending along the river looking after our cattle, we gather and consume these fruits depending on their ripping season. We also catch fish in the river and eat it there—by the riverside. Especially there was a type of fish locally known as “lombi”, a darker smaller fish that we often catch and consume. At that time this fish was abundant in the river. Abay was a place where we can get our food. We don’t care if we eat at home. We don’t overstress our family over eating.⁶⁷

The role of traditional spiritual beliefs on Abay is substantial, especially for the protection of large trees, such as the *dokima* described earlier. Large trees by the shores of Abay are thought to host supernatural spirits, which is the main reason why the spiritual beliefs are

⁶⁷ Interview, Orthodox Christian, May 2024, Wetet Abay

important for tree protection. Abay and the trees surrounding its shore are perceived as intimately linked sacred sanctuaries where supernatural spirits reside. In this perspective, the riverscape as a whole is thought to be the abode of supernatural spirits, rather than just the river's water. That is why, as discussed in chapter three, there is a widely held assertion by the locals that they have frequently heard the invisible spirits singing around trees along the shores of Abay. In addition, several informants claim that while they lingered along Abay as a shepherd, they could often smell the incense smoke of the spirits around enormous trees and even hear the sound of their coffee cups clinking, especially at noon. So, the trees along the banks of Abay are safeguarded not merely because they are large and elegant; they are protected due to their proximity to the river, where it is believed that powerful supernatural spirits have domiciled in the river and its surrounding.

As stated earlier, many of the *dokima* trees in the study sites along Abay closely face the bank of the river; thus people make consecrations and offerings to the river sitting under their shade. Historically, the New Year celebration feast on Abay was also held beneath the shelter of these trees. The narratives of local people commonly reveals that no one dares to cut these *dokima* trees. But the protection of the trees is not just out of the pragmatic benefit of their shades. Instead, the most important factor prohibiting the locals from cutting trees is fear of punishment from the spirits believed to inhabit them. The local people widely believe that if someone dares to cut even a branch from such trees he/she would be seriously ill, and may even die. So, trees along the shore of the river are preserved primarily for spiritual reasons—not to irritate the spirits and be the victims of their wrath. Regarding this, one of the key informants, an elderly man, described his experience as follows:

I once ran out of fire wood to make the feast as the Saint George annual holiday drew near. I visited Abay and climbed a zigba⁶⁸ tree after spotting timber on one of the Abay river's aits. As I attempted to cut the wood, the ax slipped out of my hand and fell three times. "This is not without a purpose", I thought after pausing. I immediately stopped cutting, made the sign of the cross, and got down from the tree. Trembling, I picked up my ax from where it had fallen into the river and headed back home⁶⁹.

Like the event recounted above, sources have revealed another tale that was said to have occurred three years prior to the time I made the interview⁷⁰. An adult man, referred by the name Ayinalem, had a sugar cane field close to Abay. Near his land is an enormous and age-old *zigiba* tree that the locals consider as the home of supernatural spirits. Ayinalem was being bothered by monkeys that were invading his field and causing damage to his plantation. As a result, he began to remove any nearby foliage that he believed the monkeys had used to hide in. While trimming the bushes surrounding his farm, he ultimately invaded the territory of the aforementioned massive tree. Then he had a horrible consequence. He lost his vision eventually. It was commonly thought by the locals that his blindness was caused by his encroachment on the large *zigiba* tree, which infuriated the spirits. I was unable to contact the owner of the story—Ayinalem—in person because he lived farther away from the location where I spoke with the sources, as well as due to safety concerns brought on by the political strife.

⁶⁸ *Zigiba* (ዝግባ) is the local name for *Afrocrapus gracillor* (also known as *Podocarpus gracillor*), which is native to East African afro-montane habitats. It is a large graceful tree which belongs to a coniferous species

⁶⁹ Interview, Orthodox Christian, December 2025, Nunu

⁷⁰ This interview was conducted on January 2025, Nunu

When it comes to the categories of spirits, the locals typically refer to the spirits that are thought to have inhabited enormous trees such as those by the banks of Abay, as *qole*—guardian spirits. Like the *Jinn* and the *Zar*, *qole* is believed to be a benevolent spirit if properly appeased and not angered. Often peoples’ belief of what distinguishes the *qole* from the *Jinn* and *Zar* is not clear. In my understanding from the local peoples’ beliefs and narratives about the spirits, the *Zar* tends to be included in their perception with the spirit/s they dubiously named *qole*, at least regarding those supernatural beings domiciling trees on riversides. This is because, it is widely believed by the locals that *Zars* tend to inhabit river sides where there are trees. But the association of the *Jinn* with trees is less convincing, as *Jinn* is believed to reside beneath the rivers. While which types of spirits are specifically and evidently linked to trees is equivocal, the belief that cutting a large tree by the riverside, causes the anger of spirits and misfortunes on the doer is generally prevalent. And my discussions favor the issue at stake—on those beliefs and their outcomes in protecting the trees, rather than going further to discern which spirit is on trees and which is not.

Regarding the reactions of the spirits against the chopping of large trees, local people argue that the spirits may give precautions in various ways before inflicting their misfortunes. For instance, many of the informants state that if someone dares to cut a big tree along the river’s banks and if the person doing so didn’t engage in sex yet, the spirits may reveal themselves physically and give a word of warning directly to stop what the person is doing. As it was also highlighted in chapter three, it is a widely held belief in the study sites that spirits dwelling in and around rivers, including by the banks of Abay, can be revealed physically for young children who do not know sex. Such persons are considered clean and unpolluted spiritually, and therefore can see invisible spirits.

Back to the earlier point, particularly *dokima* trees are part of the system of spiritual life of people along Abay. This should not mean that trees themselves are worshipped, though there is a tendency of mixing up spiritual perceptions in this regard. Many of the local people themselves demarcate that reverence to the spirits believed to inhabit trees along the river and reverence to the trees themselves is a different thing. An adult woman who was one of my informants, states:

Our traditional spiritual beliefs call for the protection of trees by the banks of Abay. Due to this, some people assume that trees are revered. But the trees themselves are not worshipped. It is true that trees like dokima which are found by the shores of Abay are specially protected. But, this is not because we worship them. People guard such trees for the sake of resting, sacrificing and feasting under their shades⁷¹.

So, the trees alone are not worshipped, but are intricate part of the people's traditional spiritual beliefs and ritual performances along the river. Trees are esteemed for serving as dwellings for supernatural spirits, for being ideal sites for rituals and ceremonies, as well as for their pragmatic benefits to the everyday mundane activities of people around the river. As revealed from the verbatim of informants earlier, the locals widely believed that if there are persons that act to deplete the graces of the trees by the riverside, the spirits residing around tend to guard their environment, usually furiously. These beliefs enabled trees to be preserved for generations. Thus, trees along Abay have been vital component parts in the physical and spiritual life of the local people.

⁷¹ Interview, Orthodox Christian, August 2025, Wetet Abay

The tradition of preserving trees in spiritual sites may have contributed even to the adoption of conservation of forests around Churches, a well-developed tradition among the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido Church. The locals' strong ties both to the Church and spiritual beliefs on Abay, as well as the prevalence of forest conservation customs in both spiritual spheres, raise the possibility that the two traditions may be related to one another. Additionally, it might be argued that the Church adopted forest protection measures from pre-Christian spiritual ideas and practices, because traditional beliefs are typically older than their Christian counterparts. However, there is a dearth of conclusive evidence about whether the Church borrowed its forest conservation practices from pre-Christian spiritual traditions. We can be convinced that there are connections between the two traditions regarding the preservation of forests that surround sacred sites, and that these traditions undoubtedly reinforce one another.

Along with the traditional spiritual beliefs, the aesthetic values local people hold on Abay and its surroundings play important role for preservation of flora ranging from the reeds to the big trees by the shoreline. Interpretations of folkloric evidences from chapter four, especially the part that discussed Abay as an aesthetic icon, make this role clear. The metaphorical, poetic and artistic portrayal of the different types of vegetation that grow by the banks of Abay is a tribute to the floras' continued presence along the river, even though it does not explicitly advocate for conservation. Additionally, as it can also be discerned from empirical evidences such as Berhanu (2014), the aesthetic and empathetic symbolization of Abay and the features on its surroundings can be considered as a positive cultural value that could help for the conservation of flora and other natural resources along the river's course.



Figure 7: Shore side *zigiba* tree that is believed to be home of invisible spirits. This is the tree where in the discussions the local people said that a man who dared to encroach in to it became blind (photo by Abraham Genet)



Figure 8: A Glimpse of riverine vegetation, a mix of *dokima* tree with *kiha*, *gofer* and various bushes (photo by Abraham Genet)



Figure 9: *Dokima* trees along the banks of Abay with rapids during the dry season (photo by Abraham Genet)⁷²

5.3 Recent Challenges to the Adaptive Roles of Spiritual Ecology

Basically, demographic pressure and expansion of cultivation by the river side are the major factors accounting for deforestation along Abay. But, the decline of traditional beliefs and ritual practices related to Abay appears to have coincided with the anthropogenic factors in causing depletion of forests and related natural features along the river. In this section, I focus on how the decline in the frequency and intensity of rituals and beliefs concurred with those factors that led to uncontrolled cutting down of trees.

In some localities of the study area such as around Wetet Abay town, the coincidence of the weakening of traditional sacrifices and rituals with population pressure and expansion of

⁷² For additional visual data on the riverine trees and vegetation along the shores of Abay, see the Figures from C9 to C11 in Appendix C

farming has resulted in the tendency to disrespect and removal of trees along the river's course. The shoreline of Abay near Wetet Abay is now barren of forests, with the exception of a few patches of trees planted by humans during the past decades along the river's path. I understood from the recollections of informants' that, the shoreline was formerly covered in thick natural forests before the riverbank deteriorated and became almost treeless. Enormous endemic trees like *dokima* and *shola*⁷³, as well as the smaller plants growing beneath them, added beauty to the river and its surroundings. Now, except for a few scattered trees, this vegetation is no longer present. Several informants who witnessed the change in the riverscape note that traditional rituals and sacrifices weakened simultaneously with the increasing anthropogenic pressures to exacerbate the uncontrolled clearing out of forests along Abay.

In relation with the decline of rituals and sacrifices, there are also other spiritual issues that appear to contribute to the erosion of spiritually supported tree preservation. The most prominent one is the belief that the supernatural beings that used to domicile the shores of Abay and the surrounding trees are no longer there. Local communities formed this perception based on their observations of outsiders' activities in their territories at various times. Especially in the earlier times, these outsiders, usually led by white guys, frequently arrive by helicopter. They often land near rivers and woodlands. Then, they carry out various activities and take things near rivers or woods, and after a brief visit, they fly away in their helicopter. I was unable to engage with informants among such outsiders and not fully aware of their intended purposes. As a child who has ever witnessed the aforementioned encounters of the strangers, I too used to believe like the locals. Based on my current attempts to think logically about the matter, those strangers may have been conducting geological research, collecting samples, or doing other similar tasks.

⁷³ *Shola* (ሸላ) is the local name for *Ficus sycomorus* (also known as Fig tree), which is native to Africa and the Middle East. It is a large spreading semi deciduous tree providing shade. It bears edible fruits.

However, the local people generally believe that these guys were capturing and removing the supernatural spirits from their untamed homes. The locals hold the idea that white men are especially skilled at capturing spirits. As a result, even though there may be Ethiopian individuals in the team, the plan to forcibly capture and take the spirits is attributed to the white men. This is consistent with the reality that white men are typically the ones who lead the team's activities in the areas where they have landed. People believe that white folks are forcibly catching the spirits in order to transport them to another location, lock on them and exploit their wisdom. One of the key informants reported that his father had wrestled with a white guy who, according to him, came to catch and remove the supernatural spirit that was thought to reside on a large *lol*⁷⁴ tree in their village near Abay. He claimed that his father went so far as to fight the white man in order to keep the spirit that is benevolent to the locals, and indeed he won the combat and sent the white man back. The tree believed to house the spirit is still standing and preserved for this virtue.

Other areas where the strangers' aforementioned tasks were successful are thought to be bare, as the spirits have already been uprooted and removed from their homes. This gave the impression that the wilderness surrounding river sides and forests is now hollow and had lost its graces. The other informant indicated that he used to hear the spirits' songs surrounding Abay, but now it is silent, which is because the spirits have been removed from their homes. This widely held perception of the locals that the spirits have vanished from their abodes, does not account as an immediate and pragmatic factor in the depletion of trees along Abay. But it does

⁷⁴ Lol (ሎል) is the local name for *Ekebergia capensis*. It is a large evergreen tree with massive branches, admired for its medicinal and ornamental value, among other attributes. It is distributed in Ethiopia in several habitats as well as in various regions of Africa.

serve as one of the basic psychological foundations for individuals to dare to encroach in to the wilderness that was once feared because of the wrath of the spirits that are believed to inhabit it.

The growing influence of modernity at the expense of local traditional beliefs and values is the other element that has an effect on riverside forest protection. In general, I have learned from many of the informants that, today's youth in particular are dismissive of traditions. This includes cutting down trees situated along Abay's shoreline that have been used to perform rituals and sacrifices. The area is in transition from tradition to modernity, and stable social and cultural order cannot be found normally. As discussed in the previous chapters, Abay occupies a particular place in the hearts of the residents of Wetet Abay and the surrounding rural communities. However, the spiritual significance of the river differs from person to person depending on education level, age group and religiosity. In particular, the educated youth openly reprimand the tradition of ritual sacrifices to the river, and this can include daring to cut trees on the river shore if they believe they do not have practical functions.

As highlighted in the beginning of this section, demographic pressure is a factor increasingly threatening forests and other ecosystems along the banks of Abay. Due to lack of sufficient farmland and the need to find additional fields, the local government has confiscated areas along the riverbank that have been safeguarded for many generations. The ground immediately beside the river is farmed in many of the study sites. This led to the removal of vegetation along the river in a number of places. Large trees that face the river are still standing in locations upstream of Wetet Abay, but, the agricultural fields have damaged the once pristine and beautiful natures of the shorelines. Related with population pressure, cutting down trees for fuel and charcoal production is another hazard to the long-term survival of forests along the river.

Erosion and climate change also appear to have an impact on forest preservation along Abay's banks. I recognized these effects based on my observations of the river landscape where I grew up, both then and now. This is also the assertion of several informants who have lived in the area for a long time and witnessed the decimation of trees along Abay was caused not only by human activity but also by natural processes. Some large trees along Abay's shores beneath which sacrifices were conducted have disappeared naturally. The river's continuous erosion is causing the trees along the shore to collapse. A number of trees, particularly *dokima* trees near the riverbank have gone this way.

Finally, climate change has also become a threat to the vegetation along the river's shore. The locals particularly sadly stress about the *zigiba* trees—one of the largest growing trees along the river's banks and among the trees native to Ethiopia, are nowadays drying out in their own. Large *zigiba* trees are also one of the most honored as the dwellings of supernatural spirits and subsequently for conducting rituals and sacrifices. But, many of these trees, including those in the aits of Abay, are vanishing. With no other identifiable factor, climate change is most likely the cause for the drying out of the trees. Similarly, the once abundant medium sized trees along the shore such as *kiha* and *gofer* have vanished considerably in a similar manner.



Figure 10: Then—before the expansion of cultivation by the riverside. Now—after the area in the riverside is cultivated (photo by Abraham Genet)⁷⁵

5.4 Implications of Depletion of Forests and Spiritual Beings along the River

As previously mentioned, the degradation of vegetation along Abay river is mostly induced by human activity, including deforestation and cultivation of new areas. These human actions partly stem from the conditions arising from the deterioration of traditional spiritual beliefs and practices. These conditions are also aggravated by climate change and erosion. The situation resulted in many sorts of repercussions. The loss of vegetation along the riverbank caused by a combination of the aforementioned elements has three major implications: physical, cultural and spiritual. Physically and culturally, the depletion has resulted in an overall decline in local biodiversity and cultural diversity.

The loss of cultural diversity is expressed in the disappearance of local knowledge and vernacular language, which parallels the extinction of indigenous plant species along the river. As a result, many people in the younger generation, including those rose in rural areas along the course of Abay, are unable to discern between the varieties, names and characteristics of the

⁷⁵ Figure C12 in Appendix C provides a larger perspective of how farming changed the riverscape

plants that grow along the shores of Abay. Along with the effects of modernization, the condition has isolated and disconnected people from their local natural and cultural bonds.

The depletion of forests and that of spiritual beings is a reciprocal occurrence. The perceived or actual disappearance of the spiritual beings from their abodes implies the trees have lost their guardian beings. And, this understanding suggests an ongoing degradation both in the natural and social ecology of Abay. Thus, the depletion of vegetation along the riverbank has spiritual ramifications. One widely believed perception by the locals is that when the community intruded in to the homes of the spirits, the spirits have moved on to disturb the relationship between people. A quote from one of the informants, an elderly woman, expresses this perception straightforward: “when we ruined their (the spirits’) homes, they entered in to our homes”⁷⁶. Many of the local people feel that this is the reason why conflict has become prevalent in households, communities and even at the country level. Though the locals’ externalizing perspective of conflict may be problematic, by calling for the preservation of wild habitats, their perceptions positively and significantly help to the protection of trees along the river.

5.5 Potentials for Forest Protection and Restoration

Earlier, it was stated that the decline of traditional beliefs, rituals and sacrifices along Abay, as well as the subsequent locals’ affinity to the river, contributed in the disrespect and removal of trees. However, in another sense, the falling trend of the locals’ physical—not necessarily spiritual—engagement with the river and its surroundings contributed to the reduction of day-to-day cutting of vegetation in the wild. Compared to prior times, the locals’ attachment to and desire in exploring the wilderness has decreased. Furthermore, in many areas

⁷⁶ Interview, Orthodox Christian, January 2022, Wetet Abay

of the study sites along Abay river, nowadays cattle are not allowed to graze freely as they used to do before; they are confined at home. Reduced physical encounters of humans and livestock with the wild has resulted in noticeable relief and an increase in wildlife protection along the river. Another element contributing to the relief of the flora along the river is the rising migration to urban areas, particularly among young people, which lessened the pressure on forests in some way.

Above all, the spread of eucalyptus plantations for home and commercial use appears to be the most substantial prospect, as it has significantly reduced people's reliance on wild trees for firewood, construction, fencing and other uses. In addition, improved monitoring and inspection by local government officials to conserve natural forests is an essential aspect that has contributed to the preservation of forests, including trees by the riverside. However, in some areas along the river's course, the region's armed political turmoil has jeopardized the implementations of the official legal protection of natural forests.

5.6 Change and Persistence in Spiritual Beliefs and Practices

As mentioned in the various parts of the findings, the number and regularity of ritual performances and sacrificial offerings by the banks of Abay has diminished over time. This section is dedicated to discussing the decline of rituals and sacrifices along Abay, together with the factors and dynamics that account for the decline, as well as the ways the spiritual beliefs and practices along the river sought to endure besides their marked chronological decline. In addition to discussing the fundamental factors and contexts that influenced the frequency of periodic rituals and sacrifices, I will briefly highlight how the region's violent political conflict exacerbated the deterioration of rituals and sacrifices by hindering people-river interactions.

5.6.1 Changes in Perception of Sacredness and Frequency of Periodic Sacrifices and Rituals

Though not completely vanished, many of the varied, widespread and deep spiritual reverences given to Abay are now days showing a waning trend. One of the informants, an elderly woman, says: “currently, people don’t make ritual sacrifices and feasts on Abay as openly and confidently as they used to do before. They fear the eyes of others⁷⁷”. Another source, an adult man key informant states: “these days, the practices are weakening, partly because of the influence of Churches and Mosques. Religious authorities from Christianity and Islam condemn the spiritual and ritual practices on Abay as paganism⁷⁸”. Fearing these critics, together with other factors, people are increasingly refraining from openly performing those practices along the banks of Abay.

When it comes to religion, relatively, Christians are in a better position of enduring the tradition as they are more closely related with the river spiritually. Nevertheless, rituals and sacrificial traditions by Christians on Abay are declining. Muslims are abandoning the tradition of rituals and sacrifices on Abay earlier and faster than Christians do, because of their religious authorities strictly perceiving the practice as worshipping the river other than Allah.

Basically, the religious authorities from both Christianity and Islam do not prohibit making consecrations to Abay as the river is considered holy. Accordingly, anyone can make consecrations to the river as long as they do not go to the river side for conducting sacrificial rituals. Religious leaders advise people to do their feasts and sacrifices at home.

Even so, from time to time, religious authorities from both religions are becoming harsh in prohibiting followers from performing rituals that appear to be worshipping the river. Due to

⁷⁷ Interview, Muslim, September 2024, Wetet Abay

⁷⁸ Interview, Orthodox Christian, September 2024, Wetet Abay

this, people from far and near have reduced their periodic pilgrims and ritual sacrifices on Abay.

Modernization is another significant factor contributing to the decline of rituals and sacrifices by the banks of Abay. Especially the youth consider making consecrations and sacrificial rituals to the river as a backward practice. During the time we were making participant observation in one of the sacrificial feasts conducted on Abay, the youth who were washing in and trekking around the river were openly scolding us. According to them, we were performing such an outdated sacrificial practice on the river side in this ‘modern era’. Owing to these factors, it is no longer common to see people making consecrations and sacrifices on the banks of Abay.

According to the perceptions of the local people, the dwindling of rituals and sacrifices does have spiritual repercussions for how supernatural entities interact with both humans and non-humans. This is closely related to the spiritual ramifications of the degradation of forests along the river, which was discussed earlier in this chapter. However, whereas the latter is the result of the destruction of the homes of the supernatural beings—the trees, the former owes to the deprivation of their sacrificial offerings. To this effect, the locals in the study sites assert that failure to provide seasonal sacrificial offers to Abay has turned the benevolent *Jinn* into a malevolent being. For instance, informants noted that the *Jinn* of Abay has lately become furiously malicious to everyone around. It hurts people and cattle. When people enter the river to wash their bodies or swim, the *Jinn* pulls them down and kills them. Accordingly, annoyed by not receiving offerings, these days the *Jinn* of Abay receives both the locals and strangers alike dangerously. One of the key informants, an elderly farmer living along the bank of Abay who had strong attachment with the river physically and spiritually, recalls an incident:

One day, my young son entered Abay to swim with his peers. While swimming, Jinn grabbed his foot and pulled him down. He struggled to escape. Fortunately,

his hand reached a tree trunk (locally known as 'gofer') and held it firmly. Meanwhile, his companions observed what was happening to him and reached out to rescue him; they jointly pulled him towards the shore, and eventually the Jinn was forced to surrender. My son fractured his tooth against a stone when struggled to escape. But this way his life was rescued. When I was younger, I used to swim in any portion of the river at any time, including at night. Because I am a well-known swimmer in our community, robbers have previously called me at night to assist them in crossing animals stolen from other locations. I go and get the cattle cross the river turning back and forth many times swimming in the darkness. I never experienced such an incident⁷⁹.

Because of these views and several catastrophes that have happened, such as those mentioned above, many people now consider entering Abay, particularly its deeper sections, as hazardous. These circumstances, combined with lifestyle changes and the abandonment of

⁷⁹ Interview, Orthodox Christian, March 2024, Nunu

traditional values, caused individuals to have fewer and fewer interactions with the river over time.

Finally, as indicated in the fieldwork encounter and the limitations section of the first chapter, the violent political conflict going on in the region has an impact on the interactions between people and the river. Though the conflict is not a fundamental cause of the decline in rituals and sacrifices, it has disrupted the social and economic lives of those living in Wetet Abay and the adjacent rural areas. Regarding the performance of rituals and sacrifices along Abay, the conflict affected the practices at least in three ways.

First, due to the strategic position of the river and the bridge, most of the time one of the armed groups stays by the riverbank, creating a hostile and risky condition for local people that would like to linger around the river bank. Safety by the riverbank is uncertain, as clashes can happen any time unexpectedly, with opposing armed group potentially launching an ambush when the scenario appears favorable. There were also several instances of blockade of the bridge, particularly by the Fano forces, who aimed to obstruct the logistics and operations of the state forces. One of the key informants, an elderly man, expresses with a sense of sadness: “we have no power other than pleading them. The power is in the hands of the armed forces that come in turns; when one leaves the other one shows up”⁸⁰.

Second, the conflict in the region is generally accompanied by frequent periodic travel restrictions imposed by one or both of the armed groups often resulting in roadblocks. These circumstances have hindered pilgrimages to the river, particularly from more distant locations.

Third, the ongoing violent conflict between the government and the Fano forces has significantly undermined the state’s law enforcement capabilities. As a result, incidents of

⁸⁰ Interview, Muslim, September 2024, Wetet Abay

violence, robbery and abduction have become increasingly prevalent, making it difficult for people to travel to Abay for spiritual matters.

Nevertheless, despite the conspicuous decline owing to the factors discussed, people have maintained spiritual attachments with Abay in various ways. Some have kept performing their consecrations and sacrificial ceremonies at the river secretly. Also, there are still certain individuals and families that have continued conducting their sacrificial rituals openly by the riverbank, regardless of the religious and public critics. In addition, the religious value of Abay still remains holy and people have continued to use the river's water for healing by immersing in it or taping the water from the river and take home to use it as *tsebel*. Indeed, using the water of Abay as holy water is a practice sustained to date by Christians and Muslims alike.

To summarize, this chapter demonstrated that the significance of spiritual beliefs and practices for ecological conservation is a global cross-cultural phenomenon. Within this approach—spiritual ecology, I discussed the ways how the local spiritual beliefs and practices surrounding Abay river have contributed to ecological preservation, particularly of large trees along the river's banks. Major factors such as demographic pressure and agricultural expansion by the riverside, along with the concurrent decline of traditional beliefs and ritual performances, were identified to be the major challenges threatening the continued survival of forests along the river's course. It should be noted however that, the combined and solo effects of the aforementioned factors differs from locality to locality in the study sites along the banks of Abay. Despite the challenges, it is discovered that the expansion of eucalyptus plantations, the formal legal protection of forests, the locals' waning attachments to the river and the wild in general, and an increase in rural-urban migration are all dynamics that have provided opportunities to preserve trees along the river's banks.

With regard to the dynamics over time, analysis of the changes and continuities of the traditional rituals and sacrificial practices on Abay indicates the practices are diminishing noticeably. The major factors that account for the decline of rituals and sacrifices along the river are the influence of Christianity and Islam, “modernity”, armed conflict and other related conditions that restrain movement and distance people from local attachments and traditions. As revealed from the discussions, the decline in the frequency of periodic rituals and sacrifices has spiritual ramifications in the traditional belief systems of the local people. But, most importantly, the weakening of rituals and sacrifices tends to impede the spiritually backed preservation of large trees along Abay. Nonetheless, people’s emotional attachment in the reverence of Abay has endured. There are still occasions that people from near and far make consecrations and conduct rituals and sacrifices by the river bank. Also, both Christians and Muslims have continued utilizing the water of Abay as holy and capable of curing various forms of ailments.

Chapter Six: Conclusion and Recommendation

6.1 Conclusion

In the Ethiopian popular tradition, Abay transcends a mere river system and is profoundly viewed through a human perception as an embodied riverscape. The river is widely imagined as a “living being” that engages in both amicable and hostile interactions with humans and non-humans. The curiosity to empirically explore and understand this “humanized” aspect of Abay laid the basis for this research, with a specific emphasis on the Wetet Abay area. So, Abay, like many other rivers around the world, is more than just a great river that flows naturally. Instead, it envisions interconnected natural and social systems in which rich traditional beliefs, meanings and practices are generated and perpetuated. Broadly, the cultural significance of Abay is part of the cross-cultural phenomenon in numerous regions of the world that shows that water bodies, including rivers, have essential places in peoples’ cultures, religions and spiritual lives (Aniah et al, 2014; Kala, 2017; Anderson et al, 2019; Yoseph et al, 2020). However, Abay’s cultural significance is also rooted in specific religious and local contexts. In the eyes Ethiopians, what distinguishes Abay is that, it is directly described in the Genesis of the Abrahamic religions under the name “Ghion”, as a river of paradise. This notion has resulted in a sincere embrace of Abay as holy, as well as home of invisible superhuman spirits. Such a reverential view of the river, which reveals the continuity of parts of pre-Christian and pre-Islamic African traditional practices, has transformed Abay into a humanized space for the spread of extensive spiritual, ritual and sacrificial practices along its banks.

Cross-cultural studies in various parts of the world reveal that peoples’ interactions with rivers have generated diverse beliefs, rituals and traditions, with the Abay river exhibiting features of both universal and distinctive cultural practices (Gad, 2008; Oestigaard and Gedif, 2013; Pain, 2018). The broad chapter of this dissertation has covered detailed discussions about

beliefs, rituals and sacrificial practices along Abay. Distinctively, the customs of performing rituals and sacrifices along the banks of Abay are specifically related to local peoples' spiritual beliefs in the *Jinn* of Abay. It is a powerful supernatural being that, when properly placated with offerings, is believed to be beneficial in health beseeching, fortune gaining and various other matters in the lives of people, as well as their cattle. The spiritual and sacrificial practices associated with Abay underscore its importance as a natural and cultural entity where tradition intersects with Christian and Islamic religious observances, resulting in a sort of religious syncretism. The intermingled interaction of beliefs, rituals and ceremonial performances associated with *tsebel* or *tehlil* and that of the *Jinn* spirit provides unique practical situations for illustrating this religious syncretism. Besides their religious and spiritual roles, the ritual, sacrificial and ceremonial performances along Abay have an important function in strengthening social bonds among the local communities.

The cultural, religious and spiritual aspects of Abay are interconnected and mutually reinforcing with the symbolic meanings of the river. Significant patterns in peoples' beliefs, popular imaginations and symbolic representations of Abay both in the vicinities of Wetet Abay and at the national level were revealed by the data produced and analyzed from ethnographic and folkloric sources. The combined findings of the ethnographic and folkloric data, as well as some empirical studies have shown that, Abay is an important emblem of paternity, untamed power and generosity. It is also an icon of national representation, nostalgic reminiscence and wistfulness. The river's symbolic meanings are interconnected and are frequently used in people's everyday language and thoughts.

The humanized perceptions, spiritual domains and symbolic aspirations associated with Abay made the river to stand at the crossroads of nature and culture, having vital roles for

ecological conservation along the river's course. Again, such positive impact of traditional spiritual beliefs for ecological safeguarding is supported by numerous cross cultural researches worldwide such as Reynolds et al. (2017), Suprianto (2023), Amah (2024) and so forth. In the case of Abay, the mutually reinforcing interplay of the river's religious, spiritual and symbolic elements has aided to protect a variety of natural resources, especially the large trees that line its banks. The spiritually backed preservation of large trees that have naturally thrived along the shores has become possible as the local communities widely believe such large trees host supernatural spirits. Cutting down trees and generally trespassing into such unordinary spaces is thought to bring misfortune to the perpetrators by provoking the spirits' anger.

Concerning the dynamics of people-river interactions, especially with respect to spirituality, the findings indicate a significant decline in sacrifices and ceremonies along Abay over time. This decline is basically due to the growing influence of Christianity and Islam, "modernization" and other factors that isolate individuals from their local affiliations and customs. Additionally, the Ethiopian government's viewpoint on Abay has changed to focus on its hydrological, economic and geopolitical features, which appears to contribute its own share to the river's cultural and spiritual parts receiving less attention.

The decline of pilgrims, organized sacrificial rituals and ceremonies by the banks of Abay has generally impeded the preservation of cultural diversity and biodiversity in some of the studied sites along the river. It has also revealed a significant spiritual implication in the dynamics of local communities' belief systems. Additionally, along with the expansion of cultivation fields, the fading of traditional beliefs and the eventual deterioration of ceremonial and sacrificial rituals has negative impacts in the preservation of forests and pristine features in several areas by the shores of the river. However, many large trees that were once used for ritual

sacrifices and ceremonies are still standing in a number of locations along the river's shores, showcasing the traditional spiritual beliefs surrounding Abay still continue to have a positive influence on the preservation of vegetation along the river.

The final remark to make is that, while openly sacrificing and feasting by its banks has declined and the state's focus has switched to the river's economic and political dimensions, Abay is still seen as religiously holy and culturally substantial. It endures to occupy an important place in spiritual traditions, particularly among the locals. As a result, Abay's cultural relevance and its long-standing institutional legacy as a shared spiritual heritage are lasting. Abay also continues to play an important role in the symbolic language and cultural memories of Ethiopians.

6.2 Recommendation

As can be surmised from the discussions, the cultural significance of Abay is profound, but is often eclipsed, partly due to the Ethiopian states' emphasis on its economic potentials. I fully acknowledge the utilization of Abay's economic possibilities. But, along with Abay's economic benefits and possibilities, this study commends the need to appreciate the cultural understanding of the river at policy level. Indeed, embracing the cultural significance of Abay in policy and initiatives can aid the economy through heritage tourism, as the river is a shared natural and cultural legacy among Ethiopians. Especially, the government and any other stakeholders should genuinely take in to account Abay's cultural and spiritual understanding while devising and implementing social and economic interventions to improve the lives of local populations along the river.

With respect to the symbolic significance of Abay, related topics such as the river's

artistic features are not adequately covered in this study; hence, require independent empirical investigation. Additionally, it is important to note that the study did not include comprehensive lists of folk proverbs regarding the river other than analyzing some key sayings about Abay to elucidate its symbolic value. Therefore, further research should be done on the rich artistic manifestations and folklore surrounding Abay. In addition to revealing imperative empirical evidences regarding the cultural, spiritual and symbolic importance of Abay, it is critical to suggest that such people-river connections could be of great interest to anthropological and cultural studies.

In terms of protecting rivers and other natural resources alongside, the traditional spiritual beliefs and practices surrounding Abay can be valuable alternatives to the increasing human-induced pressures that couldn't be effectively addressed through the application of formal laws alone. So, anthropogenic stresses such as agricultural expansion and deforestation by the river bank should be mitigated jointly, through the application of locally enforceable communal mechanisms and official legal procedures for conserving trees and plant diversity. To effectively carry out such interventions, the implications of spiritual beliefs and ritual sacrifices for cultural and environmental preservation require additional scholarly attention and investigation of the issue not only in the vicinity of Wetet Abay, but also in several other areas along the river's banks.

The effects of climatic and demographic factors on forest conservation along the riverbank are only briefly highlighted, indicating the necessity for additional professional inquiry. Additionally, in order to counteract natural process such as erosion and climate change, authorities and experts in environmental protection should actually incorporate the knowledge and experiences of the local population.

Finally, the impact of the armed political conflict in the region on the social and cultural life of the communities along Abay, particularly their spiritual interaction with the river, is only briefly highlighted in this research. So, the issue needs further scholarly investigation in its own.

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Appendix A: Semi-structured Interview Guide

General Introduction: The purpose of this research is to collect information for the PhD dissertation project entitled “Cultural Significance of River Abay in Ethiopia: Ethnography of Water-inspired Beliefs, Spiritual Practices and Symbolic Meanings Along the Banks in the Wetet Abay Area”. Here, I am going to ask you questions designed to generate information pertinent to my study objectives. For each of the questions you are kindly requested to provide truthful and genuine response. It is your right to refuse or discontinue from participating in this research. I would also like to promise you that all your responses will be kept confidential and used only for the purpose of this research. Do I have your consent to go ahead with my questions?

Some Essential Personal Data about Informants & Key informants

1. Sex_____
2. Age_____
3. Occupation_____
4. Religion_____
5. Place of residence_____
6. Place of interview_____ Date of interview _____

Interview Guiding Questions to Informants and Key Informants

The following were some of the major guiding questions used to acquire field information from informants and key informants for each specified objective.

Specific objective 1: To explore the religious and traditional beliefs, spiritual practices and rituals conducted by the banks of Abay

Guiding Questions to Informants

1. How frequently do you visit Abay? Could you tell me the things you do there, by the river?
2. How intimate is your interaction and attachment with Abay? In what ways?
3. I saw an interesting event—people paying spiritual reverence to Abay. What looks like your perception and experience in this regard?
4. What looks like your spiritual sympathy with Abay? For example, do you make a ritual sacrifice? Could you tell me why you do that?
5. Do you participate in group (or may be familial) periodic sacrificial rituals conducted on Abay? Could you describe the activities you do in the ritual?

Guiding Questions to Key Informants

1. How intimate is the local people's interaction with Abay?
2. In what ways the local people are attached to Abay? Tell me for instance, how you and other people are attached with the river physically, spiritually, socially...
3. Could you tell me the religious & traditional spiritual beliefs that are associated with Abay?
4. Do people conduct traditional ritual and sacrificial performances by the banks of Abay? Why?
5. What looks like the performance of ritual and sacrificial practices along the banks of Abay? What are the activities? What is the process like?

6. Do you participate in the rituals? Who leads the ritual? What is your role? Who else participates?
7. When are the specific times the rituals and sacrifices are performed? Why are the rituals and sacrifices performed at these times?
8. What are the locations where rituals and sacrifices are commonly performed by the banks of Abay? Why the places are preferred?
9. Did the ritual, sacrificial and ceremonial traditions along Abay change over time? Did the practices weaken or persist? What are the factors behind the dynamics?

Specific objective 2: To identify and interpret the symbolic meanings of Abay both for the locals and Ethiopians at large

Guiding Questions to Informants

1. What would you feel if Abay ceases to exist?
2. What comes to your mind when you think of Abay?
3. How do you perceive Abay? Do you consider it just as any other naturally flowing river?
4. If your perception about Abay is beyond just naturally flowing water, what other representations and meanings you hold upon it?
5. Could you elaborate how the cultural and social meaning of Abay is expressed? For example tell me how it is expressed in proverbs & folktales?
6. Do you think that Abay has a symbolic meaning to you and to the community collectively? For instance, what?

Guiding Questions to Key Informants

1. What comes to your mind when you think of Abay?
2. What would you feel if Abay ceases to exist? What do you think the locals, and we as a nation loose?
3. Could you elucidate the cultural and social meaning/s of Abay to the people beyond being a naturally flowing river? Tell me for instance how the river's social and cultural meaning is represented in terms of folk proverbs, poetry, music, etc.
5. What does Abay represent? Could you describe how you and the locals use the river as a collective metaphor for a variety of concepts and phenomena?

Specific objective 3: To examine the importance of traditional spiritual beliefs, ritual practices and symbol values associated with Abay in the context of ecological conservation along the river

Guiding Questions to Informants

1. How do you see the relationship between Abay's traditional beliefs and spiritual practices and riverside ecological conservation?
2. Do you think that the beliefs and peoples' spiritual attachments with Abay have a contribution for the protection of natural resources, such as trees, along the river? If so how?
3. In what way do the beliefs & ritual practices may sustainably impact the conservation & management of natural resources along the river?

Guiding Questions to Key Informants

1. According to your lived experience in the locality, do you think that Abay's spiritual, symbolic and cultural values have an influence on the conservation of natural resources, such as trees along the river? How?
2. Do you know the trees along Abay river that are safeguarded due to traditional spiritual beliefs? Could you further elaborate your observations on this issue?
3. Did the beliefs and the ritual, sacrificial and ceremonial traditions along Abay change over time? If so how the dynamics affected ecological conservation along the river?

Appendix B: Participant Observation Guide

General Introduction: This observational checklist is prepared for the PhD dissertation project entitled “Cultural Significance of River Abay in Ethiopia: Ethnography of Water-inspired Beliefs, Spiritual Practices and Symbolic Meanings along the Banks in the Wetet Abay Area”. The participant observation checklist is crucial to observe, document, record and explore important events, activities, behaviors as well as the cultural, social and natural landscape of Abay river with the broad intention of understanding people-river interactions and the meanings that emerge out of those interactions. The objective of this observation is only for academic purposes. I assure that the rights, privacy and anonymity or confidentiality of the research participants will be safeguarded.

These were my observational guiding checklists outlining of what to observe and the techniques of observation that I used for the study themes that required involvement and observation.

1. Regarding peoples’ interaction and spiritual attachment with Abay

- What are the activities people do along the banks of Abay?
- How do people behave and act when they come in to contact with the river?
- Who is visiting Abay and from which location?
- Are there specific group of people manifesting stronger physical and/or spiritual attachment with the river more than others?

How I observed & recorded:

- I observed the natural and social landscape surrounding the river in different seasons of the year
- I took part and observed some of the day to day activities of the local people by the river bank
- I attempted to observe some of the local peoples' activities including the patterns and seasonal rhythms of their activities along the river bank
- I took notes of my observations
- I made some photo and video recording of the natural and social landscape of the river, as well as peoples' activities along the river
- Whenever necessary I also interviewed folks along the river while observing and participating

2. Regarding ritual and sacrificial practices conducted on the banks of Abay

- Where are rituals and sacrifices commonly carried out?
- Who participates in the rituals and sacrificial performances?
- Who leads the event? Who else does what task?
- What are the specific actions done on the river in the process of conducting rituals and sacrifices?
- How do the participants act and behave during the rituals and sacrifices?
- What food and drink is served and how?
- What looks like the context? The sound, the smell, the smoke, the taste...
- How is the ritual and sacrificial event concluded?

How I observed & recorded:

- I participated in rituals and some sacrificial events and observed the process
- I took notes of my observations
- With the support of my field guides and assistants I also made some photo and video recording of the rituals and sacrificial events
- I observed verbal as well as some non-verbal expressions of the participants in the process of ritual and sacrificial events
- During my involvement, whenever necessary, I selectively interviewed people (for instance key informants such as elders) from among the participants

3. Regarding the nexus between peoples' spiritual beliefs and practices and ecological conservation along Abay

- What looks like the river's natural landscape?
- Are there long lived trees beneath which rituals and sacrifices are conducted along the banks of the river? How could the trees survive without being chopped down?
- Are there signals that show the beliefs and ritual practices of local people have an impact on ecological conservation, particularly large trees along the river?

How I observed & recorded:

- I prudently observed the nexus of the river's cultural and natural landscape by slowly walking and posing along the river
- I took notes of my observations

- I conducted some photo and video recording of the overall cultural and natural landscape along the river in different seasons of the year

Appendix C: Additional Field Photos

All of the pictures in this Appendix were taken by me or my local guides, with the exception of Figure C1, which has the source indicated in the caption.

Figure C1: The course of River Abay in the vicinity of Wetet Abay town, featuring the bridge at the center, which is the entry in to the town (Bukayaw Fentie, 2023)



Figure C2: River Abay during the dry season in the surrounding of Wetet Abay



Figure C3: River Abay during the rainy season in the surrounding of Wetet Abay



Figure C4: The confluence of Rive Abay and River Jema near the town of Wetet Abay



Figure C5: Trekking in rural communities along Abay



Figure C6: The locals washing clothes on the eves of the New Year around the town of Wetet Abay—common scenes along Abay on the month of Pagume



Figure C7: One of the sacrificial and New Year ceremonial sites on the shores of Abay lined with ever green *dokima* trees and lush grass, during the rainy season



Figure C8: A famous and historical sacrificial and New Year ceremonial site beneath a large *dokima* tree along the shores of Abay in Nunu



Figure C9: Forests on the aits of Abay



Figure C10: One of the flowers of a plant that uniquely thrives by the shores of Abay



Figure C11: Trekking by the shores of Abay for an observation of the ecology along the river



Figure C12: Cultivated fields along the shorelines of Abay

Appendix D: Profile of the Research Participants

D1: Profile of Key Informants

No.	Name	Sex	Age	Religion	Occupation	Area of residence (urban, rural)	Remark
1	Alemu Yihunie	M	75	Orthodox Christian	Teacher (retired)	Urban	Key public figure in Wetet Abay town issues
2	Anteneh Fentahun	“	50	“	Merchant	“	
3	Desta Yazew	“	45	“	“	“	Also deacon and traditional medical practitioner
4	Mengesha Zeru	“	66	“	“	“	Also a priest
5	Eyasu Wassie	“	29	“	Civil servant	“	
6	Birhanu Ayele	“	73	“	Farmer	Rural	
7	Andualem Amsalu	“	63	“	“	“	
8	Tadele Bekele	“	48	“	“	“	
9	Haji Yitayew Mohamed	“	76	Muslim	Merchant	Urban	Also a sheikh
10	Ahmed Ali	“	47	“	“	“	
11	Senayit Admasu	F	60	Orthodox Christian	Home maker (house wife)	Rural	Recently relocated to Bahir Dar
12	Alemnesh Kebede	“	85	“	“	“	A nun, now living in Bahir Dar

D2: Profile of Informants

No.	Name	Sex	Age	Religion	Occupation	Area of residence (urban, rural)	Remark
1	Fenta mekuriya	M	54	Orthodox Christian	Merchant	Urban	Also work as Merigeta
2	Bogale Sinshaw	“	42	“	“	“	Formerly served as soldier
3	Ayenew Reta	“	39	“	“	“	
4	Yigerem Tilahun	“	24	“	-	“	
5	Simegnaw Feleke	“	69	“	Teacher (retired)	“	
6	Solomon Tesfa	“	50	“	Civil servant	“	
7	Tewabe Yenealem	“	36	“	“	“	
8	Assefa Abebe	“	40	“	Farmer	Rural	
9	Fentie Bogale	“	39	“	“	“	
10	Mihrete Tizazu	“	52	“	“	“	
11	Beyene Bantie	“	70	“	“	“	
12	Demlew Ambelu	“	67	“	“	“	
13	Tilahun Abate	“	52	“	“	“	
14	Shegaw Derbie	“	55	“	“	“	
15	Yoseph Adane	“	23	“	-	“	
16	Mohamed Siraj	“	45	Muslim	Merchant	Urban	
17	Hussen Yibre	“	52	“	“	“	
18	Ali Mohamed	“	44	“	“	“	
19	Omar Ali	“	42	“	“	“	
20	Ibrahim Hamza	“	36	“	Civil servant	“	
21	Aisha Mohamed	F	29	“	Home maker (house wife)	“	
22	Merem Yesuf	“	43	“	Merchant	“	
23	Hayat Ibrahim	“	69	“	“	“	
24	Belaynesh Yibeltal	“	24	Orthodox Christian	Home maker (house wife)	“	
25	Workinesh Debebe	“	31	“	Civil servant	“	
26	Degitu Moges	“	67	“	Merchant	“	
27	Wubit Fekadu	“	70	“	Home maker (house wife)	“	
28	Etenesh Alayu	“	51	“	“	Rural	
29	Abaynesh Yekoye	“	49	“	“	“	
30	Simegn Agegnehu	“	45	“	“	“	
31	Betelhem Yihunie	“	32	“	“	“	

Note: the hyphen (-) represents no job or permanent occupation