



#### RURAL/TERJE OESTIGAARD

Dr Terje Oestigaard is a researcher at the Nordic Africa Institute. He is responsible for the research project "Rainmaking and climate change in Tanzania: Traditions, rituals and globalization".



# RICHNESS AND POVERTY THROUGH RITUALS

In Ethiopia, there is a strong belief that the divinities control the weather, which can be modified through prayers, rainmaking rituals and sacrifices. The Nile, regarded by many as the most important river in the world, is often the focus of these religious activities.

In agricultural societies, wealth, health and prosperity depend on a successful harvest achieved through the physical work of ploughing and harvesting. But crucial for the richness or poverty of any year is the timing of the arrival

of the life-giving waters or the river's annual inundation: too little or too much rain at the wrong time will cause disaster. If the annual flood fails, the fields cannot be irrigated.

This uncertainty has always been part of the daily life of all agricultural communities, and it has always been of the utmost importance to reduce such risks. Consequently, humans have often tried to control, influence and modify the weather through prayers, rainmaking rituals and sacrifices.

**IN A RELIGIOUS WORLD**, everything has a reason. Throughout the history of Christianity, God has collectively punished his devotees for disobedience and sinful behaviour by constraining the life-giving water, in the form of rains or annual floods that do not arrive. God's reward for pious



The Timkat festival in Bahir Dar, Ethiopia.  
PHOTO: TERJE OESTIGAARD.



'The Great Sacrifice'.  
PHOTO: GEDEF ABAWA FIREW.

devotees may be in the form of life-giving waters, which give bountiful harvests, wealth and health.

The Blue Nile in Ethiopia – the Nile which by many is seen as the most important river in the world – is believed to have its source in heaven. It is the River Gihon flowing from paradise. In Ethiopia, the most important festival commemorates the role of water and the baptism. It is called the Timkat festival. It is not the birth of Jesus (Christmas) or his death (Easter), but the promise through baptism and by being initiated into the Kingdom of God that ensures salvation. And the holy water from the source of the Nile – Gish Abay – possesses this religious power.

When the Portuguese missionaries visited Gish Abay in the 16th century, sacrifices of cows took place. In 1770 the explorer James Bruce described in detail the traditional ritual whereby cattle were sacrificed. The early Christians, like the Ethiopian Orthodox Church today, perceived such sacrifices as pagan heresy.

**EVEN SO, SACRIFICES TO THE NILE** have been part of Christianity. Indeed, the sacrificial practice may have Jewish origins. New Year's Day on 11 September coincides with the Feast of John the Baptist. This is also the time when the rainy season ends. In the countryside before the rain starts in June, animals have been regularly sacrificed to the Nile. The sacrifice of white cattle used to take place within the church compound. If there is too much rain or if torrential rains damage crops and harm people and husbandry, sacrifices may also be conducted as rain-stopping rituals. Today, the church opposes such sacrifices, but priests pray for sufficient rain and successful harvests as part of the liturgy.

Around Lake Tana, there is an indigenous group with a strong water religion. The Woyto have been seen as the finest fishermen, but they have been and still are treated as unclean and as outcasts since they used to eat hippopotamus and catfish. Today, the Woyto have converted to

Islam, but other Muslims do not view them as true believers since they still worship the Nile.

In the Woyto religion, Abinas is the god of the Blue Nile. Abinas is the source of everything and the Woyto receive wealth, health, prosperity and natural resources from him. At the family level, poultry, sheep and goats are sacrificed

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throughout the year. The main sacrifice takes place before the start of Lent (the Christian fasting period). This 'Great Sacrifice' is communal, and an immature and pure calf is sacrificed. When Abinas is satisfied with the blood, he provides good fortune and prosperity for his people.

Common to both Christian and indigenous practices are the beliefs that divinities control the weather, which can be modified through ritual. Although lay Christians still conduct sacrifices to the Nile for making rain, the church opposes this as heathendom.

**THE WOYTO PRACTICES** are seen as especially pagan and condemned by both Christians and Muslims. Several times the Woyto have been displaced and many of their ritual places have been appropriated for profane purposes. Their existence, religion and beliefs are under strong pressure.

Thus, if richness or poverty in the form of successful or failed harvests is the outcome of rituals and religion as believed and practised by the devotees themselves, then the Woyto suffer from another type of poverty as well. The Woyto are deprived of their tradition, since they cannot conduct their religion and sacrifices in the prescribed manner. This is a form of poverty which may lead, they believe, to physical poverty. Consequently they will be punished by Abinas. ■