



Försvarshögskolan

The Great Ethiopian Renaissance Dam

**- A study of its ontological importance and impact on
Ethiopia**

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Abstract:

How does the *Great Ethiopian Renaissance Dam* affect Ethiopia's ontological security? This study proposes that the ontological security perspective must be comprehended within the analysis of the dam's importance, in order to grasp certain dimensions of security which otherwise could remain unnoticed. Thus, the fact that Ethiopia has executed the dam's building, despite the regional controversy and different forms of attacks it has implied – and was expected to imply in the initial case - suggests that the traditional security perspective is not sufficient in order to understand the dam's causes as well as the long-term determination regarding the dam's execution. Hence, by adopting Steele's and Mitzen's two conceptualizations of the biographical narrative, as well as Carol Bacchi's conceptualisation of meaning-making within representation, the dam's ontological significance is analysed. I argue that the *Great Ethiopian Renaissance Dam* constitutes a meaningful symbol within the Ethiopian biographical narrative, due to the grand political and emotional significance it has been interlinked with. Further on, I argue that this is partly due to the *meaning* and emphasis which the Ethiopia's State agents have expressed in conjunction with the comprehending needs which the dam is aimed to satisfy. I conclude by proposing a discussion to whether the dam could be considered to increase the ontological security of Ethiopia, or in fact weaken it.

Keywords: Ethiopia, Transboundary water conflict, Great Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, Self-identity

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

The building of the *Great Ethiopian Renaissance Dam* finished in July 2020 and will be fully operational by the end of 2022 (NS Energy 2021). The two main functions of the dam are: (1) to provide water restoration, as well as (2) to produce hydrological energy. Due to its estimated power capacity of 5000MW, it will consequently become the largest dam in Africa (ibid). It is located in northwest Ethiopia, close to the border towards Sudan and it is therefore dependent on the stripe of the Nile River, which passes through the Ethiopian landscape, in order to function. Since the declaration of the dam plan in 2011, negotiations between Ethiopia, Egypt and Sudan have taken place (Abera 2020). Initially in 2011, discussions emerged considering the newly published fact regarding the *Great Ethiopian Renaissance Dam's* mere existence, in which Egyptian delegates expressed disbelief regarding Ethiopia's intentions, declaring the Egyptian military to prepare for "any eventuality regarding a crucial water dispute" (WND 2011).

In alignment with the concept of transboundary water conflicts (i.e. disputes emerging among countries which have access to the same water source, regarding the water distribution), the ideas of territorial sovereignty and national autonomy is thus contested. Hence, projects which initially appear to be of a domestic character can consequently become objects of regional disputes, depending on whether other States perceive themselves as negatively affected and – if so – they are acting upon that perception. The culmination of the 10 years long dispute regarding the *Great Ethiopian Renaissance Dam* has, at least in some reputable forums such as the Magazine *Foreign Policy*, been given the name *the Ethiopian-Egypt Water War* (see for example article "The Ethiopian-Egyptian Water War Has Begun" by Ayenat Mersie 2020), although the political dissension has not evolved into a violated conflict State-wise so far. Nonetheless, different forms of attacks, often somewhere within the so-called *grayzone*, have been directed towards the Ethiopian institutions after the declaration of the dam (Mahmoud 2020), also including more prominent threats, such as verbal threats of military interventions by Egyptian Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry (Dunne 2020). The risk of a violated conflict has thus been a reality for the Ethiopian State, a risk which the Ethiopian government most likely predicted but still chose to take. This implies that the needs of the *Great Ethiopian*

Renaissance Dam, in terms of physical and ontological ones, were dominant in the decision making of its potential execution.

Despite the potential of the positive outcomes as well as the increasing interest within the international politics regarding national risk reduction measures regarding water access as well as renewable hydrological energy sources, the eventual success of such measures could become obstructed if such measures are not legitimized within the regional context. Yet, the importance of safe access to water sources and energy capacity cannot be downplayed. The quotations of former Secretary-General of the United Nations, Boutros Ghali stressed this issue already in year 1985: "The next war in the Middle East will be fought over water, not politics" (BBC, 2003), as well as by his successor Kofi Annan, who in 2001 said: "Fierce competition for fresh water may well become a source of conflict and wars in the future." These two quotations constitute two of many examples of how the issue regarding water access have been addressed in world politics (Bapna et al 2018).

1.2 Research problem

In order to gain better understanding of how Ethiopia managed to diverge itself from its previously established position as a controlled State actor in the context of the Nile River – due to a post-colonial treaty providing Egypt almost total control of the Nile River water distribution (Damian 2020) - into the controlling State actor within this transboundary water conflict, this paradoxical event ought to be investigated. The success of the *Great Ethiopian Renaissance Dam's* building, despite the inevitable physical risks and attacks which Ethiopia have received as a consequence to building the dam, addresses the need for an additional perspective in the analysis of this case. By applying the ontological security theory, a more comprehensive understanding of the *Great Ethiopian Renaissance Dam's* meaning within Ethiopia's national ontology is provided. Thus, the lens of Ontological Security Theory is appropriate when investigating States' interactions and relations within the context of International Relations, as well as within the domestic context.

The Middle East and North African States (the MENA region) have been exposed to political frictions during a long time, both within a domestic and a regional context. This causes stress and uncertainty upon the subjects, individually and on the State-level, which increases the political demands and need for establishing the sense of *home* and *belonging*. Drawing on

Anthony Giddens, Catarina Kinnvall claims in *Globalization and Religious Nationalism in India: The search for Ontological Security* (in Peoples and Vaughan-Williams 2010, 71-71) that the globalisation's rising complexity and interconnections causes individuals to seek security within the practices of *religion* and *nation* in order to restore the hurt self-identity and the biological narrative. Both religion and nationalism are considered extra powerful, due to their ability to provide the feeling of "home", a "place where subjectivity can be anchored and securitized" (ibid). Steele's arguments regarding the interconnected emotional linkage between the domestic audience and its society's representation - in terms of the State – is likely another mechanism which might has affected the declaration of the *Great Ethiopian Renaissance Dam* (ibid, 69-70). Hence, the inclusion of the ontological security upon transboundary water conflicts ought to be of importance in order to gain better understanding regarding disputes of regional character. Eventually, by examining the Ethiopian State delegate's expression regarding the purpose and the intensions with the dam, the underlying meaning of the *Great Ethiopian Renaissance Dam* ought to be emphasised.

1.3 Research question and purpose

The aim of this essay is to investigate the underlying meaning behind the execution of the Great Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, assuming that the dam represents something greater than merely satisfaction of physical needs. Hence, this research will attempt to answer the research question:

- *How does the Great Ethiopian Renaissance Dam affect Ethiopia's ontological security?*

2. Research and theory connection

2.1 Previous research

Considering co-existing movements of both biological and political caliber, transboundary water conflicts will most likely become an even more recognized phenomenon within both the research field of International Relations as well as in international politics. The politics

regarding climate change, including global warming and the increasing global temperature, along with the frequently occurring droughts, constitute the concept of so called *Creeping Environmental Changes Disaster Diplomacy* (Kelman 2016, 34). The concept stresses the potential for co-operation which these environmental, long-lasting alterations might enable among actors. This is due to the non-antagonistic threats which affect several partners, and consequently might result in strengthened relations based on the altruistic interdependence which would emerge. The time factor is mentioned as a unique factor regarding the possibilities of reaching a stable and long-lasting solution suitable for all partners. Nonetheless, previous research has demonstrated that the chances of such outcomes are relatively low, referred to the fact that the time factor in fact seems to hollow the ambitions of such negotiations. The importance of already established diplomatic relations among the concerned parts has been mentioned as the fundamental condition for successful outcomes in terms of prolonged dilemmas (Kelman 2016, 4). Further on, the core elements of this concept are based upon the concept of *Disaster Diplomacy*, which too stresses the window of opportunity which environmental alterations might create in terms of political cooperation (Kelman 2010, 2-6). The distinction between the concepts is thus the fact that *Disaster Diplomacy* is centred towards shorter time chains, including both preventive and affective measures.

Mark Zeitoun and Jeroen Warner's article regarding the Ethiopian – Egyptian 'power asymmetry' in *Hydro-Hegemony – A Framework for Analysis of Trans-Boundary Water Conflicts* (2006), demonstrates Ethiopia's limited chances of alteration and control in the region in terms of water transboundary conflicts. The theoretical framework is partly influenced by the neo-realistic perspective on the anarchial States-system and the stressful environment effect it causes upon States. This are in alignment with the considering of some States operating through power-maximization (Schweller in Jervis 1999, 43), while others are considered Status-quo (Mearsheimer in Jervis 1999, 45). The regional Hydro-Hegemony Transboundary water sources - i.e water sources which multiple countries share access to - tend to reveal regional power asymmetries, demonstrated through the regional distribution of a common water body (Zeitoun and Warner 2006, 436-440). The framework rests upon historical events which have led to certain instrumentalizations of power, implying a post-colonial perspective into the context. The colonial treaty from 1929, followed by a 1959 legislative agreement, both designed by Great Britain, justifies Egypt's almost total control of the water distribution of the Nile River (Damian 2020). Above that, a supplement provides

Egypt veto regarding regional infrastructure projects which might affect its access to water resources (Zeitoun and Warner 2006, 449).

The concept of *Water security* includes multiple designations regarding uncertainty of water, such as *water wars*, *water conflicts*, *water scarcity* and *water stress*. Accordingly, the original conceptualisation of ‘water security’ was established in the context of both risk reductions measures as well as in general hydrological discourses. The concept was originally drawn from the safety which safe water access causes its consumers, constituting fundamental human needs. The definition by United Nations is emphasised: “The capacity of a population to safeguard sustainable access to adequate quantities of acceptable quality water for sustaining livelihoods, human well-being, and socio-economic development, for ensuring protection against water-borne pollution and water-related disasters, and for preserving ecosystems in a climate of peace and political stability” (2013). Nonetheless, this could equality be questioned since the dependence to water in fact could result in a less secure attitude, often problematized first when a crisis of some kind occurs. This might extence to a degree whereas other energy sources are perceived as irrelevant, with the risk of creating a so-called “false security” that might ultimately lead to a decrease in the capacity of power sources, eventually constructing inherent societal vulnerabilities. This is in alignment of the idea that the categorization of natural events as “hazards” and “natural catastrophes” are the result of constructivist practices, in order to conceal insufficient political power actions and responsibility (Kelman 2022, 39-41). In summary, the interpretation of security in the context of water access could hereby be contested. By separating the expression of “water security” into “water” and “security”, the different security perspectives following this particular dependence issue could hopefully be distinguished with more clarity. This essay has purposely taken the latter version into account – thereby distinguishing ‘water’ from ‘security’ in order to investigate by what means the regional security has been affected by the disagreements regarding water distribution.

2. Theory

2.1 Ontological Security Theory

Critical Security Studies is an issue-area study, developed within the academic discipline of international politics. The scholarships within “critical security theory” have become established as an alternative in contrast to the positivist orthodoxy in Western social science, whereas the realistic tradition regarding physical capabilities and assets as means of power has dominated the field of International Relations. The core argument which unites the theories of critical security studies, viz securitization, constructivism, feminist studies, poststructuralist studies, human security and ontological security theory, is the conviction that security is a derivative concept and must therefore exceed the traditional demarcation of “security” as the mere physical survival of the State.

The conceptualisation of security emerges from the real conditions of insecurity, a universal condition for individuals and collectives. In order to escape the perceived threats, energy and resources are being sacrificed; means which are valuable and costly regarding the fact that the referent object is denied the chances to live in harmony with the environment. From this insight, two conclusions regarding the nature of security can be drawn. First, security can be interpreted as an instrumental value, since it consequently frees its possessors from the captivity of existential angst, at least to an extent. Secondly, security is interpreted as something greater than mere survival. One can live in an environment where the risk of death is excluded and still portray the general situation as insecure, unable to exercise human rights for instance (Peoples and Vaughan 2010, 66-67).

The concept of ontology represents the “nature of being” within the social world, emphasising a holistic perspective in regard to the referent object’s perception of itself and its environment. It originates from the philosophical branch produced by psychiatrist Ronald David Lang, who studied the reflections of existence, being, becoming, anxiety and reality among individuals (Peoples and Vaughan 2010, 66-68). His description of ontological security could be illustrated by the core distinction between the *ontologically secure* and the *ontologically insecure* human object. The ontologically secure subject does not perceive her self-identity, nor existence, being in danger and is therefore able to establish relations with others in confidence. The *ontologically insecure* subject is unable to experience this due to the lack of fundamental conviction regarding the temporal or spatial continuity of her very existence. The occurrent feeling of *dread* and existential angst – simplified in the expression “fear of fear” - is a distinguishing and ever so frequent feature of the ontologically insecure (ibid). The core attributes were later developed by sociologist Anthony Giddens, who argued that the social,

political and economic consequences of globalisation impose an inevitable pressure on the individual and the collective, which consequently results in a more prominent need for ontological security. Giddens began defining the State actors as legitimate referent object, thus making the theory applicable in the field of International Relations (ibid, 69).

Jennifer Mitzen argued that the 'scale-up' from the individual level is passable due to the emotional interconnection between the State and its population. The ontological security of the State is of fundamental importance in order to secure its domestic audience. Further on, she takes hold of the neorealist attributing of the State-system as anarchial, although she stresses the importance of recognizing the ontological security as a parallel reality in regard to the physical one. In fact, States frequently act in a way which seem to collide with or threaten their physical security; demonstrating that the ontological and the physical security each constitute a separate and ineluctable need which are not necessarily in alignment. Harmful, insecure situations and relations might result in the establishing of routines, implying that certain foreign policy actions become the normality, the securing act in an insecure environment.

Through Mitzen's contribution, sudden actions performed by State actors could be understood as rather logical since that perspective respects and links the perceived existential threat of nations with their complex responses. The case studies of these performances vary from the range of sudden (re)actions to new issues to structurally established measurements. Laura Schelenz (2017) provides several courses of events which could be regarded as more or less contradicting, such as the Bush administration's authorization of the systematic use of torture on detainees in Afghanistan, Iraq and at Guantánamo Bay in the US-led so called "War on Terror", despite America's long proclaimed role as the defender of democracy and political rights, illustrate such notable event chains. Another example, illustrating a less controversial issue, is States' routines of providing financial aid overseas, despite the fact that such transactions reduce the own funds of the State. Finally, the phenomena of provocative and seemingly venturesome military actions of smaller States, risking their own physical security, does constitute a strong foundation for the need of implementing the ontological security perspective in order to find the logics within such actions.

Brent J Steele advances the arguments of Mitzen by offering an alternative justification for State personification. By incorporating the argument of Bill McSweeney's view upon States, that States act as if they are individuals, the two level of analysis – the individualistic and the

national ones – can and should in fact be conflated. As Steele himself puts it: “State agents seek to satisfy the self-identity needs of the States which they lead” (Peoples and Vaughan-Williams 2010, 70). The referent object is thus the States, represented and analysed through their respective State delegates. They uphold the biographical narrative, representing continuity (Steele 2008, 10-11).

Likewise, it is of importance to highlight the division regarding the two roles of the State. In international politics, both Mitzen’s and Steele’s perspectives personify the States as a result of the States’ individual and subjective processes, developments and (re)productions. Nonetheless, the construction, protection and consumption of the self-identity must satisfy the domestic audience (and the ontological insecurity) in order to reach legitimacy. This important aspect highlights the mission which political representatives and delegates of State actors uphold towards their population, their people. If such operations fail to an extent in which the trust and the perception of being secure is overly damaged, the protection and security have been failed. It is therefore important to stress the existential effects which successful national operations on a regional and global scale could have on the domestic political arena. The success regarding ontological security measures is thus largely determined by domestic audiences, at the end of the day.

Both Mitzen and Steele declare the State as the referent object of ontological security, although there is a specific difference in their approach to the State’s reproductions of identity. Linking the neo-realistic perspective into the analysis, Mitzen claims that social the interactions among States within the international environment are the main source of identity seeking processes for the State. Steele – on the other hand - refers to past traumas and glories, national memories, myths and notions of shame as explanations of State behaviour, emphasizing the autobiographic narrative (ibid). Accordingly, Steele stresses the historical, social and cultural processes of the State in order to display the development of its self-reflection. He also claims that the material and reflexive capabilities, assessments of and responses to crises, biographical narratives and the receptiveness of others to those narratives are of great importance in order to identify how States secure their ontological security (Steele in Peoples and Vaughan-Williams 2010, 65 –71). Regarding the four foundational ontological mechanisms of Anthony Giddens, *Incoherent biography*, *Discontinuous biography*, *Inferiority* and *Distrust of external environment*, Steele underlines the internal processes and the autobiographical narrative, while Mitzen underlines the external, bi- and multilateral

processes based on intersubjective interactions. Both Ayşe Zarakol (2010, 14-15) and Catarina Kinnvall (2010, 34) problematize this tendency of demarcation regarding identity creating processes through narrative, claiming that there is a natural reflexivity among the two of them.

One of Catarina Kinnvall's contributions to the theoretical field, as previously mentioned, is the recognition of *religion* and *nation* as especially appealing to individuals in an increasingly complex world, in which different narratives and identities are interlinked and contested, causing an internal dissonance. The feeling of predictability and security could thus be found within the frame of reference, community and unity which both religion and the nation tend to provide, especially in the context of outer pressure and stress. The common perception of the collective subjectivity is drawn from the religious and nationalist narratives, which often are based upon the dichotomistic logic of self/other. The identity of the 'self' is thus anchored and securitized through the identification of, and distancing from, the 'other'. It appears as that further critical security theories, such as constructivism for instance, could be referred to in the process of 'securitizing subjectivity'. Nonetheless, Kinnvall emphasises the function which the 'other' contributes in regard to the identity seeking processes within the referent object; offering individuals a holistic connection, context and the sense of security and belonging, whereas each individual participation constitute a part of the collective body (Peoples and Naughan-Williams 2010, 70-73).

2.2 Limitations of the Ontological Security Theory

Regarding the theory's limitations, there is a noticeable concern in terms of generalization of actions in the protection of an actor's ontological security. This includes both the triggering causes – except the recognition of the ontological insecurity, what more is considered threatening enough to evoke certain reactions? - as well as the consequences, i.e the responses to the ontologically destabilizing situation. This aspect could derive from the fact that the theory indeed offers different perspectives of how the ontological security interact and affect the State in the State-system, although there is a conventional consciousness regarding that there is really no predictability regarding States' future actions.

Although Mitzen's established concept of routines demonstrates a certain stability and appreciation regarding the referent object's probable actions, it does not comprehend the mechanisms for a political change within the ontological insecurity. Each State constitutes its own truth in the process of reconstructing the identity, in relation to temporal and spatial events in the international politics. Hence, the theory positions itself quite unconditional in its respect to contextual factors and circumstances, aspects which must remain "untouched" in the analysis since operationalization of potential variables, based upon a number of requirements, simply does not provide a sufficient generality which could be seen as universal, regardless of case.

This inquires contextual and specialized accuracy of the particular referent object, the particular State and its environmental when ontological security is being analysed. Consequently, this implies that an academical liberty regarding the framework of the analysis is necessary, in order to identify actions which are executed in the name of ontological security. Because of that, transparency regarding the processing of the material is significant. Awareness regarding normative assumptions and political subjectivity is also of great importance in a time where the term "crisis" is frequently applied. Following the wonder regarding breaking points in foreign policy routines, there is no general unity within the theory. The synonym of dread as existential angst, as well as the causality between dread and responses within the ontological insecurity, could be questioned. Are there only threats of existential proportions which causes anxiety, which further on results in previously mentioned reactions, thus implying that every possible threat causes existential anxiety? Eventually, there is a general criticism regarding the fact that the absolute majority of the critical theories has been applied upon ontological security within citizens and States in the 'West' (to my knowledge). There is a noticeable lack of studies in other parts of the world, with exception for Kinnvall's work.

2.3 Categorization of Empirics

In order to understand the *Great Ethiopian Renaissance Dam's* effects on Ethiopia and its self-identity, the empirics was examined through Ontological Security Theory as its analytical lens. In Table 1 (below) the different criteria in Ontological Security Theory were categorized in regard to the different scholars used in this paper. It consists of three theoretical

conceptualizations: (1) Carol Bacchi’s theoretical framework of representation is adopted in order to demonstrate the *Great Ethiopian Renaissance Dam’s* representation for the Ethiopian State (2010). The two main principles regarding states’ self-identity processes – (2) Steele’s *Autobiographical narrative* (2005) and (3) Mitzen’s *Biographic narrative through interactions* (2010) - were implemented too.

The analysis was implemented by two steps. Initially, the material was read and analysed in order to display initial impressions of the speech’s construction.

Secondly, the content was divided into meaningful entities based on a systematic categorization of themes and patterns. The entities were condensed into shorter meanings and eventually abstracted into codes. The results of the codes were to describe the content of the elementary units (Johannessen and Tufte 2010, 109-114).

Ontological Security Theory	Theoretical categorization
Representation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The State’s representation of the nature of the threat (Bacchi 2013, 114) • The State’s representation of the affected subjects (actors) and their attributes to the threat (ibid) • The State’s representation of the presented solution to the threat (ibid) • The representation of the solution’s consequences: • Which actors would benefit and which would disadvantage by the threat being represented like this? (ibid)
Autobiographical narrative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mentioning of past traumas and glories, national memories, myths and notions of shame affects States’ self-identity and behaviour (Steele 2005, 523-527) • Activating of reflexive behaviour, based on fear, when distinct and short-term threats appear (ibid) • Activating of new routines, based on anxiety, become activated when established routines are interrupted (ibid)

Biographic narrative through interactions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ‘Othering’ (potentially) hostile actors (Kinnvall 2006, 36-45). Steele’s adaption of historical references and attributes could constitute the practice of ‘othering’ (2005, 524-534) • Declaring the <i>nation</i> as the safety in relation to hostile actors (Kinnvall 2006, 34-36)
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Table 1 – A theoretical categorization

By adopting this coding schedule, the categorization aimed to prove dependability and transparency for which the analysis and conclusions found on. Yet, the clarity it provided does not advance the transferability of the analysis, although the case study analysis the core elements within ontological narratives. The reason for this assumption rests on two reasons. First and foremost, the qualitative content analysis comprehends subjective assumptions which the State apprehends. This implies the need of embracing specific contextual factors, such as historical events, its affects within the biographical narrative as well as the strategical policy. The uniqueness of each State’s particular contextual factors must thus be recognized and cannot constitute a general “verity.” Secondly, the singularity of the *Great Ethiopian Renaissance Dam*’s area and functions in MENA is unique. This makes it a particularly interesting case for analysis, since there are no previous ones of such magnitude.

3. Research design

3.1 Method

This paper constitutes a deductive qualitative content analysis, executed through a case study of former Ethiopian Prime Minister’s ceremonial inauguration speech of the *Great Ethiopian Renaissance Dam* (Meles Zenawi Memorial 2011). The analysis unit of the study is thus the Ethiopian State, represented by its State agent PM Zenawi, in accordance with Steele’s fixation of States and State agents as units (2008, 10-11). By systematizing the manifested content and the latent content within the speech, relating to the core arguments of the biographical narrative, the ontological importance of building the *Great Ethiopian Renaissance Dam* ought to become understood.

A qualitative content analysis is an appropriate method whenever interpretations of meaning-making processes through verbal or written practices are of interest (Nygård 2021). Instead of focusing on causal *why*-questions, the qualitative content analysis investigates what, whom, how and what types of *ideas* are being recognized (ibid). The method rests on the assumption of actors interacting with other subjects, objects or phenomena in regard to its own *meaning* and perception of the environment. Since ‘meaning’ is being expressed through linguistics; spoken, written or in the shape of pictures, the aim to analyse such content is appropriate whenever ‘meaning’ is of interest (Esiasson et al 2017, 211). Nonetheless, in order to expose such ideas, the meaning-making processes are not perceived as individualistic but socially and intersubjectively practiced. The meaning-making processes are constantly being (re)produced as a result of the narrative being reproduced within the referent object itself, as well as a result of interactions with others (Zarakol 2010, 13-14

There are several methods which seek to find elements and attributes within meaning-making processes. A narrative analysis would likely constitute an appropriate method for this analysis, considering the operationalization’s focus towards two concepts of the biographical narrative. Yet, the adaption of the analytical concept *representation* is an established analytical tool within the qualitative content analysis, which is the main reason considering the choice of method (Esaissaon et al 2017, 216-217). According to Stuart Hall, representation means using language to say something meaningful about, or meaningfully representing, the world for other people (*The Work of Representation* 1997). Words, concepts and symbols function in their ability to create understanding of the world, either by referring to previous memories and experiences, or by offering a hypothetical situation. Thus, matter (*materia*) has no objective meaning but is given meaning throughout subjective representations. The representation of a phenomenon or an object can vary over time and space, due to its dynamic and subjective nature. The analysis of the *Great Ethiopian Renaissance Dam*’s representation is consequently an important component when studying the dam’s ontological meaning. Carol Bacchi’s questions, whereas representation of policy documents are analysed, is thus adopted within the operationalization, contributing to a more specific focus on how the biographical narrative is affected by the *Great Ethiopian Renaissance Dam* (Bacchi and Eveline 2010, 114).

3.2 Material

The material for this study consists of a first-hand source; the speech by former Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi in April 2011. The speech was held at the inauguration ceremony for the Great Ethiopian Renaissance Dam. It is the first official addressing of the dam's building, both for the domestic audience as well as the foreign audience. Considering this fact, the speech is particularly interesting in the analysis since no response had occurred yet (domestically or within the MENA region). Hence, it marks the commencement of the 10 years long period, whereas the dam has been executed, and in which regional disputes related to it have occurred frequently.

An alternative collection of material could have been the national policy documents of the *Growth and Transformation Plan I* (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia 2010). The document covers the causes and the predicted outcomes of the *Great Ethiopian Renaissance Dam*, which indicates its relevance as empirics considering the choice of case for this thesis. Yet, the speech marks the beginning of an era in which expressions, commentaries and statements of Egypt, Sudanese and Ethiopian State delegates dictates the regional discourse. By analysing the initial contribution to these courses of events, the underlying meaning of the *Great Ethiopian Renaissance Dam*'s ontological importance is emphasised.

4. Analysis

4.1 Introduction

In alignment with Steele's recognition on historical events and symbols within States' self-identity processes (2008, 35-36), the name of the dam marks a powerful reference. The choice of words in terms of *Renaissance* is not explained in further detail within the speech, although it ought to call upon historical events. One could assume that the name refers to Ethiopia's previous empires as well as its successful battling over colonial Italian troops in 1986 and in 1935-1936. Due to those particular historical events, Ethiopia has remained as one of Africa's few non-colonized countries, likewise one of the first African countries to become accepted by the United Nations. Hence, the sense of pride and capability into linking the nation's historical events and position with its future course of actions could imply a sense of greater purpose into the dam's meaning.

It too emphasises patriotic elements which makes it appear as an object of the Ethiopian society and people. Although Steele does not explicitly express ‘pride’ as an antonym to the notion of ‘shame’, such an adoption could be implied with regard to the general impression of the dam’s naming. As previously written, shame could be considered as a state of mind which occurs whenever political actions appear as a contrary to the self-identity's foundation and values (ibid). Consequently, the ontological security is damaged. By discussing the potential advancement of the concept ‘pride’, thus reasonably occurring when the referent object perceives its political actions in alignment with the self-identity's foundation and values, a broader understanding of the dam’s ontological functions could be comprehended. Accordingly, the referent object’s ontological security ought to become strengthened, since the self-identity is confirmed within the actions it embodies.

Yet, a strengthened ontological security thus not necessarily imply that the exposure to ontological insecurity is diminished. In fact, there is still reason to believe that the referent object’s ontological security could become fragile and exposed to potential harm, which might intensify its ontological insecurity to a greater extent due to the perception of ‘angst’ (ibid). That assumption rests on two conditions: the margins of success and Mitzen’s conceptualization of routines. First, by confirming the self-identity through successful operations, the efforts and importance of continuing the confirmation of the self-identity ought to be intensified. The “fall” from a potential failure is raised, most likely resulting in a more cautious standpoint for the referent object. Hence, the ontological security might not become “secured” in a wider perspective, although the self-identity is so, at least in the moment. Second, Mitzen’s conceptualization of ‘routines’ is relevant in the context. Abrupted routines for States, due to threatening situations and actors, constitute ontological insecurity since the self-identity appear as threatened and insecure.

The risk of experiencing disrupted routines could thus be interpreted as more fearful, than assuming that disrupted routines will occur if the referent object occupies a more exposed position by seeking trust and comfort from others. Paradoxically, established ‘routines’ in which conflict seeking behaviour constitute a routinized component could thus be a securing factor in terms of the State’s self-identity. The perception and representation of the State as constantly exposed to hostile actors could thus become an established part of the State’s

biographical narrative, resulting in the sense of ontological security and safety (Mitzen 2006, 35-37).

4.2 Representation

There are mainly two general causes expressed regarding the need for building the *Great Ethiopian Renaissance Dam*: eradication of poverty and expansion of power production, domestically and regionally. The need for a more predictable and efficient energy distribution, executed through both the *Great Ethiopian Renaissance Dam* as well as through several other landscaped ponds, are presented as arrangements within the five-year *Growth and Transformation Plan I*. The *Growth and Transformation Plan I* was declared in 2010 with the goal of a yearly increase of the country's GDP to a level of 11 to 15 per cent during the period of 2010 – 2015 (Ethiopia Ministry of Finance and Economic Development 2010, 15). The overall linkage between the domestic needs regarding greater electrical capacity and the need for a far more sustainable standard of living for the population is merged, which implies that the building of the *Great Ethiopian Renaissance Dam* is absolutely necessary in order to realize those ambitions. Hence, to welcome the building of the *Great Ethiopian Renaissance Dam* is to welcome a better future for the Ethiopian population, this could be interpreted as. This implies that the *Great Ethiopian Renaissance Dam* itself represents a better future for the Ethiopian people as well as it represents a symbol of the industrial and political progress of the Ethiopian society.

Nonetheless, the criteria of representation touches upon the various needs which the *Great Ethiopian Renaissance Dam* is supposed to satisfy, according to PM Zenawi. Eradication of poverty as well as strengthening of power capacity are undoubtedly needs of physical character, which is worth noticing. The frequently repeated assurance regarding the positive affect which the dam will cause the Nile River as a whole, could indirectly be interpreted as a third motive regarding the intentions of the *Great Ethiopian Renaissance Dam*, although it could be interpreted as a positive side effect as well. However, there is not an apparent requirement to exclude the mere physical dimension (which PM Zenawi's motives refers to) from the analysis, although the Ontological Security Theory arrives from a critical position to the traditional conceptualisation of security. In fact, by recognizing the problematics emerging from physical security related issues, a more comprehensive understanding regarding the

ontological (in)security is possible. The altruistic prompt regarding economic interdependence with the Nile Basin countries constitute another example of how the materialistic means of power is illustrated, thus principally recognizing the core attributes of the Liberal Theory. The aim to create a shift within the foreign relations, a shift in the power dynamics and the 'routines' could thus be manifested as a proposition. The deal is to offer Sudan and Egypt considerable benefits as a direct consequence of investments and funding in the dam's execution, claiming that such measures would contribute to their respective water distribution whose are shaped by infrastructural complications. Hence, the requirement for such an agreement covers both the means and the goal of legitimizing Ethiopia as a juridically legitimate and equal State actor in regard to water transboundary dilemmas. The disputed (post-)colonial treaties would thus be politically undermined and irrelevant, creating a preferably beneficial situation for Ethiopia by evening the regional power asymmetry which has dictated the region since 1929. Although the dam, and consequently the desired 'deal', is portrayed as a "testimony" of the potential shift in the strained regional context, it does not appear evident that such actions would actually constitute mark a shift in Ethiopia's ontological security.

The expressed recognition of the Ethiopian State as responsible with regard to the regional politics might initially appear as a potential closure of its previous 'routines', drawn by existential angst. Still, the prominent demands which Ethiopia poses upon Sudan and Egypt, along with their expressed definition regarding the causes and consequences for their potential cooperation alternatively opposition, appear as rather non-negotiable and fundamental for the Ethiopian positioning. By adopting historical references which addresses the collective memory of Ethiopians; reminding them of their painful past as well as their determination, the sense of national unity and pride are produced. Such statements are in alignment with Steele's idea of narrative seeking tendencies. By advancing these attributes by applying a second dimension onto Ethiopia's historical events, in which the other's instrumentalization of impoverishment (although no State is explicitly mentioned in the empirics regarding this matter) has undermined the chances of a fair progress for the Ethiopian people – and is still a complicating factor regarding its current development, the perception of the *Great Ethiopian Renaissance Dam* as a legitimate mean is anchored. PM Zenawi's commentary upon States which do not satisfy the Ethiopian demands, accusing them of operating in a destabilizing, harmful and egoistic manner, thus undermining Ethiopia's rightful chance of freeing themselves from the chains of poverty, are thereby being portrayed as the 'other'. The 'other'

is accordingly responsible for any disputes that might occur in regard to the *Great Ethiopian Renaissance Dam*, which emphasises Kinnvall's recognition of the idea of the nation as appealing in the context of insecurity and conflicts (2010, 35-45).

4.3 Autobiographical narrative

PM Zenawi describes the Ethiopian State as capable and successful in terms of its "rapid economic development activity." As a sign of the truth within that Statement, and as a sign on the continuation of this progress, is the *Great Ethiopian Renaissance Dam*. The *Great Ethiopian Renaissance Dam* is portrayed as the embodiment of the Ethiopian State's thriving ascent, resulting in Africa's largest dam. Linking the historical aspects with the determination and endurance of the Ethiopian people, the underlying message from parts of the speech could not be misunderstood: "No matter how poor we are, in the Ethiopian traditions of resolve, the Ethiopian people will pay any sacrifice. I have no doubt they will, with one voice, say: Build the Dam!" Further on, PM Zenawi advances the financial argument, implying that the Ethiopian State indeed has the ability to raise the required funds for the construction, signalling national independence and indicating authority. Kinnvall's perspective on the interconnection of individuals and the State, is by this Statement recognized. The purpose of expressing Ethiopians as the producing and constructing success factor in terms of the Ethiopian State, is an example of how the boundaries between individuals, the collective and the State are coalesced.

Interestingly, the potential chance to abandon the infrastructure project was mentioned, most likely as a rhetorical twist, since it was followed by a Statement declaring that it really is no alternative: "Either to abandon the project or do whatever we must to raise the required funds. I have no doubt which of these difficult choices the Ethiopian people will make." These traits of character, although their general positive framing, could thus be interpreted as a fortification of the strategic direction which the speech presents. Hence, Zarakol's dimension of political authorization, whereas the domestic audience must accept the presented conditions in order for the State to legitimize the presented narrative, is comprehended (2010, 18-22). Additionally, the regional audience is too an intended recipient, which will be further described in the section below.

4.4 Biographic narrative through interactions

The term “Nile Basin countries” is frequently mentioned as a general term, for instance in attributing the *Great Ethiopian Renaissance Dam* as the best possible “testimony” of Ethiopia’s commitment to “forge a lasting partnership between all the Nile Basin riparian countries”. More specifically, there are only two States who are explicitly mentioned: Sudan and Egypt. The countries are both involved in the post-colonial treaties which affect their respective share of the distribution. Accordingly, they constitute the only jurisdictional concern in terms of the dam’s execution. Further on, the proclamation of export regarding hydrological energy is mentioned too as an ambition in terms of power capacity. In fact, PM Zenawi claims that the *Great Ethiopian Renaissance Dam* will “increase the amount of water resources available, reducing the wastage from evaporation which has been a serious in these countries, of the Nile Basin riparians. It will in fact ensure a steady year-round flow of the Nile.”

The Statement demonstrates an opportunism regarding the conditions for the future of Nile, it is in fact argued that the *Great Ethiopian Renaissance Dam* will contribute to a more sustainable and efficient water supply for the Nile River. This could further be interpreted as an attempt to please actors which might fear that the dam will disrupt their existent access to water. The Egyptian society is largely dependent on the Nile River, an estimation of 95 per cent of the Egyptians live within a range of five kilometres. Such fragile margins could, according to Kelman, be the result of insufficient political actions in terms of national risk reduction measures (2010, 45-56). There is a constant need of recognizing potential risks from a broader perspective, in which the lack of risk diversification regarding infrastructural capacities must not be overlooked.

The speech appears as a marking of a new, collaborative era for the regional politics, offering a new path of trust and stability among the concerned Nile Basin countries through a more united energy and water distribution. It could be interpreted as Ethiopia defines their national success as a sign of exemplary within the regional context, thus constructing it as a national attribute in relation to Egypt and Sudan. By declaring the *Great Ethiopian Renaissance Dam*’s execution, the idealisation of the Ethiopian State is present. Consequently, the

perception of national unity could be incarnated in the building and execution of the *Great Ethiopian Renaissance Dam*. If the *Great Ethiopian Renaissance Dam* gains acceptance from Egypt and Sudan and additionally becomes funded by the countries (PM Zenawi proposes a 20 per cent funding from Egypt and 30 per cent from Sudan), the use of the tri-lateral post-colonial treaty is practically finished, replaced with a treaty which Ethiopia has designed. The symbolic importance would be of great significance. Perhaps could the Ethiopian offer regarding a trilateral ownership be interpreted as a sign of trust in Egypt and Sudan. The common ownership, although Ethiopia would still represent 50 per cent of the building's total worth, could be seen as an instrument for communication and respect among the three countries. Although such an offer could be interpreted as a financial risk for both Ethiopia as well as the counterparties, the risk of changing 'routines' is prominent as well. According to Mitzen (Ontological Security, 4):

“Even harmful or self-defeating relationships can provide actors with ontological security; and as long as that relationship is reliable, actors may prefer to hold onto the relationship rather than to experiment with something new. From here it follows that breaking free of physical security dilemmas can generate ontological insecurity.”

Regarding the trilateral funding, PM Zenawi presents it like a proposal. Yet, in terms of the primary condition regarding the *Great Ethiopian Renaissance Dam* – i.e the acceptance of its future existence, there is certainly no room for interpretation: “The second message we want to send is that the intention to exercise our rights to use our own rivers is in order to fight poverty in our own country.” By calling upon the right of national independence regarding domestic matters, the arguing for the *Great Ethiopian Renaissance Dam*'s legitimacy is clarified. The *Great Ethiopian Renaissance Dam* is by these means represented as a domestic infrastructure project. The ownership of the dominant narrative is thus insinuated. Hence, it becomes a symbol of the Ethiopian authority and prosperity, i.e a symbol with the intention of stating something meaningful within the Ethiopian narrative, something which highlights the Ethiopian society as well as its population.

Potential distrust and oppression, both performed by the domestic audience but furthermore if performed by other States, concerning the dam's legitimacy would thus be interpreted as deeply offensive, unethical and antagonistic. Such responses would most likely strengthen the existent ontological insecurity among the three countries, constituting evidence for Ethiopia in

terms of occupying a more hostile attitude towards Egypt and Sudan. That could in fact lead to a potentially more harmful and cautious situation, in which the relations become even more fragile. PM Zenawi's commentary on the previous lack of investments of Sudan and Egypt indicates a certain disappointment in their attitude to the dam: "Indeed, one might expect these countries to be prepared to share the cost in proportion to the gains that each State will derive."

Further on, critique regarding the oppressive conditions which Ethiopia has suffered from is discreetly raised by PM Zenawi:

"Before we mobilized our efforts to eradicate poverty, centuries of impoverishment curtailed our development and restricted us from exercising our right to use the resources of our own river". There is no particular designating, although the theme of injustice is being performed. To not accept the terms which the Ethiopian government offer the downstream Nile basin countries would thus be interpreted as a sign of maintenance of oppression, an expression of egoism and rivalry."

"Unfortunately, the necessary climate for engagement, based on equitable and constructive self-interest, does not exist at the moment. Indeed, the current disposition is to make attempts to undercut Ethiopia's efforts to secure funding to cover the cost of the project. We have, in fact, been forced to rely on our own savings alone to cover the expense."

The two quotations are interesting in the analysis of the Ethiopian meta narrative, the portraying of Ethiopia in relation to its counterparts. The speech constitutes two possible interpretations of Ethiopia's position in regard to Sudan's and Egypt's social interactions. The first one, which has been discussed previously, is the narrative regarding Ethiopia's successful management within the regional context; resulting in the desired legitimization of Ethiopia in transboundary water conflicts. The legitimization would also imply that Ethiopia constitutes a more equal actor in regard to Sudan and Egypt in terms of the *Great Ethiopian Renaissance Dam's* water distribution, considering their financial funding of 50 per cent. This would probably strengthen Ethiopia's ontological security in its identification of the leading State,

the controlling State. The regional power balance would, considering the realistic and positivistic scholarship, become more even, with Egypt no longer being the only controlling State in this issue. The sensation of ‘pride’ within the biographical narrative ought to be fulfilled. Nonetheless, comprehending the previous discussion whether confirmation of the self-identity necessarily implies a stronger ontological security long-term, such issues rest unsolved.

Alternatively, if the Egyptian and Sudanese responses do not correspond in alignment with Ethiopia’s perspective, that would probably lead to a more familiar self-identity. The speech’s references to historical and existent oppression, resulting in national impoverishment, indicates that the biographical narrative of Ethiopia to a large extent is influenced by these historical events. The process of ‘othering’ hostile States (i.e., potentially hostile States, based on their responses to the *Great Ethiopian Renaissance Dam*) is thus a consistent part of the Ethiopian narrative and discourse. By these means, the idea of the *nation* as a strong resistor to the hostile, outside threat, is emphasised. Thus, Ethiopia’s ontological security and self-identity could become intensified, providing the ‘self’ one or several given antagonists. This distinction could potentially affect the domestic debates to an extent, whereas the “outside threat” is uniting the domestic audience. The domestic discourse within Ethiopia has during the decades been questioned by its population, represented by a number of ethnic groups. Disputes regarding the national distribution and representation of power have marked Ethiopia’s history. The Eritrean – Ethiopian war in 1998 – 2000 constitutes one example. Another one is the conflict in the Tigray Region, seriously undermining the national stability. Additionally, the country suffers from the domestic pressure emerging from the non-democratic conditions. The dominant discourse is not necessarily legitimized by the domestic audience, or at least it remains uncertain, due to the limited freedom of speech. In summary, the *Great Ethiopian Renaissance Dam* might function as a contributing component and symbol within the idea of unity among the different groups of citizens – both for the Ethiopian audience as well as the foreign ones. Nonetheless, there appear to be no distinct evidence that the *Great Ethiopian Renaissance Dam* necessarily would have that particular impact on the domestic discourse. Instead, it seems like its predicted consequences in terms of safe water access as well as its energy capacity could become the crucial elements which will define the population’s opinions on the *Great Ethiopian Renaissance Dam*.

Considering Mitzen's perception of routines, the three countries' power asymmetry is heavily influenced by the British colonial era, resulting in an on-going struggle for each State's autobiographical narrative and identity. As previously mentioned, the hydro-hegemon, Egypt, possesses a significant advantage regarding the water distribution of the Nile River.

Regarding the causes for Ethiopia's and Sudan's frequently occurring famines and droughts, conflicts and unstable rain seasons are often mentioned. Nonetheless, safe access to water is most reasonably a component which would affect such course of events in a positive direction, putting Egypt in a complex and exposed position due to on due to its beneficial advantage regarding the Nile River. The mere foundation for the British State building of Sudan was in fact based on Egyptia's need of protecting their downstream channels to the Nile River as well as improving their irrigation in the south. Hence, Sudan constitutes a form of geographical and political mediator between Egypt and Ethiopia, both within the considerations of historical interactions as well as subjective perceptions of the nations. Due to the regional colonial history, Egypt gained and has been able to maintain its strong influence on the Nile River water distribution, whilst Ethiopia – often highlighting their history as a non-colonized State - has most certainly been limited in terms of the water distribution. Sudan has had the least strained relation to the Egypt and Ethiopia and seems to have difficulties defining its self-identity, considering its relatively weak position within a regional and global context (Zeitoun and Warner 2006, 460). Its national narrative – the 'self' - has not maintained a more prominent and consistent character - given the fact that Sudan (and South Sudan as well) has undergone long term disputes and conflicts, often drawn by ethnical and religious tensions. The civil war as well as the fragmentation in 2011 illustrate the lack of, and search for, one hegemonic biographical narrative.

5. Conclusions

The research question:

- *How does the Great Ethiopian Renaissance Dam affect Ethiopia's ontological security?*

The findings of this thesis are that the *Great Ethiopian Renaissance Dam* fills a function within Ethiopia's ontological security - as a representative symbol within the Ethiopian

narrative. The conclusions drawn from the analysis find the *Great Ethiopian Renaissance Dam* as a strengthening component within Ethiopia's self-identity, thus interpreted a sign of national pride as well as a shift within the regional power dynamics. Egypt's and Sudan's responses to the *Great Ethiopian Renaissance Dam* - may it be (1) acceptance and financial funding of the dam or (2) skepticism and hostile reactions – could thus be understood and logical according to the Ethiopian narrative of national dominance and success. The first response would strengthen the Ethiopian ontological security due to its confirmation of the existing Ethiopian narrative, portraying Ethiopia as a dominant and stabilizing actor within the regional politics.

Considering the domestic context, the dam would most likely strengthen the ontological security. This would presumably be the consequence of its physical functions and affects, providing the Ethiopian people a safe(r) water access as well as hydrological power capacities, which are necessary measures for the country's further development and prosperity. Although such consequences are within the traditional conceptualization of (physical) security – or perhaps because of the dam's physical importance and affects - the dam would most likely strengthen the ontological security. Nonetheless, the symbolic meaning of the dam might not necessarily affect the Ethiopians' sense of national unity, due to the strained tensions among ethnic and religious groups within the country. The national narrative is in fact constantly disputed despite – or as a contributing factor of – the non-democratic elements regarding the political distribution of power. Consequently, the domestic audience could interpret the dam's ontological meaning differently than the official, domestic discourse dictates, potentially resulting in an ontological insecurity within the domestic context despite the dam's meaning and representation regionally as well as internationally. The second response could also strengthen the Ethiopian ontological security due to its confirmation of the existing Ethiopian narrative, portraying Ethiopia as an oppressed, yet threatening, actor within the regional politics. This could contribute to Ethiopia's ontological security since their foreign policy 'routines' based on angst would become confirmed as legitimate and reasonable due to the hostile reactions of Egypt and Sudan. The physical risks if would imply to the Ethiopian State would most likely constitute as a confirmative element to the biographical narrative of Ethiopia as an oppressed state, contributing to the domestic discourse of Ethiopia as a safe spot in an unreliable world.

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