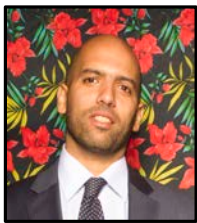


## The Nile Project: Music as Metaphor



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**Abstract:** The Nile project, founded in August 2011 by Mina Girgis and Ethiopian-American singer Meklit Hadero, brings together accomplished musicians from the Nile Basin countries, as a way of addressing the cultural and environmental challenges facing the countries of the Nile Basin.

*Keywords:* Music, Nile basin, Africa, cross-cultural connections

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The Nile Project was founded in August 2011 by Mina Girgis and Ethiopian-American singer Meklit Hadero as their unique way of addressing the cultural and environmental challenges facing the countries of the Nile Basin. The Nile is the longest river in the world and the eleven African nations through which it flows are home to some of the world's oldest cultures. Over many millennia, the reliable seasonal flow and overflow of the Nile has allowed farmers to produce grains and other crops that sustain those living in deserts well beyond the Nile. In centuries past, Nile fishermen caught and sold the once-plentiful Nile perch; traders transported goods to Nile countries from the Mediterranean, Europe and Asia; and boat owners brought scores of tourists to ports along the Nile.

In recent years, however, all has not been well in the Nile Basin. Its population has grown exponentially, changing climatic conditions have made the rains that feed the Nile increasingly unreliable, and regional politicians speak of countries that take more than their fair share of the Nile waters – waters that in times past were equitably shared. It has been said regional conflicts in some parts of the world, including Africa, will soon be “water wars”. If so, few parts of Africa would be as negatively impacted as the countries of the Nile Basin.

Girgis, who grew up in Egypt and studied hospitality administration and ethnomusicology in the United States, had the big idea of convening a musical “gathering” of accomplished musicians from the Nile Basin countries. Girgis describes the gathering of the musicians as “speed dating”. Much like that social-mating ritual, the musicians were put in groups for short periods of time and impelled to learn quickly about each other and each other’s musical tradition, then figure out how to make music together. The musicians brought together instruments and vocal styles differing in tone, pitch, and rhythm; Sudanese harps joined with Kenyan kettle drums while Ethiopian violins played beside Burundian thumb pianos and Egyptian flutes. Out of the initial cacophonies of sound, and to the delight of the musicians, came beautiful, exciting music that was turned into [The Nile Project’s highly acclaimed album, \*ASWAN\*](#). Alsarah, a musician from Sudan, described the musical synthesizing process: “We are creating a ‘Nile sound,’ not just country by country, but working together to create a new sound. It’s the joy of discovering older traditions that makes them new.” Girgis added, “It’s taking traditional instruments and doing non-traditional things with them.”



*The Nile Project performing for Penn State Paterno Fellows*



*Miles Jay at a Community Event in State College, PA*

The song [Sematimba ne Kikwabanga](#) is one example of that synthesis. Girgis sees The Nile Project as a novel initiative, using music to bridge the cultural gap not only among youth in the Nile Basin countries, but also between youth leaders in Africa and in the United States. His goals are, firstly, to bring Africa's music to

college students in the United States and, secondly, evoke engagement and collaboration among African and American peers on highly politicized issues like global climate and water issues.

In April 2014, The Nile Project spent a week in State College, Pennsylvania, on the University Park Campus of The Pennsylvania State University. Thanks to the enthusiasm and energy of Amy Vashaw, Director of Audience and Program Development of the Center for the Performing Arts, Penn State was one of twenty-five college campus communities that hosted The Nile Project musicians and staff during the academic year. The Nile Project musicians and artistic personnel brought both beautiful music and serious dialogue about water issues to the community, tapping the collective intelligence and creativity of groups from kindergarten and elementary school classes to graduate student seminars and teacher workshops. Mid-week the pace changed and a ticket-paying audience shook the walls and floor of Eisenhower Auditorium during a syncopated, hand-clapping, foot-stomping evening led by The Nile Project musicians and singers. The final event of the visit was a community get-together in the State College Borough Building in partnership with Sounds, a local nonprofit group dedicated to creating musical opportunities for State College residents. The Nile Project team and local residents of all ages were invited to bring their favorite instruments, hula hoops, and voices to play, sing, dance, meet, talk, eat, and learn from each other and about each other. The message is: we can, and must, work together to solve the problems facing Planet Earth, and enjoy ourselves as we do it.



*The Nile Project Musicians*

Photo credit: Peter Stanley

In a recent interview, Girgis was asked what he hoped The Nile Project would be doing ten years from now. He hoped there would no longer be a quirky, non-profit organization called The Nile Project. That's because Girgis believes today's youth will, by then, take the reins of leadership and challenge the world's politicians to listen to their people while respectfully embracing both the academic knowledge generated in institutions of higher education and the traditional knowledge of the many cultures of the world.

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