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

**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.
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 pa-
radise. In Ethiopia, the most important festival commemo-
rates 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 rit-
ual 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 Christia-
nity. 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 sea-
son ends. In the countryside before the rain starts in June,
animals have been regularly sacrificed to the Nile. The sac-
Rifice 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 suffi-
cient 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 hippo-
potamus and catfish. Today, the Woyto have converted to
Islam, but other Muslims do not view them as true believ-
ers 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
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 pro-
vides 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 exist-
ence, 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 be-
lieved 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.