

The River Nile * 1 – Looking Over De Nile

The River Nile bisects Uganda into 2 almost equal halves, from the southeast to the northwest. In the south it flows from Lake Victoria beside Jinja and exits in the north at Nimule on the Sudanese border. While Uganda is not as dependant upon the river as Egypt and Sudan, it is one of the major geographic features of the country. Uganda is one of nine riparian (owner of land along or near a river) countries, the others being; Ethiopia, Sudan, Egypt, Rwanda, Tanzania, Burundi, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Eritrea and Kenya.

The 'River Nile'. You don't get a River Amazon or a River Mississippi. The 'Mighty Nile' is in terms of volume, much smaller than many other major rivers; only 2% volume of the Amazon, 15% of the Mississippi, 20% of the Mekong; its flow is comparable to the Rhine. But there is special significance to this river both in the past and the present. Perhaps the most important river in the world, it certainly touches all of us with its history and mystic. There is no doubt that success or failure in managing its precious waters will spell success or disaster for the peaceful development of North Africa in the 21st century. Egypt is and was the "Gift of the Nile" (wrote Herodotus the Greek 'Father of History' who lived in the 5th century BCE) and its gifts of water and rich Ethiopian mud nurtured a civilization that flourished for almost 3000 years before the Roman Empire began. Its banks witnessed the dramas of Joseph and Moses, and the Holy Family found refuge there from Herod. Until the Aswan High Dam was constructed, the Nile rose and flooded the Nile valley every summer, and ancient people wondered why the river would swell during the hottest and driest time of the year. This wonder led naturally to the question about where the Nile originated.



Until recently it was known as the longest river in the world. The most distant source in 'river miles' being from a spring in the Nyungwe Forest in Rwanda which is 6,695km (approximately, depending on where the river mouth is defined) from where it reaches the Mediterranean Sea. In June 2007 a team of Brazilian scientists claimed to have found a new source for the Amazon starting in southern Peru, putting the source of that river 6,800km from the mouth. This debate could be ongoing – note that the University of Dallas Geology Dept. specify the length of the Nile as 6825 km.

It is the only large river that flows south to north and is also unusual in starting in volcanic highlands (of equatorial Africa) while the second half passes through the largest and most arid region on earth, the Sahara Desert, with its last tributary (the Atbara) joining it roughly halfway to the sea (most other great rivers join with other large streams as they approach the sea). On its journey from the centre to the north of Africa, the river passes through remarkable geographic diversity, matched only by the great diversity of different peoples living along its banks and the variation in flora and fauna to be found in the Nile basin. There is a huge catchment area of about 3,254,555 square kilometres (1,256,591 sq mi), about 10% of the area of Africa (From Wikipedia) and more then 1/3 of the total size of the USA.

The two great tributaries, the White Nile and Blue Nile, combine in Khartoum with the Atbara River attaching itself downstream below Shendi. The White Nile is the longer of the two principal branches. In Uganda the White Nile is divided into two sections. The 'Victoria Nile' flows from Lake Victoria, past our home at Bujagali Falls, through Lake Kyoga, then over Karuma and Kabarega (Murchison) Falls into Lake Albert. From there to the Sudanese border it is called the 'Albert Nile'. From Nimule it passes by Juba and becomes known as the Bahr al Jabal (River of the Mountain). For about 100km it crashes down through some spectacular white water sections and then levels out with the flow disappearing into a huge area of swampland known as the Sudd. This almost impregnable section finally drains into Lake No where it is joined by another river coming from the west call the Bahr al Ghazal or Bahr al Arab, which itself is 716 kilometres (445 mi) long. Just downstream from Lake No is the confluence of the Sorbat River. From there the Nile is known as the Bahr al Abyad, or White Nile, from the whitish clay suspended in its waters. The term "White Nile" is used in both a general sense, referring to the entire river above Khartoum, and a limited sense, the section between Lake No and Khartoum.

In Uganda there are 2 main branches of the Nile. Water from Lake Victoria flowing along the Victoria Nile meets waters from south-western Uganda at the north end of Lake Albert. The catchment area for this water is formed by the northern face of the Virunga Mountains, the eastern faces of the Ruwenzoris and the streams and rivers that wind their way to Lake Edward. Likewise the streams and small rivers between Mbarara and Fort Portal flow into Lake George and from there eventually flow down the Semliki River which in turn feeds Lake Albert.

The most distant watersheds for the Nile are located south of Uganda. The southernmost source is in Burundi where water from a spring over 2,000m above sea-level, on the slopes of Mt Kikizi, eventually flows into the Ruvubu River. The most distant source of the Nile (i.e. farthest from the Mediterranean following the water courses) is located in Rwanda on the slopes of Mt Bigugu. This furthestmost spring is over 2,960m high. Both watersheds flow into the Kagera River which runs along the Rwanda / Tanzania border and from there into Lake Victoria on its western shore.



The Blue Nile originates in the Ethiopian highlands above Lake Tana. After flowing out of the lake the river takes a huge 270 degree bend that takes in through the centre of the country following through a deep gorge, which extends for over 400km and is over 1500m deep for much of its length. The Blue Nile is not particularly blue (in Ethiopia it is called the Black 'Abbai') and could be referred to as the 'Summer River' – for much of the year it supplies little water to the Nile, but in summer the rainy season brings moisture laden winds from the Indian Ocean which are forced to rise over the high Ethiopian plateau (2km +). Unable to hold the evaporated water in the clouds, the summer monsoon rains lash the basalt lavas of the highlands, carve through the gorges and wash rich black silt down onto the floodplains of Sudan and Egypt. Because of this huge increase in flow the Blue Nile and the Atbara River contribute about 80% of the total volume of water that flows through northern Sudan and Egypt.

While we tend to think of the Nile as ancient, the section that we know in Uganda is relatively young. It was 'only' 12,000 years ago that the water level in Lake Victoria rose high enough to push through the rock wall at a point which became known as Rippon Falls. The river course that we now call the Victoria Nile slowly carved its way past Budhagali and north into the lowland areas of Lake Kyoga. In subsequent articles I will be looking at; how the Nile developed and evolved of time, exploration of the Nile, and the part that the Nile has played in the development of human civilization and the ways humans are developing it for the future.

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