



Artist Desaalegne Hailu Mazengiya, artist and visionary, is the initiator of *Children of the Nile*. Combining creativity with social purpose, he envisions a festival uniting Nile Basin communities through arts, culture, and dialogue. As storyteller, facilitator, and cultural steward, he transforms shared heritage into a living, participatory celebration of unity and identity.

Interview Responses for Artist Desaalegne Hailu Mazengiya

Theme: The Artistic Journey Behind Children of the Nile

1. The Beginning of the Journey

As the artist who initiated the Children of the Nile project, can you share when and how the idea first took shape in your mind?

The idea for *Children of the Nile* did not appear in a single moment, but rather grew over a lifetime of observing the river's profound role in our lives. Formally, it began to crystallize several years ago as I reflected on a paradox: the Nile is our greatest shared inheritance, yet we lack a platform that truly unites us in celebration of this fact. I envisioned a grand festival that would be a living tapestry, woven from the threads of our diverse cultures, our arts, our businesses, and our shared aspirations. It is an artistic concept on a civilizational scale.

What personal experiences or emotions inspired you to start this initiative?

My inspiration is deeply rooted in my identity as an Ethiopian and an African. The emotion is

a powerful blend of pride and responsibility. Pride in the ancient civilizations that flourished along this river, and a responsibility to the future generations who deserve a legacy of unity and prosperity, not one of conflict. I was driven by the belief that our shared identity as "Children of the Nile" is stronger than any border. This initiative is, at its heart, an act of love for our people and our land.

How did your background as an artist influence the way you envisioned the project?

An artist does not just see what is; we see what could be. My background allowed me to envision this not as a standard conference or political summit, but as a multi-sensory experience. Every performance, every exhibited craft, every business deal struck at the bazaar, and every conversation at the conference would be a stroke of paint on a vast collaborative canvas, collectively creating a new picture of regional unity. Artists are society's visionaries and cultural catalysts—they illuminate important issues, inspire reflection, and foster connection. In this project, my role as an artist allows me to create, connect, and evoke emotion, which becomes the engine for a shared vision of unity.

2. Bringing the Vision to Life

What role have you played personally in shaping and driving the project forward?

I have been the architect and the initial catalyst. My role began with defining the core vision and translating it into the comprehensive concept note you have seen. Through my foundation, the Bethlehem Ze-Ethiopia Humanity and Charitable Works Foundation, I have begun building crucial partnerships with government bodies, cultural institutions, and private sector leaders across the basin. Artists are not only creators but also educators and community builders; I see myself as the project's chief storyteller, articulating its soul and mission to every potential stakeholder to bring them into this collective dream.

What challenges and breakthroughs have you encountered as the artist behind this initiative?

The greatest challenge is shifting perceptions—moving from a narrative of competition over the Nile to one of collaboration because of the Nile. Each time a minister, an artist, or a business leader from another Nile country says, "Yes, I see it too. How can we help?"—that is a monumental breakthrough. It validates that the artistic vision resonates not only on a human level but also in social and diplomatic spheres. This aligns with the societal role of artists as agents of change, challenging norms and inspiring transformation.

How has your creative process evolved while working on *Children of the Nile*?

It has evolved from a solitary vision into a facilitative process. My creativity is no longer just about my own expression; it is about creating frameworks and conditions for thousands of others to express themselves. The project has shown me that the most beautiful art is co-created. Artists are facilitators of collective expression, and this festival is my largest and most important work of art—a living, breathing celebration of human potential.

3. The Power of Art in This Initiative

In what ways do you see art as a tool for healing, connection, and unity among the people of the Nile?

Art is our first language, long before diplomacy or commerce. It speaks directly to the heart. A traditional dance from South Sudan, a melody from Egypt, a painting from Uganda—these are not just performances; they are conversations. Artists serve as healers and unifiers; their work transcends politics and speaks to our shared humanity. In a region with a complex history, art enables healing, fosters connection, and bridges cultural divides.

How does your own art express the themes of the project?

My art has always revolved around themes of heritage, unity, and African identity. *Children of the Nile* is the ultimate manifestation of this. It is a multi-disciplinary, participatory installation on a grand scale. Every aspect of the festival—from the CATTHEM Expo to the Awards Gala—is designed as an artistic expression of these themes, creating a powerful narrative of a united and prosperous basin. Artists are also stewards of cultural identity, ensuring that our heritage is preserved and celebrated through creative expression.

Are there specific artistic mediums or styles you feel best capture the spirit of the Nile and its children?

No single medium can capture it all; that is why the festival is intentionally multi-faceted. However, the living arts—music, dance, and storytelling—are the most immediate and communal. The spirit of the Nile is also captured in the functional art of our craftspeople and the visual storytelling of our filmmakers. The blend of traditional and contemporary styles shows that our culture is dynamic, flowing, and alive.

4. Visual Storytelling and Film

Have you imagined or created any films or visual works that represent your vision for *Children of the Nile*?

Absolutely. The festival is conceived as a visual and experiential narrative. I have storyboarded key moments—the opening ceremony under the African sky, the vibrant colors of the bazar, the powerful faces of the artists in performance. While a definitive film has not yet been produced, the vision is clear. It will be an epic documentary following the journeys of participants—an artisan, a musician, an entrepreneur—showing how the Nile connects their stories. Artists are also storytellers and documenters, shaping culture through narrative and imagery.

Would you like to collaborate with filmmakers and artists from across the Nile Basin to tell this story together?

This is not just a desire; it is a necessity. The authenticity and power of this story depend on it being told through many lenses. I actively invite filmmakers, cinematographers, and visual artists from all 11 nations to co-create this narrative with us. We need a chorus of voices, not a solo.

Are there any existing artistic projects or films that inspire you or align with the vision you have?

I am inspired by large-scale cultural projects that celebrate pan-African identity, such as the Festival au Désert in Mali and the FESPACO film festival in Burkina Faso. In terms of film, I admire works that beautifully weave together landscape and people, such as documentaries exploring great rivers like the Amazon or the Mississippi, but our Nile story, told by us, will be truly unique.

5. The Future and Collective Creativity

How do you envision the future of Children of the Nile as a collaborative artistic movement?

I envision it blossoming into an annual pilgrimage of creativity and commerce for the entire basin. Artists from across the Nile will find collaborators, markets, and audiences, and our youth will see a future rooted in shared culture and innovation. This movement proves that collective creativity is our most valuable renewable resource.

What role do you see other artists, cultural institutions, and communities playing going forward?

Artists are visionaries and first ambassadors. Cultural institutions are guardians of our heritage and bridges between nations. Communities are the source of authenticity and the ultimate beneficiaries. Their role is to own this movement, populate it with their energy, and hold us accountable to the vision of a united Nile.

What message or feeling do you hope audiences take away from experiencing the art created through this initiative?

One word: Belonging. I want every participant, whether a head of state or visitor, to leave with pride and belonging to something greater than themselves. Art should not just entertain; it should transform, inspire hope, and remind us that we are more powerful together than we could ever be apart.

