



## Water: An Anthropological Contribution

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At a time when humanity is facing an environmental crisis that threatens the very existence of our planet, a growing number of anthropologists are using their knowledge and skills to identify more sustainable forms of human coexistence with nature, not least water. Water is clearly essential for life on earth, from the seawater that covers over 70 per cent of the earth's surface, to the freshwater that sustains all forms of life even though it makes up less than three per cent of the earth's water. In recent years, water has received more attention in public debate as well as scholarly research. With its vast knowledge of the human condition in different places and at different times, anthropology is well placed to deepen our knowledge of what water is all about.

Up through the twentieth century, anthropologists focused their writings on theoretical and methodological questions related to anthropology and published most of their work in anthropological journals. It was a time when disciplinary gatekeeping and policing of inter-disciplinary boundaries were common in the scholarly world and when small and young subjects felt a need to develop their own disciplines. Belonging to the smaller and less visible subjects within the social sciences (or in some of the universities – the humanities) anthropologists were particularly keen on profiling their discipline within the scholarly community, on the one hand, by highlighting the importance of anthropology's holistic approach and, on the other, by theorising its subfields (kinship and marriage systems, material culture, socio-environmental relations, rituals and religion, gift giving and relations of exchange, etc.) through publications in journals associated with their professional associations and institutions.

In the past 50 years, anthropology has grown from a small to a middle sized discipline in many universities and as the subject has gained scholarly recognition and leverage, researchers from not only neighbouring disciplines within the social sciences and the humanities, but also more hard-core disciplines such as medicine have taken interest in the subject's methodology and its alternative approach to social problems and cultural issues. At the same time, anthropologists have moved out of their disciplinary comfort zone and engaged in cross-disciplinary and applied research. Likewise, the growing number of students graduating from anthropological departments in both the Global North and Global South are making an important difference as they find employment outside the academia in both the public and the private sector.

The maturation of anthropology as a subject and the dissemination of its concepts and tools among scholars from other disciplines have repercussions for the way anthropologists create their professional networks, choose topics for their teaching and research, and

communicate the results of their work. Today a growing number of anthropologists participate in inter-disciplinary research projects and educational programs, and in some countries they have even become known figures in the public as communicators, commentators, op-ed contributors, etc. In a similar vein, many anthropologists now address research questions and investigate social issues that until a few decades ago were considered unimportant or irrelevant for anthropology.

One such topic is water – a physical substance which gave rise to scientific disciplines such as hydrology, oceanography, limnology, and glaciology in the twentieth century, but which evaded the attention of anthropologists for many years. Unlike soils, plants, animals, and other natural elements that have been central to anthropological studies since their inception, water was never a theme of importance to anthropology even though the “theory machine” of seawater had a critical impact on the thinking of classical anthropologists such as Bronislaw Malinowski, as Stefan Helmreich (2011) points out and even though irrigation and water management were issues of research by several renowned anthropologists (Geertz 1973; Kelly 1983). However, in recent years water has become an established field of research within the social sciences that not only complements the received wisdom of the natural sciences with studies of the social and cultural context in which water flows, but also questions their conception of the hydrological cycle as natural phenomenon and directs our attention to the way humans manipulate its circulation and ascribe social and cultural meaning to it. A growing number of anthropologists have taken up this challenge and a body of literature which investigates water as an anthropological subfield, is now emerging (Ballesteros 2019; Hastrup and Hastrup 2015; Orlove and Caton 2010; Strang 2015).

This special issue of *kritisk etnografi* – Swedish Journal of Anthropology contributes to this new wave of water studies with a collection of articles that examine ethnographically how water shapes and acquires life, socially as well as culturally, in a variety of historical and geographical settings. The six articles all deal with water as a liquid substance (unlike water’s other physical forms: ice and steam). However, due to their different perspectives on not only how water assumes social importance and is attributed cultural meaning but also the way it flows (hydrological cycles, sea tides, etc.) and changes chemical composition (from fresh water to seawater and back again) and material appearances (transparency, temperatures, etc.), their analytical focal points differ, which is reflected in the issue’s organisation and the articles’ order. Starting with a review of how humans throughout history have imagined water as a symbol of life and power, we move first to East Africa and then Scandinavia to explore the unseen in water as a spiritual force or material waste, and lastly to South America where we read about the multiple ways freshwater fashions indigenous people’s worldview and struggle to cope with both existential and socio-political challenges.

In the issue’s first article, Veronica Strang scrutinises water as a universal condition for human life and as a matter that circulates in all forms of societies. In the search for water’s existential serpent deities and the elemental and generative powers they symbolise and engage in, Strang explores water’s ‘conviviality’ which she argues has helped maintain highly sustainable lifeways, based on a comprehensive reading of historical, archaeological, and theological literature of water. Strang also suggests that this conviviality survives in contemporary indigenous and activist communities which are making use of traditional images and objects representing water beings and which use the meanings that these hold to critique the exploitative environmental practices imposed on their homelands by colonial

societies. The central questions of Strang's research are: what happens to water serpent deities and beliefs in nature beings when societies develop more instrumental technologies, such as shifting into agricultural modes of engagement? And can alternate worldviews assist societies in developing less anthropocentric ways of thinking about and engaging with the non-human world? Strang's point is that sacred water serpent beings provide a way of conceptualising the hydrological movements of water and its annual cycles so that societies can work with these and the material environment to maintain social and economic stability.

At par with Strang's work on water's social and metaphysical attributes, Paula Uimonen and Masimbi Hussein enquire into the spiritual relationality of the ocean. Reflecting on their preparatory fieldwork in a fishing community on the Swahili coast of Tanzania that has a long history of transoceanic connections, they explore the ocean's spiritual importance for the local population, examining how the spirits in the sea, especially around islands, rocks, and coral reefs, influence their daily activities and maritime perception. Similarly, they scrutinise how people's spirituality shapes rituals that revolve around prayers at low tide to get rid of something and at high tide to bring something back and which symbolically configures the ocean as a cleansing as well as protecting force. To conceptualise *Swahili ocean worlds*, Uimonen and Hussein employ what they call a pluriversal approach which implies studying "multiple worldings in an emergent world of many worlds" and which aims to go beyond the focus on materiality and sociality that prevails in other works of the anthropology of water, to interrogate the spirituality of the ocean in terms of spiritual beings as well as becomings. The pluriversality of Uimonen and Hussein's study opens a door to understand the spirituality of Swahili coastal communities, which constitutes a waterworld shared by both human and non-human beings and that links local people to not only faraway places but also the very power of divine creation.

If the ocean contains a world of invisible spiritual forces on the Swahili coast, what is hidden underwater in Stockholm offers a disturbing view into the city's environmental past, which has enticed young urbanites to use their diving skills to collect waste in the dark waters of lake Mälaren. In Rasmus Rodineliussen's article, the author demonstrates how these trash divers use images and videos uploaded to social media accounts to make the general public see the waste from below Stockholm's water and to create an awareness of the city's benign neglect of what for many years was considered a public secret. Rodineliussen's argument is that the divers' images and videos produce what Chloe Ahmann has called a "moral punctuation", that is a deliberate marking of time to highlight unaddressed sins of the past, to demand ethical action, and ultimately to force political action. In the article's account Rodineliussen, who conducted fieldwork as a practicing diver, takes the readers on a thrilling trip below the surface into Stockholm's murky waters in search of underwater waste, inviting them to share not only the divers' moral and political quest to clean Stockholm's maritime environment but also their embodied and sensorial encounter with the city's deep waters where hearing and touching are more valid means of navigation than vision and smelling. As Rodineliussen points out: "Had I not been able to dive, I would not have grasped how the divers' senses were rearranged in order to collect the trash". What is the next frontier of ethnographic fieldwork?

Humans' embodied interaction with water and in particular the way it is mediated by their sensorial engagement is also the topic of Malene Brandshaug's article, which investigates how an indigenous community in Peru's southern highlands relates to water

and environmental change in what the author coins “intimate ways”. It explores how the circulation of water connects people, soil, crops, and the nearby mountains that produce the meltwater the community relies on to irrigate their fields. Moreover, Brandshaug asks: what happens when the climate changes and there is less of the water that makes these human-non-human relations human relations? Inspired by the notion of water’s relationality and the concept of “bodies of water” that build on the idea that both human and non-human bodies are made up of water and linked by the circulation of water, the author argues that in Peru’s highland communities, water affects everything from language, emotions, and communal identity to economic and biophysical survival – a total social fact Brandshaug labels “aquasociality”. If we think relations as watery and follow the flow of water through different kinds of bodies, Brandshaug suggests, we understand humans’ worldly embeddedness through water and the way the human body is always more-than-human. Finally, Brandshaug proposes that the water scarcity following from climate change makes humans and non-humans a single suffering body.

Paerregaard’s study is not only situated in the same regional setting as Brandshaug’s field site, but it also deals with the same research question: how do Andean people manage the mountains’ meltwater and how does their fresh water supply become the central focal point of their cosmology? But while Brandshaug is preoccupied with her interlocutors’ personal relationship with water, Paerregaard’s concern is the offering ceremonies that Andean communities make to the mountain deities to ask them to release the flow of meltwater they are believed to control. Focusing on the material rather than the metaphysical aspects of the offering ceremony and drawing on the notion of water metabolism, the article scrutinises the ceremony’s temporal and spatial organisation and the social meaning of its offering items which, the author argues, Andean people perceive as a gift to the mountain deities and as essential ingredients in the metabolic process that produces the meltwater. Borrowing from Roy Rappaport’s study of the Kaiko ritual and the argument that culture plays an important role in environmental sustainability, Paerregaard suggests that at the heart of Andean offerings and their replica of water metabolism is a holistic worldview which perceives water as a substance that is enmeshed in human-non-human relations and therefore of vital importance for social life and the preservation of freshwater supplies anywhere in the world.

Martine Greek’s article takes us further south to the Chilean inland island of Isla Huapi that has been the site of the construction of the country’s largest off-grid solar power irrigation system. Like Brandshaug and Paerregaard, Greek’s article deals with indigenous people. The three authors also investigate the same research topic: freshwater. But while the former two examine this irrespective of its use, Greek’s focal point is the difference that water for irrigation and drinking water makes in the struggle the Mapuche inhabitants of Isla Huapi engage in to challenge the cultural prejudices they face in the Chilean society at large and which are reinforced by the lack of clean drinking water. For a long time, the island’s indigenous population have been asking the Chilean government to provide them with basic services such as electricity and clean water, and when the government finally constructed the island’s new irrigation infrastructure, they learnt that this can also be used to access the much-wanted drinking water. However, the slow progress of the infrastructure’s construction and implementation has affirmed the image of cultural backwardness of some islanders who are still waiting to get connected. Greek’s argument is therefore that water infrastructure has the capacity to both connect and disconnect and that the form in which freshwater is provided, as either water for irrigation or drinking water, constitutes a hallmark

of not only different consumption practices but also different socio-cultural identities. Seawater played a critical role in Malinowski's work, not only as a "theory machine" but also as an object of ethnographic research, which is evident in the study of magic and its importance for fishing on the Trobriand Islands. But even though water was omnipresent in the writings of Malinowski and other anthropologists in the discipline's formative period, it mostly served as a contextual parameter for their studies. In line with other recent anthropological works on water the six articles of this issue contribute to the development of an anthropology of water that seeks to understand not only how water frames ethnographic thinking and research but also the very nature of water and the intricate ways it moulds society and culture. Read them with gusto!

### References

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