

Guardians of water and memory; cultural heritage, traditional knowledge and the women's role in the appropriate use of water resources

Cirella A., Laureano P.

in

Hamdy A. (ed.), Sagardoy J.A. (ed.), El Kady M. (ed.), Quagliariello R. (ed.), Bogliotti C. (ed.).

Training of trainers in INtegration of Gender Dimension in water management in the Mediterranean region. INGEDI project

Bari : CIHEAM

Options Méditerranéennes : Série A. Séminaires Méditerranéens; n. 64

2004

pages 85-86

Article available on line / Article disponible en ligne à l'adresse :

<http://om.ciheam.org/article.php?IDPDF=6002383>

To cite this article / Pour citer cet article

Cirella A., Laureano P. **Guardians of water and memory; cultural heritage, traditional knowledge and the women's role in the appropriate use of water resources.** In : Hamdy A. (ed.), Sagardoy J.A. (ed.), El Kady M. (ed.), Quagliariello R. (ed.), Bogliotti C. (ed.). *Training of trainers in INtegration of Gender Dimension in water management in the Mediterranean region. INGEDI project.* Bari : CIHEAM, 2004. p. 85-86 (Options Méditerranéennes : Série A. Séminaires Méditerranéens; n. 64)



<http://www.ciheam.org/>
<http://om.ciheam.org/>

GUARDIANS OF WATER AND MEMORY; CULTURAL HERITAGE, TRADITIONAL KNOWLEDGE AND THE WOMEN'S ROLE IN THE APPROPRIATE USE OF WATER RESOURCES

A. Cirella* and P. Laureano*

* IPOGEA – Studies Center on Traditional and Local Uses, Matera, Italy
Email: ipogea@ipogea.org

The soil, i.e. the surface stratum produced by the constant action of chemical, physical and above all biological factors, together with water enables vegetal life which guarantees the protection of the territory and its continual regeneration. The surfaces without any protection undergo the aggression of the atmospheric agents and the eroding action of the wind or the rain which can become therefore destructive. The materials removed charge the wind with further abrasive particles and form the sands which contribute to the disappearance of the surface run-off waters and worsen drought. As a consequence, the processes of soil degradation and of biological and water impoverishment within an ever-increasing desertification cycle consolidate. Inappropriate human works such as the exploitation of water and vegetable resources, the monoculture, the aggression of the slopes and cimentification act as triggering or worsening factors of the process.

Suitable works stop the negative cycle intensifying the phenomenon of desertification and trigger the dynamics of sustainability. That is the way the traditional knowledge operates. By fitting themselves to the environmental dynamics over a long period they promote the correct management of soils, waters and energy resources. Landscapes are created by the local and environmental knowledge. All over the Mediterranean, human action has organized and moulded space by implementing a synthesis of nature and culture. The Mediterranean cultural heritage is characterised by a high interaction between the single site and the milieu, the architecture and the environment, art and society. Each exceptional site originates from this whole system which develops over the long period and the monuments emerge as notes of a more complex melody. The skills, the techniques and knowledge which gave rise to these monuments and which represent the qualities of the landscapes with an extraordinary aesthetic value universally assigned by Unesco to the category of the *cultural landscapes*, are spread out over the territory and used for managing the soils, building the rural architectures and organizing the urban centres. The appropriate use of the natural resources determines the architectural and environmental harmony of the cultural landscape, a symbiosis among the techniques for the space organisation, traditions, social habits and spiritual values as well as a synthesis of functions and beauty.

Women are the guardians of the historical memory and the processes for passing on knowledge. In African countries they guarantee the corves necessary to harvesting water and are responsible for the quality of water and its use in the household in village societies. In European countries women are the protagonists of the urban consumptions. However, in modern age women were expropriated from their role which was once assured by an interaction of symbolic, aesthetical and functional elements.

In oasis culture water is the life blood shared by the families: for this reason the jewel that is the symbol of fertility worn by Berber women around their necks features the stylisation in different shapes of the water distribution system. The Egyptian hieroglyphic *mes* that means 'to born' has the same shape, which confirms the very close connection between the oasis culture and the most ancient civilizations of the desert. The same drawing is reproduced on the pattern of the carpets, in women's hairstyles or it is tattooed on women's skin. The hairstyle marks the different phases of the women's growth closely linked to the agricultural practices and to the genesis of the oasis. At birth, the women's hairless head represents the original cosmic space. During childhood, girls have their heads shaven except for a single lock that is left in the middle of the head; the lock symbolizes the primordial land. During puberty, only a narrow shaved strip surrounds the hair growing in the middle of the head: it represents the salted and sterile ocean surrounding the land which is fertile but still untilld. As time passes, women keep their hair shaved around the circumference of the head, while the hair growing in the middle of the head is divided into locks by a median line reproducing the central canal of the irrigation systems. When a girl is ready for marriage her hair, no longer shaved

off, is divided into lines and thin tresses, representing the tilled land where the water flows through the irrigation canals. Married women gather their long hair in thick tresses: woman is now as fertile as the oasis.

The correspondence between the ego and the world establishes a pact between culture and nature. In the oasis the constant relationship between the microcosm and the macrocosm is not a metaphysical conceit but rather an ethical principle based on precise material needs.

Broadly speaking, women are responsible for providing the basic needs of their families such as water, fuel, child education and basic health care all of which are necessary to the well being of the family. The close association between women and natural resources exists because of their social and economic roles.

In the traditional system of the Sassi of Matera, the *vicinato* is not only a spontaneous articulation of cave-dwellings but rather it undertakes precise social and economic values assigned to it by the local culture. The *fogge*, cisterns and pits for grain storage, the tanks and the installations for the wool milling and for the skins treatment, the market and the economic heart of the town were placed inside the numerous *vicinati* dug out along the gravina. A crucial role within this social and psychological organisation is that of woman. She is the angel of the home who takes on her all the problems of cohabitation.

However, besides their social role women had an economic role because of a close association between women and natural resources. As matter of fact, they had the first responsibility for providing her family with the basic needs such as water. The big collective cistern for harvesting water represented quite the only place and moment for social and community exchanges all over the day, the place where the every day occurrences in people's life were narrated and became popular tales to pass on the future generations.

Early in the morning women went out for harvesting water for the household needs, for cooking and drinking, above all for men who worked in the fields until the end of the day. Water was collected and carried on the hand into an earthenware jar, reminding the hypogeal bell-shaped cisterns, which kept water cold all over the day. The use of a container with a narrow aperture and rounded edges that did not allow a single drop of the precious liquid to be wasted is the evidence a parsimonious usage of such a vital natural resource. With the same rituality as in the morning, women went out in the evening to discharge manure in the collectors. That was another time in women's day for meeting people of the *vicinato* and waiting for men coming back from the fields. In this agro-pastoral society women were also involved in all aspects of farming on the roof gardens, from seed selection and planting to water harvesting for breeding the animals. In dry season, the hypogeal rooms within the natural cave-dwellings work during the night as condensers of humidity which condenses in the final hypogeal cistern. The inclination allows sunrays to penetrate down the bottom. While, in summer time sunrays have a higher inclination and hit just only the entrance to the underground rooms which are kept fresh and humid. This technical solution has also a symbolic value: the encounter between the sun, the male element, and the earth, the female element, which generate water, i.e. life.

Another local traditional practice connected to water harvesting was the building of a cistern dug out of the rock to a 5-6 m. of depth for storing snow, which was collected and pressed under layers of straw until it became ice. Therefore, it could be stored and used for food conservation.

Nowadays, the safeguard of the traditional knowledge needs an attention on the recovering of the women's role as shareholders and guardians of ancient knowledge. As a matter of fact, any correct management and saving of water resources may be possible without the women's contribution. The involvement of woman through training programmes may ensure the safeguard of the cultural heritage and the saving of the water resources for a sustainable future.