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# WATER IN THE COLLECTIVE IMAGINATION OF ALL AGES AND VARIOUS CULTURES

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**SUMMARY** – Water is life with rich symbolism emphasizing the various aspects of these two elements. But no international Statement recognizes water as a common heritage of humanity. Water is indeed a social resource and consequently a basic common heritage for all human communities. These truths are found in the order of Nature itself, the varieties to be found therein and which bears an original characteristic print, interpreted by all those variously qualified to investigate it. So no aspect of reality, no attribute is insignificant, since this reality contains the whole deposit of all experimental facts, which can take into account certain aspects of things outside the single scientific perspective.

**Keywords:** history of water, religious and cultural characteristics

Water has nurtured a rich mythology: *transversal to time and space with frequent appeal to the Holy Scriptures of all religions or also to literature.*

Remember Homer?

the Ocean, generated by the clouds (Iliad XIV, 24 2)

And the beauty, incarnate of Venus, was that not also born of the sea?

Being born from the sea is the fortune of supreme beauty. Marine is the epiphany of Venus in the masterpiece by Botticelli, unassailable model of feminine grace.

The sea is the primigenial element: mystery of every birth, archetype of every possible significance.

Water, therefore, is the beginning of life, but it is also a principle of life, *a primordial force that generates, vivifies and regenerates*, as Pierre Thuillier states (Les mythes de l'eau, La recherche special Leau n.221, May 1990).

Nor is it just at the beginning of life that water exists.

In the mythological vision it accompanies us constantly in at least two further phases of our existence: *the purification of sin, the passage to the other world.*

There are a multitude of symbols about the water-life relationship that enhance the many aspects of these two elements.

The symbol is the sensible element able to reveal the supersensible and, thanks to its synthetical nature, in an incomparably more pertinent manner compared to analytical reason.

Water is life, but can also be eternity, death, but also instancy, weakness but also strength.

Omnipresent where there is life, it constitutes a favoured means of communication: through springs it tells of the depth of the earth, through the dew it becomes the delicate messenger of the Sky.

Nowadays the tendency is to demythologise in the name of scientific rigour, but the need for *omens that speak* can also be satisfied by the knowledge and historicisation of the myths which, indeed, are omens that speak.

H. Hesse in *Siddharta* simply and effectively describes how the omens that we could summon from the water cycle myth are precisely for everyone: *The river tended to its destination, Siddharta saw it speed by, that river that was made of himself and his parents and of all the men that he had ever seen, all the waves, all that water sped on, suffering, towards its destination.*

*Many destinations:*

- a. the waterfall,*
- b. the lake,*
- c. the rapids,*
- d. the sea.*

*and all the destinations were reached, and at each destination a new one followed, and from the water steam was generated and rose to the sky, it became rain and precipitated from the sky, it became a spring, stream, river, and again took up its march, again began to flow.*

And in an old hymn by Riq Veda *Water of life* we hear the same rhythm:

*Waters, you that give us the force of life.*

*Help us to find nourishment*

*So we shall have great joy.*

*Let us participate in the supreme delight of your vital lymph,*

*As though you were a loving mother,*

*Let us speed to the house of he*

*For whom you waters give us life, you that bring us into the world.*

Waters are mentioned more than 500 times in Veda

The waters (apah) are considered as the brides of a deity,

Invoked as mothers and adored as divinities in at least 4 hymns.

APAM NAPAT is a non-manifest deity, without shape since it precedes and is at the origin of creation itself.

Although born from the lap of the waters he is the son of himself.

And it became the germ of the plants, of the trees, of everything that lives and moves.

In some Vedic hymn Apan napat presents himself as the substitute of Varuna, who is the supreme god and the god of origins.

And also the god Prajapati of the successive Brahman ritual seems to be another way of saying Varuna and of saying apam *napat*.

*The religious sense approaches the originator with respect, with dedication: is faithful to that first giving of itself, is faithful to its infancy.*

The waters translate that deep sense of infancy on a religious level, they reconcile us with our infancy and with our mother, with that which is *without shape*, which is *genuine*, which does not allow itself to stiffen, beyond the technical vertigo of the security to which we tend in present-day culture, beyond the vertigo of our daily hypocrisy made up only of logic and steeped in thought without soul.

*Apam napat* are the waters of our birth, and the dawn of the world that precedes every other essentiality, and what we *feel* and *pre-feel*, not what we see by the light of day and control scientifically and logically.

In the end, it is necessary to recognise that among the various symbolisms, that of water must be reviewed as a preferred original, as a *world beyond the world*, just as archetypes are.

And the world of symbols and archetypes, being more fundamental than the habitual and ordinary world in which we live, translates the world of the imagination, of dreams, of the oneiric which connects life to death, leading to a real saturation of the religious sense.

The symbolism of the waters will allow us, in the end, to see the fate of our *egoism* in filigree, signalling a dynamic irruption into the static and rigid situation of the self.

That is what happens to *Benares* or *Varanasi* (Indian name).

Among the attributions of sacredness over 3000 years old thereabouts, water occupies a fundamental place if not indeed a place of priority.

Religious and symbolic culture, just as art and the forms of architecture and of the urban fabric, appear to be intimately linked there and the significance assumed by the waters of the powerful course of the River Ganges has permeated with its consciousness the whole life of the city over the centuries.

It is the archetypal sacred river. It is venerated as the mother giver of life (for this reason Indians call it the Ganga), symbol of fertility, inexorable matrix, source and origin of all the possibilities of existence.

But it is also a dangerous might, menacing and uncontrollable, so that it is believed that Shiva himself with his mane slowed down the ruinous descent of the waters when the goddess Ganga springing from the toe of the left foot of Viishnu precipitated from the celestial Ocean the original location of the primordial waters on the earth, with such force that it was able to provoke a catastrophe.

It is precisely out of the ambivalent nature embodied in the fascinating and tremendous power of the river that the character and significance of the sacred territory is established and the city takes its shape.

Having come from the sky, the Ganges is a strange river: *a sacred bridge to the divine*.  
In an ode to the river there appear 108 sacred names for the river.  
It washes, like other sacred rivers, spiritual and material impurities.

Moreover, on the basis of modern bacteriological research, it is saturated with antiseptic minerals that kill bacteria.

Going back in time to the ancient civilisation nearest to us the Magna Graecia, in contradiction of the legendary life of the Sibari area where the use of water was banned in favour of wine, indeed made to flow into the canteens by wine viaducts, the most recent archaeology shows how all the houses of the area were provided with a carefully built well which, drawing from the underlying water table, fulfilled the task of supplying the houses with the water required.

And the rivers were also at hand, nor was pollution to be feared: the 5<sup>th</sup> idyll of Theocritus compares the waters of the Sybaris (Coscile) to the sweetness of honey.

Springs and water courses, for the world of ancient Greece, the Magna Graecia and Rome, were the homes of divinities: lesser divinities if compared to those of Mt. Olympus, but much more present in the daily life of farmers, shepherds, woodmen and wayfarers.

With the advent of Christianity this veneration was cancelled, the sacredness of water was preserved in the rites of baptism and the washing of hands.

Baptismal sites and churches were built near to wells, and sometimes over them.

And St. Paul in his letter to the Ephesians speaks of purification with water, and with the Word.

Therefore states today cannot force us *venerate*; they take us beyond the market, into a world with a wealth of myths and legends, of cultures and festivities.

In Islamic cultures preliminary ablution to prayer is obligatory and weight is given to the ritual purity of the waters. Neither is there the lack of a special prayer for rain.

If the *Sura of the cow* of the KORAN recites *But give, O Muhammad, to believers and those who do good, the good news that there are Gardens in whose shade rivers run*, it is clear that rivers are a part of those Gardens destined to the believers.

Water belongs to life and humanity must fulfil the collective management of its use, preservation, and protection in respect of the right to life of all human beings and other living species, just as for future generations.

As much as it may seem paradoxical, this affirmation is not shared by the overwhelming majority of the ruling classes of the western world.

Neither national constitution nor international treaty recognises water as a common heritage belonging to humanity.

Everyone agrees on recognising water (rainwater, river water, groundwater) is a fundamental commodity for life, but *predominant wisdom* considers starting from the moment when there is human action to transform the water/resource into water/commodity or water/service, it must be mainly considered as an economic commodity, a commercial commodity, having a determined economic value depending on the *correct* market price and subject, therefore, to processes of appropriation and private uses.

Considering water mainly as an economic commodity is an ideological choice which favours, among the many aspects of water, that relative to the economic dimension, to the detriment of all other values.

This choice rests on the thesis, also ideological and not proven by the facts, of the superiority of market forces to any other mechanism (political regulation, cooperation, solidarity), since it is the mechanism of the regulation of the allocation of material and nonmaterial resources and of redistribution of the wealth produced.

This ideological choice can be accepted or rejected. But even its supporters cannot deny (excepting total blindness in the face of reality) that water is a resource which is the source of life, unique, special, and different in nature from all the others – *apart from the air and the sun* – which humans must have to satisfy their individual and collective needs.

Its uniqueness is, among other factors, connected to the fact that it cannot be substituted.

Coal can be substituted by petroleum, petroleum by nuclear energy; rice can be substituted by grain, or the train can be used rather than the plane.

A monetary economy can be practised just as an economy without money or indeed without prices (situation gratis).

But water cannot be substituted in life.

One of the inherent principles for the correct operation of market mechanisms is that commodities (production factors or products/services) are subject to substitution; from here arises the function of relative prices that reflect the value of bought utilities among interchangeable commodities and services.

To be able to choose among various commodities of a different or similar nature, but different in terms of price, quality et cetera, is fundamental for the market.

That is what, they say, is the freedom of the consumer and producer.

Now, making use of *water* is not a *question of choice*. *Everyone needs water*.

Owing to its *inability to be substituted*, water is therefore a fundamental commodity which cannot be subjected to any sectorial and partial principle of regulation, legitimation, and mercantile promotion.

In this sense, it is precisely a social resource and, consequently a basic common resource of any human community.

The fact, admitted but not conceded, that the offer of drinking water can be increased for whole countries by the desalination of sea water, just as one day it will be possible to produce synthetic water (artificially), does not change the nature of the problem.

Desalinated and synthetic water also remain a social resource. Whatever the source of obtaining water, it will always be a basic common resource belonging to humanity.

Access to water in sufficient quantity and quality for life – *estimated at around 50 litres daily per person for domestic use* – cannot be reduced to a need to satisfy a market as a function of individual usefulness. Instead it is a universal infeasible human right.

For example, why what we consider to be perfectly natural for our pet cat or dog – that is, the right to water (yet they do not belong to a trade union!) – should not apply also to human beings?

Nowadays a billion and a half people do not have access to drinking water; two billion do not benefit from hygienic and healthy systems and three billion do not benefit from any sewage water treatment.

The situation is unacceptable.

It risks becoming intolerable in the course of the next twenty years if present trends are not radically modified, especially regarding production methods (agriculture, in particular) that are destroying or greatly deteriorating the water resources of the planet because they are based on:

- a. intensive farming irrigation practices (at high water loss, heavy salinisation of the groundwater, etc.);
- b. pollution and contamination processes provoked by industrial activity and by unsuitable or inadequate management (or lack of management) of urban waste;
- c. excessive withdrawal of water owing to inefficient production, distribution and consumption systems;

- d. misadministration of the land allowing the frequent succession of great *natural* catastrophes (drought, floods, landslides, dam breaks...), ever more caused by the action of man.

The state of water in Italy is, in this respect, among the most worrying of the 15 European Union countries. Almost a third of Italians, largely represented by the people of southern Italy and the islands, do not have access to regular and sufficient water!

Let's return, now, to the fundamental issue of the question: accessing water is not a problem of choice.

The choice intervenes with regard to the method of access and use (surface waters or groundwater; appropriation or sharing of water; water for agriculture or for domestic requirements; tap water or bottled water...).

To assure every person and human group access to water to satisfy vital needs is a fundamental duty of society, whatever the cost. It should be taken for granted that common sense requires that the ingenuity, wisdom and ability of human societies should allow the maximum reduction of costs, above all of human, social, economic and environmental costs.

But human health is closely bound up with safe basic access to water. Let's remember the lack of its availability in minimum quantity/quality is at the origin of 70% of human illnesses in developing countries and that percentage rises to 85% in the poor countries of the world.

Currently 10000 human beings die every day because of the absence or the bad quality of water.

And it is an eloquent fact that no government, no international organization, no world high authority has yet proposed to three minutes silence every day in memory of these innocent victims of the economic-social barbarities of the world today and to observe this practice until such a time as the victims to the absence of the right to water continue to fall.

Theses on water as *blue gold* and on the inevitability of wars for water are dangerous oversimplifications.

The quantity of drinking water available on the Earth is ever more qualitatively reduced because of abuse and waste. It remains sufficient to assure the right to life for everyone, also in Africa, in Asia, in Latin America.

In these continents it is poverty that is at the origin of the scarcity and rarefaction of water.

Poverty and the non-sustainability of the current model of *development* are the main causes of the possible *world water crisis* on the horizon of 2015-2020.

Now the *world water crisis already exists*, as demonstrated by those billion and a half human beings who do not have access to drinking water.

The theory of a *world water crisis in 2015-2020* means that more than half of the world population (between 3.5 and 4 billion people out of a world population near to 8 billion) will not have access to drinking water and that for the remaining population water will have become ever more expensive, so that only 2 billion people (at most) will have the possibility of accessing water in a regular and sufficient way on the quantitative and qualitative level.

Most of the analyses about the causes of the *wars for water* place the main emphasis on the growing *hiatus* between the need for water (increasing) and the situations of penury or of limited offer.

Returning, now, in conclusion, to the more spiritual aspect of water, we cannot fail to see how water reveals our need for purity, for basic values, for transcendence.

The running, the flowing of water, its journey can be a metaphor of life and of its dramatic precariousness.

Observing water change colour to that which lies below or above it, it can be said that it resembles the soul of man who, according to his own needs and hopes, confers to water the same colour and specific languages.

Goethe in his *SONG OF THE SPIRITS OVER THE WATERS* compares the soul of man to the water:

The soul of man  
Is like the water:  
It comes from heaven,  
It returns to heaven,  
And down again  
To earth must go,  
Ever changing.

When from the high,  
Sheer wall of rock  
The pure stream gushes,  
It sprays its lovely vapour  
In billowing clouds  
Towards the smooth rock,  
And lightly received,  
It goes enshrouded,  
Softly hissing  
Down to the deep.

Cliffs tower,  
Opposing its fall.  
Annoyed, it foams  
Step by step  
Into the abyss.

In a flat bed  
It slinks down the grassy vale,  
And in the waveless lake  
All the stars  
Feast on their likeness.

Wind is the wave's  
Handsome suitor;  
Wind stirs up from the depths  
Foaming billows.

Soul of man,  
How like to the water!  
Fate of man,  
How like to the wind!

The colour of the water is the colour of the soul, it is the colour of our desire for life.  
The sound of water is the voice of our inextinguishable desire for life, of our irredeemable thirst.