

## *Chapter 1*

# **Water, Culture and Identity:**

## *Comparing Past and Present Traditions in the Nile Basin Region*

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### *Introduction*

From the past to the present, in hunter-gatherer societies, tribes, chiefdoms, states and civilisations, among nomads, pastoralists and agriculturalists; nobody has been indifferent to the water-world in which they lived, although fewer studies have analysed the pervasive role which water has always had and still has in society and religion. Water is not only a physical substance, biological necessity or scarce resource, but also an intrinsic part of people's identities, cultures, worldviews and religious perceptions of themselves and the Otherworld or the life thereafter. Water in its many facets matters for humans, while the social, cultural, ideological and religious roles of water include deep ontological relations and identities ranging from personal perceptions and gender relations, to rainmaking and fertility rites for the benefit of the whole society as well as perceptions of cosmological realms and religious beliefs. How and to what extent water constitutes and creates identities and social values and how different and changing water-environments and water-worlds have impacted traditions and cultural values are crucial to know in order to understand cultural change in a historic perspective. Without incorporating water as a relevant variable for understanding people's identities, cultures and religions in the past and present, one misses crucial aspects of historical agencies and structures at work in society and religion with implications for future developments.

### *Objectives*

The overall aim is to study a) why, how and to what extent water has formed and still constitutes parts of people's identity and core value sys-

tems in past and present regional traditions, societies and religions in the Nile Basin region in contextual and comparative contexts, and b) how and why water as a structuring agency has been institutionalised in various societies, giving legitimacy to continuity or change in cultures and traditions throughout history. This involves

a) particular case studies with regards to how people have used and still use water, and how different types of water have been and still are institutionalised in different ecological zones and in specific cultural and religious contexts,

b) analyses of how presence and absence of different water has been and still is used as symbols and attributed cultural significance and religious values, perceived as a fundamental source of life and prosperity, but also of death and devastation, and how and why water constitutes different identities and at which levels,

c) analyses of how water is institutionalised in different types of social organisations, creating continuity in societies and how rights to water and symbols of water are actively used to challenge existing hierarchies and structures, thereby creating cultural changes, and

d) a comparison of different sub-regional identities, where water is a basis for unity or conflict transcending or dividing other political units and social organisations in the Nile Basin region as a whole and its different ecological sub-regions.

Thus, by analysing water in the Nile Basin region, the main objective is to shed new light onto fundamental matters for humans by analysing parts of the processes which constitute people's identities and lives, aiming to provide a better understanding of the dynamics of continuity and change in the past and present with implications for the future. An understanding of how and why water constitutes identities and forms cultural values will enable new knowledge with historical importance which also renders possible other solutions and alternatives to today's challenges in the Nile Basin region.

### *Types of fresh waters*

Fresh water – the essence of life – occurs in many forms and hence, it is necessary to identify and distinguish what kinds of fresh water are where

at a given time in order to understand the role of water in history and development. Following the Nile from the south to the north, it is possible to distinguish between at least seven bodies or main sources and appearances of water in different ecological zones:

- 1) Rain in general, with a particular emphasis on rainforests and the seasonal rains.
- 2) Lakes, particularly the natural lakes such as the Great Lakes in Central Africa and artificial lakes such as Lake Nasser.
- 3) Swamps, in particular the Sudd in Sudan.
- 4) Rivers, as tributaries to the Nile and to the lakes.
- 5) Rivers, the White Nile, the Blue Nile and the Atbara River as separate rivers in different ecological zones.
- 6) The Nile as a single river, particularly in desert regions with emphasis on the annual inundation.
- 7) Oases, wells and groundwater in desert regions.

These main categories of water may exist exclusively in one region or there may be a combination of different water bodies at a certain place or in a region. Thus, in order to deepen the knowledge and understanding of the Nile Basin region as a whole and its sub-regions, it is crucial to identify and analyse what the past and present regions and traditions of water-worlds were and still are, how they differ and how they relate to each other.

### *Identity and regions*

The development of the Nile Basin region and its water challenges in the past as well as in the present and for the future is not only an economic or political question of distribution of limited water, but also involves people's identities and cultural and religious dimensions of water. Although engineering projects such as dam-building and development strategies procuring and securing sufficient and safe water are often seen as mere technological activities phrased in economic, health or welfare terms, interferences in the water-worlds also include changes in identities, traditions, cultures and religions. Various types of water have been culturally and religiously institutionalised and incorporated as part of peoples' lives in particular ways and in specific contexts in the different regions, traditions and water-worlds. Hence, in order to understand the economic and

political role of water and the development of the whole Nile region, it is necessary to include cultural and religious variables which highlight the importance of water, define different types of water and analyse the role of water in creating and maintaining identities, and for the development of societies.

People's ideas of themselves and their waters in the various water-worlds are not restricted and limited to national identities, but include a range of ecological zones transcending national borders. Therefore, identities where water is a fundamental component may today represent trans-national regions and broader cultural spheres, and the identification of such regions has not yet been undertaken. With such an undertaking it is possible to illuminate how and why water as a socioeconomic and cultural variable and identity either transcends or divides nations. In other words, to what extent does water represent a supra-identity transcending national identities, or at which level and regional basis does water play a fundamental role in identities, unifying or dividing people across today's national borders and other political units in the past? The ecological diversity of the Nile Basin region with its inherent varied worlds of water renders it impossible to identify certain shared values that can be used as symbols of identity uniting different populations living in the whole Nile Basin region, but it facilitates analyses of several distinctive water traditions in the basin's sub-regions, since different types of water are given particular values and importance. Both the usage of water and the degree of scarcity or abundance at a given time enable particular ecological adaptations, possibilities and problems. Hence, have the identities founded in the various water-worlds been and are they still the solutions to the development of the whole Nile Basin region, or have they been and are they still the problems for unity and sources of conflicts, since water is fundamental for everyone and deeply rooted in culture and tradition? Through a broad multi-disciplinary approach, it is possible to analyse these questions by comparing past and present water traditions in the Nile Basin region.

### *The importance of various types of water*

Although water is a scarce resource for the majority of the people concerned, the importance of which type of water and for what purposes it is used depends upon a wide range of industrial, economic, energy, cultural and religious practices. Albeit it is physically the same water, holy

water for rituals such as baptism, ablution or purification is in a different category than the Nile's annual inundation for irrigation, nomads' needs for oases or water stored in dams for hydro-electrical purposes. This highlights the importance of addressing how different types of water are attributed with specific characteristics and why. Water represents the one and the many at the same time, and the plurality of cultural institutionalisations and perceptions puts emphasis on water's structuring principles and processes. The life-giving water is one category of waters which have such structuring qualities.

The life-giving waters are in a special category because it highlights the human's essential and vital need for a specific type of water at a particular time whether for religious purposes, agriculture or daily survival. Thus, analyses of the importance of water in society have to incorporate the cultural and religious traditions through which humans act and reconstitute themselves and society.

What the crucial and life-giving waters are, why, and which type of water is available in a given society, are dependent upon but not limited to different types of organisations of societies, modes of subsistence or agricultural practices. Nevertheless, the climate, topography and hydrological circle – ecological variables which are beyond the control of humans, but which they nevertheless have to react upon – create diverse water-worlds where not only the amount of water but also the type of water varies. Some regions and places receive most or exclusively all of their waters from the river Nile; others receive most of the waters from the great lakes or as rain, or from a combination of these sources of water together with water from rivers, whereas oases and groundwater may be the only water source in desert regions. Hence, both the amount of water and how it annually reoccurs as rain, river or being present in lakes and oases influence and affect the way water is incorporated into people's lives and worldviews. Consequently, the ways in which the various water-worlds or waterscapes are used practically, interpreted symbolically and assigned values according to local and regional traditions and norms are a result of humans' continuous and meticulous interplay and mediation of cultural and natural variables.

### *Absence, presence and the first waters*

The absence and presence of different types of water sources and water bodies are of utmost importance to understand in order to grasp the cultural significance of water. The absence rather than the presence of water is equally or even more important and structuring in a given society or region. However, not all water is the right water and the problem is not restricted to the mere presence or absence of water. Too much water at the wrong time of the year is as bad as too little water when it is really needed. Neither in the social nor the natural world is water a single and uniform matter of life or phenomenon. The world of water often consists of a combination of various water bodies, and the interrelatedness and seasonal variability of these different types of water constitutes the waterscape in which people are living. Thus, different waters are attributed with specific qualities, capacities and values according to both ecological variables and cultural traditions. People's ideas of water and the way water is crucial for identities and values in a broader culture have to be seen in relation to which types of waters are absent and present, or in which combinations they occur at a given time, because the different waters and constellations are actively incorporated into the collective body of knowledge since water matters for humans at personal, societal and religious levels.

Total absence or presence of water through the whole year is of utmost importance when analysing water's structuring role in society. However, such situations are often anomalies, apart from e.g. in deserts, since absence is often followed by presence and this puts the emphasis on the first waters. The occurrence of the first waters in the hydrological circle and annual cycle, whether as rain or inundation, normally attains a special and particular role in societies and humans' perceptions of water, and this highlights the absence and presence of which type of water and when. In those sub-regions where there is scarcity and/or seasonal availability of water, e.g. the first rains or the Nile's annual inundation, such scarcity and limited availability give water extra socioeconomic reliance and significant cultural values. Hence, in different sub-regions of the Nile Basin, various types of water are incorporated into society and religion and the absence, presence and first occurrence of these water types are given particular meanings and structuring roles which enable one to identify different waters in regional, trans-national and ecological zones.

### *Water in culture and society*

Hydrologically, these bodies of water are interlinked since e.g. the amount of water in the rivers depends upon the annual precipitation. Culturally and practically, certain types of these waters can be people's exclusive or main source of water depending upon tradition, adaptation and economy, but most often there is a combination of these forms of water at a certain place. If there is only one life-artery in society, such as the Nile in Egypt, this water will attain a different meaning and role compared to places where there are multiple water-bodies which open up for flexibility in strategies and uses of water for different purposes and livelihoods. Thus, in order to understand the role of water in society or a particular region, case studies analysing the particular waterscapes and the combinations of different types of water are necessary. Not all types of water are seen as being equally important or relevant in society, and hence it is necessary to conceptualise which and why certain types of water are given importance in daily life but not others.

Moreover, even within these overall bodies of water, the water continuously changes character. The silent flow of the Nile is interrupted by the violent cataracts and rapids, but still it is the same water. The dew during chilled mornings is different from the water droplets after heavy rain. As waters from beneath rather than above, the water in oases and underground wells attains particular characteristics. The transformative capacities of water, which turns from a fluid substance into steam by cooking, a process parallel to the hydrological circle in nature, emphasise transgression and fluidity of borders and categories. These ever changing qualities, capacities and forms of water as well as the various types of water enable the substance to be a medium through which it is possible to express and negotiate social relations and problems, and people can communicate the world they live in to themselves and to the outer world. Hence, the role water plays in defining, maintaining and negotiating identities and cultural values works at many levels, which may either oppose and contradict each other or strengthen and highlight unity and solidarity within a community or between communities.

### *Water and religion*

Water has deep ontological values. Religions and divinities can both be understood through water symbolism, and the cosmological realms can

be expressed and defined by the gods, as perceived by humans, through water. In more than one way, water becomes holy as it represents the material element of the spiritual core of religion. In many religions in the Nile Basin, from the ancient Egyptians' pharaonic cosmology to Christianity's and Islam's rivers of Eden, cosmos is either made from primeval waters or else it links or unites the divine realms to this world. Thus, water or parts of the water in the hydrological circle belong to the divine realms; either linking gods to humans or being a medium through which humans can reach their gods. Humans' perceptions of water in religions influence how, why and which water can be used in what manner, and this impacts their actions and responses to changes in waterscapes. Moreover, water or certain types of bodies of water are often seen as a divine gift, and it is therefore important to understand and document which types of waters are seen as divine gifts and why these particular waters as opposed to other forms of water are attributed with divine or spiritual qualities. Consequently, the different bodies of holy water are used variously in religiously defined settings.

The reverence of different types of water as holy or the attribution of various degrees of sacredness to water has caused controversies between the religions. The change from traditional folklore or tribal religions to Christianity or Islam, or syncretistic variants of the religions as well as the replacement of Christianity by Islam or the mutual co-existence, interdependence and influence of different religions and traditions highlight the structuring role water has in societies as a deep and resilient element and fundament in humans' understanding of themselves and their place in the cosmos. Although this basis of social and religious core values has always been changing throughout history, the ontology of water has been and still is part of the fundament in society and religion. Importantly, water beliefs and rituals often overlap and transcend dogmatic beliefs and rites in "Great traditions" or world religions. Ancient practices or relics of traditional rituals and cosmologies have to a large extent been interwoven into Christianity and Islam by the believers. Thus, syncretic practices and beliefs are often anchored in perceptions of water, and "high religions" incorporate former water rituals and beliefs as part of the religion's central beliefs and core values. It is therefore crucial to see water not only as a physical substance, but as an actively incorporated agency in the dynamics of change in culture and religion in history, since it has had a fundamental role in people's beliefs, value systems and identities.

## *Water and identity*

Water constitutes identities and creates societies in many different ways, both as symbols but also as a primary agency in culture. Cultural variation is based upon similarities and differences at various levels, which may or may not coincide with ethnicity or political units such as states. From a water perspective, the various water-worlds and types of water may transcend or divide states, enabling other identities since political boundaries may not correspond to the cultural units. These identities have their point of departure in the very physicality of the different forms of water and the biological necessity of the daily water. Which types of water are present at a given time creates human practices, responses and solutions. The availability of water creates practices and organisations of collecting, distributing and sharing of water, particularly when there is scarcity of water. The importance of procuring the daily and life-giving water creates activities, and water is thus a structuring agency in society. By conducting the same practices on a daily, seasonal and annual basis, traditions are made and the collectiveness of practices creates values and norms at household, community and regional levels which may not represent a national identity. Nation-states aim to link the social organisation – the state – to a culture which corresponds to the territorial unit. However, today's states may consist of multiple water cultures or different layers of identities which may not relate to ethnicity, and these identities may transcend or divide the political and territorial units. These identities are based upon shared values and practices founded on daily activities, modes of livelihood and religious beliefs and rituals.

Traditionally, at a household level, collecting water has normally been the task of women, thus creating gender relations but also relations and divisions between different age groups of women. The seasonal agriculture cycle is dependent upon when the life-giving waters occur, structuring the whole community through collective practices including the sowing and harvesting of the crops as well as determining the type and amount of husbandry possible. In traditional societies it was often the leader's responsibility to ensure and provide sufficient waters for the welfare of the people, and the procurement of the life-giving waters included religious ceremonies, whether as rain-making or rituals securing the Nile's annual inundation. The chieftain or king was also most often responsible for the failure of the life-giving waters, with harvest failure or famines and possible deaths

of smaller or larger parts of the population being the consequence. The occurrence of the first waters was celebrated with religious and cultural festivals as well as other celebrations related to the agricultural cycle and syncretic water rituals as part of the world religions. All of these practices with implications for life and death created shared experiences, values and norms which constitute traditions and cultures to a greater or lesser extent. Shared social and religious experiences become core value systems when these experiences are structurally institutionalised into the body of collective knowledge through people's own identification of the importance of these practices and the values they attach to them. Consequently, in different water-worlds there are different traditions and cultural practices since they do not share the same experiences.

### *Power, tradition and cultural change*

The legitimisation of social structures and the change of traditions are inevitably connected to power. From the organisation of the women's queue at the water well early in the morning to the distribution of a certain quantity of water among households and clans which they may use for irrigation or husbandry, the scarcity of water is hierarchically structured where some receive more water than others. Wealth is thus intrinsically connected to power and hierarchies, which in the past culminated with the chieftain or king who, as responsible for procuring the life-giving waters, could be sacrificed for society's prosperity if he was unable to fulfil his water obligations towards his people.

From the highest level in a given society to internal gender relations within a household, water constitutes not only identities but also social organisations and hierarchies. Hence, there have always been struggles and contests regarding these structures at a given time within a specific social or political unity. By changing existing water structures in a society, this enables hierarchical mobility since legalised access to more water is converted into economic, social and political wealth. From taxation policies at a state level to redefinitions of rights at the local level to exploit more of a community's shared and limited water which enable certain persons more crops or husbandries, including internal hierarchies within such water units with regards to division and organisation of labour and/or exploitation, individuals aspiring for wealth and power may have particular interests in challenging existing water structures. Water is power

and consequently an agency in the constitution and continuity of societies, as well as a driving force for those who would like to change existing structures and traditions with subsequent implications for cultural change.

### *Water themes*

Through an interdisciplinary approach to identity, culture and religion with emphasis on archaeology, history, anthropology, folkloristic studies, science of religion and cultural sciences, it is possible to identify some overall time periods, societal complexity, and themes in a historic perspective in relation to the above mentioned main forms or bodies of water. Since water is interwoven in all kinds of social life and institutions, water as an approach opens up new insights into these themes:

- Economy, subsistence and livelihood, including prehistoric and historic aquatic adaptation, hunter-gatherers, nomads, pastoralists and agriculturalists, and how constellations of various livelihoods have influenced their perceptions of water and how water has been culturally institutionalised
- Identity and gender, with emphasis on how water defines identities and relations on an individual level, but also how water practices and beliefs structure families and households, including gender constructions and divisions of work between men and women and between different age and gender groups.
- Ideology and culture, including how water practices create common experiences from a household-, village- and clan-level to more supra-political units such as states, and how people's cultural understandings of themselves correspond, differ or transcend different types of social and political organisations.
- Religion and rites, including rainmaking rituals, prayers and hymns to rivers and other sources and types of water, and how water is used as a metaphor for understanding eschatological and cosmological principles of the world, divinities and the life and consequences hereafter.
- Transmission and transformation of tradition, with emphasis on how water through history has been a resilient bearer of tradition, but also how water has been actively used to transcend, bridge or challenge contradicting conceptions and values; i.e. how water has been a formative agency in the constitution of society and tradition by being used to (re)define core values and norms with which people identify themselves.

- Power and hierarchies, with emphasis on the formation and organisation of societies from household and village levels to tribes, chiefdoms and state levels, and how concepts of water as well as legal claims to water are used to legitimise, challenge and change hierarchies, social organisations and structures.

These overall types of societies and organisations, themes and different bodies of water enable comparative studies on how and why water has been a crucial and formative agency in history at personal, societal and religious levels in both the past and the present. By emphasising and comparing different people's understandings of themselves and their water-worlds in various and changing ecological settings through history, it is possible to identify and analyse in depth the role and meaning of water in the history of the Nile Basin region in contextual and comparative contexts. Water constitutes personal and collective identities at various levels. By analysing and comparing water in different sub-regions and ecological settings, one may identify cultural variables and identities which have transcended or divided political units and social organisations in the past and continue to do so in the present, with subsequent implications for the development of the Nile Basin region in the future.