

as a property of water-in-relation (to a stream bed, for example). I suspect archaeologists will benefit from looking for ways in which not-quite-the-same properties are in evidence in other contexts. If water is always in relation, we can expect new properties from new relations, even given the undeniable set of affective responses noted by Strang.

The site of Kissing Fish is deep in a gully on the west rim of the Rio Grande Gorge in northern New Mexico. A magnet for rock art, the north wall of the gully reveals many years and layers of this practice. Pecking the basalt rock surface is a relatively new practice, however – the action of water on stone provoked by powerful, intermittent run-off has sculpted the basalt into smoothed, curved shapes. As Edgeworth (2011) has noted, there has been a long-term relationship between special meanings and waters, especially sources, confluences and so on. Here we see such places repeatedly marked by rock art. But the rock art seems to respond to processes, not properties, mimicking movement rather than things. How can water continue to be good to think with in this context, but in a way that pushes us to think beyond what we perceive as the qualities that express its timeless properties? Can we think of the experience of water here as inseparable from that of rock? Rather than archaic foragers grappling with the question of the agentive capacities or properties of the rock or water, I suggest we think in terms of the properties of the phenomenon ‘rock/water’ as engendered by specific, embodied practices in this place.

There are good reasons for taking the properties of a substance as generative of potential meanings common to all people. In the case of water, it enables the types of scheme transfer envisaged by Strang and put to good effect by her. Water as agent presents us, as she shows, with an ethical dimension to the substance itself that is belied by talk of it as a ‘resource’. But I argue that we need also to keep pushing beyond universal notions of properties, experience and scheme transfer, however well these respond to pressing contemporary concerns. There are many waters, not only many meanings of water.

Note

- ¹ The Gorge Archaeological Project, directed by Severin Fowles (Columbia University).

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Holy water. The universal and the particular *Terje Oestigaard**

Veronica Strang’s ‘Fluid consistences. Material relationality in human engagements with water’ is a highly welcome theoretical discussion regarding the role of water in society and social theories. As a discussion article, Strang’s piece opens up a number of fields of enquiry where water empirically and theoretically challenges current theories, but given the limitations of an article

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there are still other spheres where water may contest dominant theories, and I will briefly address some of these aspects with an emphasis on holy water.

Strang's point of departure is current social theories challenging Cartesian dualisms, the apparent polarization between material-culture analyses and more phenomenological approaches, and the question of agency: whether things (in this case water) may have an agency on their own or whether agency is resulting from a combination of people and things. One problem with the above-mentioned theories and theorists is that they all in varying degrees work within the sociological tradition of Emile Durkheim (1858–1917), who stated that in the social and human sciences social facts can only be explained by other social variables (Durkheim 1966). C.P. Snow (1966) described this scientific divide as 'two cultures' – a universe of humanities as opposed to the natural sciences. Although material-culture studies and, for instance, actor-network theories include materiality and the role of nature (preferably in a modified form),

The name of the game is not to extend subjectivity to things, to treat humans like objects, to take machines for social actors, but *to avoid using* the subject–object distinction *at all* in order to talk about the folding of humans and nonhumans ... Science and technology are what *socialize* nonhumans to bear upon human relations (Latour 1999, 193–94, original emphasis).

Water, on the other hand, may enable an approach where 'it is possible to reconstruct, describe, delineate and understand its movement and role in nature and in society and at the same time evade the problems created both by natural or biological determinism and social constructionism' (Tvedt 2010, 146). The fluidity of water, always being universal and particular, may open up further entrances for understanding human engagement with the cultural and natural worlds, since water is always culture (including religion) and nature at the same time (Tvedt and Oestigaard 2010). In order to understand the religious role of water, one may distinguish between 'holy' and 'sacred'. In general, 'holy' and 'sacred' are often seen as identical and are used interchangeably, but the terms imply different relationships with the divine. Most people say 'holy water', but not 'sacred water', and this difference is important. Theoretically, 'holiness' refers to the Divinity and what is derived from the Divinity as attributes, whereas 'sacredness' points to consecrated items, 'respected or venerated objects but not the divine itself and not to persons as individuals'. Moreover, it is 'the holy Bible' but the 'sacred books of the East' (Oxtoby 1987, 434).

Although a small fraction of all people on Earth do not believe in any religion, and many believe in science, including those who develop social theories excluding the agency of holy water, the majority of the world's population believe in holy water in its various forms, whether they are Hindus, Christians or Muslims or belong to any other denomination. Among the Hindus, the most sacred festival is the Kumbh Mela, which is held every twelve years in Allahabad, on the confluence of the Ganges, the Yamuna and the mythical, subterranean Saraswati River. It is a 42-day pilgrim festival. In 2001 it was estimated that between 50 and 70 million people came to this sacred confluence, in 2013 more than 100 million. They shared one

aim: to erase their sins by bathing in holy water. On a smaller scale within Christianity, the holy waters of Lourdes in France are annually visited by some 5 million pilgrims. As nature, holy water is the same water in the hydrological cycle as any other water, but its significance is fundamentally different: it works because it is holy. Being culture, religion and nature at the same time, it has agency.

Understanding the nature and character of holy water is essential not only for challenging dichotomies like culture and nature and the Cartesian concept of body and mind, but also for understanding specific practices in, for instance, Hinduism or Christianity. The caste system is built upon notions that water transmits purity and impurity; one single drop of water may challenge high-caste status if the giver is impure (low-caste). Sin may therefore be seen as a bio-moral phenomenon and fluid (Parry 1994, 127), and impure water may threaten both the body and the soul's purity. The purity of body and mind is the same, and affected by the status of the giver.

However, the relation between ritual purity and ritual impurity, on the one hand, and physical purity and physical impurity, on the other hand, is not straightforward. Holy rivers in Nepal and India are often notoriously polluted despite being the most holy and ritually pure. Cleaning of physically polluted rivers has often been challenged because of the intimate relation between nature (physicality) and religion (purity). The logic is simple, but also challenges Western dichotomies: if the water is holy and has the capacity to transfer and transform human impurity (sin) into purity, it has also the capacity to transform physical impurity into purity (i.e. a clean river). If the rivers do not have the capacity to transform physical impurity into purity, they may not have the religious capacity to do so spiritually either. In a similar vein, if engineers clean a river mechanically and chemically, it might be physical pure but not spiritually, since this was due to human, and not divine, interventions (Oestigaard 2005). Holy water has agency, particularly since it is holy, otherwise it would only have been neutral water, but even 'secular' water from a religious point of view embodies other qualities and capacities, as Strang points out.

Such notions of holy water are not restricted to Hinduism, but are also found in Christianity. Not only is baptismal water seen as holy among Catholics, offering protection against the Devil as well as enabling divine interactions, but also holy water has throughout the ages been used for a wide range of apotropaic and other purposes (Oestigaard 2013). Concepts of holy water also challenge Cartesian dualisms which originated in Christian contexts. With regard to the most holy River Jordan, despite being highly polluted, the Latin patriarch vicar general of Jordan explained in 2013,

There is a distinction between the physical state of water and the sacred realm. From a religious perspective it does not matter whether the water is dense or light, clear or cloudy, polluted or not polluted. This does not touch upon the aspect of faith . . . Pollution is a Western concern, it is Cartesian. Descartes's influence stopped on the northern shores of the Mediterranean (Châtel 2014, 225).

Water transcends Western concepts.

Thus, although just a few brief examples, these point to the fact that water can be seen as both universal and particular, always in flux and always culture (or religion) and nature at the same time, but in different forms and shapes at various points in history and specific contexts. It is fundamental not only for understanding society but also for challenging common theories. The ‘water’ blindness of many of these theories is obvious, but what is perhaps more striking is that they do not hold water, so to speak, when empirically scrutinized. This is also one of the great strengths of Veronica Strang’s article: she uses a Western context and empirical material to challenge theories which to a large extent are based on Western premises and horizons of understanding. As Strang has shown, ‘secular’ water in Australia is intimately interwoven in numerous spheres transcending existing theories and conceptions; by including ‘profane’ or holy water, even in Christianity, this picture is further challenged. Thus, in all cultural and historical contexts, since water is always culture and nature and in flux, and every human at every point in time in history has depended upon water, water studies may enable new understandings of what has mattered the most to all people throughout history.

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Contributaries. From confusion to confluence in the matter of water and agency *Veronica Strang*

I am happy to see that my essay has generated a lively discussion, and am most grateful to the respondents for their insightful contributions. Their comments express varying levels of agreement regarding the agency of things. Vernon Scarborough revisits anxieties about whether agency implies intentionality. Using the term ‘agency’ is indeed problematic if we assume that it entails sentience or intentionality (and I do not), but if we define it more precisely as a capacity to act (upon), it is possible to excise intentionality from the equation. This simultaneously allows us to acknowledge the agentive capacities of things without proposing or implying a form of *faux* animism. Anthropology has indeed drawn imaginatively on specifically cultural beliefs and knowledges, for example in composing more relational visions of human–other interactions than Western science tends to allow (see Strang 2006a), but this is not tantamount to assuming that things contain spiritual presence, or have ‘their own *sense* of agency’.

Matt Edgeworth observes, however, that things do have ‘power’ to act upon each other and upon us. For him, material agency is a product of energies and forces, and his nice description of the ‘wrestle’ of human–non-human engagement highlights the reality that it is the material properties of things that define what they bring to the match. Water does indeed illustrate the materiality of power (or the power of materiality) particularly well, but I would suggest that even more static things, such as ‘museum cabinet’