



## ***The Wateriness of Everyday Life in a Turkish Delta***

by Caterina Scaramelli

### **Introduction**

Humans inhabit liquid worlds.

Anthropologists have long argued that water is fundamental to constituting social relations—in ways that are ritual, material, symbolic, and sensorial (for recent examples, see Strang 2004; Krause 2010; Orlove and Caton 2010; Limbert 2001; Anand 2011). In the last decades, water has become a metaphor for fluid identities and relations (Busby 2000; Nelson 1999; Moore 2012; Carsten 2011), and for global flows of capital, commodities, and culture (cf. Féaux de la Croix 2011; Krause 2014). Water, then, continues to provide metaphors for social theory (Helmreich 2011). And as anthropologists of science have questioned the putative material essence of water, scholars have analyzed the various logics, forms of expertise, and relations that constitute water's materiality, flow and quality (e.g. Barnes 2014; Carse 2014).

As “modern water” (Linton 2010) has come under anthropological and historical scrutiny, many have also underlined the ways in which power and inequalities are manifested through the control of water flows (Swyngedouw 2005). The old question, that of water and social power, has gained renewed salience in a contemporary moment of accelerated climate change and neoliberal regimes of water distribution.

An anthropology of water and beyond foregrounds liquid relationalities—and it engages with material movements of water, the infrastructures of flow, the entanglements of water and place-making, and the knowledge practices that ascribe value and political weight to water.

In this short piece, I draw, fluidly, from my ethnographic notes to reflect upon everyday social relations in, of, and around water in a Turkish rural delta. This produces, I argue, ethnography made richer by attention to sensuous details, multiple agencies, and an analytical attention to practices. I also emphasize the things that water carries—fish, fertilizers, boats, sediments, lactose, fat, anthropologists.

### **April 2015: water domains in the domus**

I have been living in Avni Koparan's family farm—on and off—for the last year and a half. My comings and goings are tidal, synchronic with cycles of research funding and findings, and with research trips in other parts of Turkey. The summer is weeks away, but the mornings are already sweltering. Looking synoptically at Google Earth photography, we are only steps away from Cernek Lake, one of the largest wetland lakes on the delta (Fig 1). The maze of canals in the delta moves through a landscape of pastures, rice paddies, and farms, and some lead through reedbeds into the open waters of the lake.



Google Earth view of Cernek Lake and its surrounding farmhouses

Within the farm compound (Fig 2), it is easy to forget the ubiquitous seeping presence of wetland waters, lakes, and canals—flows of water that are always produced and mediated by infrastructural interventions, political debates, and social relations. These are also watery settings for complex entanglements of human and non-human lives. And the controlled movements of water are fundamental to the very survival of the farm: for instance, the delicate balancing of irrigation, chemicals, seeds, rain, soil, and drainage, orchestrated by Avni, his sons and nephews, and the workers he hires seasonally, will determine the success of the rice season.



Home in Doğanca, hosted by the Koparan's family (C. Scaramelli. 2016)

And water, from the city supply, allows Avni's wife Hatice and their daughter-in-law, with their Georgian helper, to cook, clean, and sustain multiple social and kinship ties. Water is used to irrigate the vegetables in the family plot, which feed the family (Fig 3). I try to help with planting, weeding, and irrigating—"make a circle around the plant, don't wet the leaves, or else it will die in the sun," Hatice instructs me, as I clumsily maneuver a heavy hose, connected to stackable irrigation pipes and then to the water pump at the nearby well.



Thirsty tomato seedlings in the Koparan family garden  
(C. Scaramelli, 2017)

Water is essential to the dairy economy of the family, too. In the mornings, Hatice, her youngest son, and a hired shepherd carefully feed, clean, tend to and milk the family's water buffaloes (Fig 4). Hatice then skillfully turns the bulk of the milk into yogurt, cheese, and cream—and bottles the rest in recycled Coca Cola bottles, to be sold to customers in Bafra. Washing the milking jugs and bottles with plenty of tap water and detergent is a task fit for the visiting anthropologist—I am scared of lifting the heavy cauldron of boiling milk from the stove.



Water buffalo calf (C. Scaramelli 2016)

## June 2017: Watery temporalities of rice

Planting season. The men are outside day and night, leveling the rice paddies. As tractors need maintenance, taxed by the heavy workload, trips to the mechanic shop in Bafra are frequent. Dikes and sets are repaired, built, and inspected, in anticipation of the flows of irrigation water. Avni and his workers oversee the order in which rice fields will be filled with water, and the changing water levels, in a delicate dance with the rice seeds: enough water for the seeds to sprout, and the seedling to take hold, without being washed away. Clouds, ripe with rainwater, add another level to the choreography of fields, seeds, and agrotechnology, for rain will influence when the fields will be irrigated and planted.

One evening Avni takes me on his tractor to bring a bag of groceries to the “water man,” who is bunked in a trailer at the edge of the rice paddies, a twenty-minute drive from the farm. He navigates the maze of country roads and canal access tracks, and talks to me about the history of infrastructural development and shifting land property regimes that, in the last two decades, created this landscape (Fig 5). On the way back, Avni reflects upon the difficulty of coordinating decision-making with his relatives and workers dispersed in the rice paddy landscapes, and with the cloudy, rainy skies. Every day of delay with rice planting is a large economic burden for the farm. We are already running late this year, he nervously explains (Fig 6).



Rice fields, photographed from Avni's moving tractor (C. Scaramelli 2017)



Going with Avni on his tractor to examine the preparation work on the rice fields (C. Scaramelli, 2017)

We are late for dinner, too. We are approaching the time of *iftar*, breaking the day's fast. Avni's wife rushes us to get showered and changed and we run to the kitchen, where the other women and I ladle steaming bowls of soup at the call to prayer—streamed on the daughter-in-law's phone (she has a slick *Ramadan* app), slightly out of sync with the village mosque's *ezan*.

## July 2014 Fishing Lives at the Water's Edge

I have been living near the edge of lake Cernek, only a five-minute drive away, but the lake is not as easy to get to and to navigate as I had initially thought. Not for a woman, at least. But my father's visit to Doğanca provides me with a perfect companion for a lake expedition. A few phone calls and texts with a fisherman, with whom my hosts here have connected me, and I convince him to take me on board for the day. I am waiting at the side of the road, with my father and two local environmental advocates—one of whom had been involved in declaring the delta a conservation area in the 1990s.

I see them on the boat, far away on the other side of the lake: two fishermen (Fig 7). I cannot help but wonder, am I being stood up on account of my company? Finally, the fishermen approach, cautiously. There has been a misunderstanding concerning the place where we were supposed to meet. My father and I take off our shoes, and wade through the soft mud to get to a small rowboat, equipped with a rusty engine. Soon, in the middle of the lake, we will run out of gas.

The two fishermen row to retrieve their fyke nets (*pinter*), marked with the empty water or milk jug they are attached to. To retrieve them, they pull them up by hand, a strenuous job I know from my fishing trips in the Izmir bay, where fishermen use the same nets to catch sepia (Fig 8). As they take up the net, they disentangle the freshwater crayfish (*kerevit*), and throw weeds, debris, and small fish back into the lake. Then, they throw the net back in the water again, making sure it is attached to its floating marker.

As we fill the boat with crates of crayfish, and the fisherman who is rowing seems to struggle controlling the boat, I wonder whether we will capsized into the lake (Fig 9). The lake surface today is calm and warm, and the lake is shallow enough to wade through, but in the winter, the freezing cold waters and the strong winds can be deadly.



Cerneke lake (G. Demirer, 2015)



Throwing pinter nets (C. Scaramelli, 2014)



Fishing for Kerevit (c C. Scaramelli, 2014)

## Conclusion: Multiple Waters

To live, work, and conduct research in the Kızılırmak delta, as in any other delta, is to know its waters (Fig 10). Consider the different waters one encounters: the mighty Black Sea, slowly eroding away the coast; the Kızılırmak river, now in large sections constrained in stone walls, flowing into the sea; networks of canals, of different sizes, carrying irrigation water from the dams upstream; flows of drainage water rife with pesticides and fertilizers pouring out from the fields; the delta's lakes, which only fishermen and reedcutters (and a few scientists) really know at all times of the day and through the seasons; groundwater, which seeps into the fields, and which feeds the house wells and also the wetland ecosystems; water in the mudlands and meadows, which the water buffaloes so love, and which provides the essential ingredient for healthy and biodiverse wetland ecologies; water in the air: rain, fog, snow, clouds, fundamental to the work rhythms of farmers, and to the feeling of being in the delta in all seasons; water pipes from Bafra flowing in the villagers' house taps (nobody buys bottled water here!).



Corn field in the Yılmaz household, Doğanca (C. Scaramelli, 2014)

Water is always both natural and cultural, and easily defies the already problematic boundaries of nature-culture (Fig 11). In a delta saturated with water of different kinds, knowing and working with these different kinds of water, for different purposes, and in different ways, is central to everyone's livelihood. This is why we pay attention to the everyday practices through which people perform their knowledge and valuation of water: not just the way they talk about water, or waters, plural, but what they actually do in practice. We can think about water, then, as one of the centers of practice, discourse, values, and aesthetics that connect all the people who live and work in the delta.



Wet meadows and koga (*Juncus acutus*) in the Kızılırmak delta (C. Scaramelli, 2016)

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