



Water Research and Teaching at the Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology, Goethe University Frankfurt by Karlheinz Cless

Water is a renewable resource, which is universally and generously available. Its clean, safe and humanly usable form, however, is becoming increasingly scarce, which leads to the death of millions of people, mostly children and disadvantaged. This scarcity creates conflicts over usage, and raises questions about control and responsibility. It provokes debates about human rights and policies for management, and the role of communities, governments, global institutions and private investments.

We need to better understand usage patterns, attitudes and consciousness with regard to water, along with the roles played by education, the medical profession, religion, politics, legalities, and global organizations (governmental, charitable, commercial) in relation to water supply and consumption. This requires a multidisciplinary approach involving natural, political, social and human sciences, from both theoretical and political fields.

With this in mind Prof. Dr. Hans Peter Hahn and the Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology at the Goethe University in Frankfurt/Main researches and teaches around the subject of water as a life essential, its social dimensions, and as a material that connects people, cultures and their global complex entanglements (Hahn et al 2012, p.23ff).

Workshop “People at the Well”

The department inaugurated this research focus with a workshop titled “People at the Well. Kinds of Water and its Usages”, organized by Hans Peter Hahn, Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology, Goethe University Frankfurt, Jens Soentgen, Wissenschaftszentrum Umwelt, University Augsburg and Karlheinz Cless, also from the Frankfurt Department, on September 23 and 24, 2010. The event gathered a number of highly recognized experts from various disciplines, in particular, as a keynote speaker, Richard Wilk, Anthropologist from Indiana University, whose research focuses on the USA, West Africa and Belize, who worked for UNICEF and USAID, and who published “Bottled Water. The Pure Commodity in the Age of Branding” (Wilk, 2006). He explained how people in different cultures develop meanings around water, how water develops magic and how these meanings are used by the bottled water industry to build up the image and personality of their brands for marketing. He criticized how this magic is used to commercialize water and lead to waste and unnecessary environmental effects through transport and packaging. Further participants included, among others, Akhil Gupta, Professor of Anthropology at UCLA (University of California, Los Angeles), as well as Petra Döll, Professor of Hydrology at Goethe University Frankfurt. The latter is a contributor to the IPCC (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change) at the UN, and added her perspective on climate-change-related projections regarding the future supply of rain and water, including regional modeling.

Among the contributions were topics such as “Water Magic” (Wilk), “Water as Substance and Meaning” (Hahn), “Dew” as a particular form of water (Soentgen), and “Virtual Water and Water Footprints” as a phenomenon related to globalization (Meissner). Consumption, production and income generation in Ghana were covered by Eguavoen and Cless. The workshop topics also covered regional issues from Mumbai (Anand), Amazonia (Hilbert), and Tamil Nadu, India (Weiz).

Together they gave deep insights into religious meanings, art, agricultural usages, water management, politics, control, development, and commercialization. They covered rural and metropolitan contexts as well as water-rich and water-scarce regions. In this way the workshop also enabled the participants to recognize numerous regional and interdisciplinary connections.

While existing literature focused primarily on macro perspectives, i.e. water politics, the workshop and subsequent research seeks to better understand the differences between various kinds of water, their specific usages, and the resulting cultural meanings in culturally specific contexts. The micro perspective is a precondition in order to properly understand the rationality of particular water usages. How are different kinds of water and their qualities perceived? How are they differentiated and used? How are cultural differences influencing perceptions and usages? How are such differences influencing the usage of mineral water, tap-water, rainwater, seawater, water from wells, treated, boiled and recycled water?

Throughout the workshop, it became obvious that all life is deeply connected with water, and water is deeply connected with anthropology. We cannot think of water without thinking of the people, the ways in which they use water, their perceptions of water, and the resulting meanings associated with water. In our (Western) cultures we take water as a given, because we are used to turning on the tap and consuming it. We hardly think of its origin and value. We only start thinking about and becoming conscious of water when there is either too much or not enough.

As all living creatures consist predominantly of water, there is no life without water. At the same time, we recognize that water is never just H₂O. It is a peculiar substance, which by itself is not even scientifically fully understood and still subject of research and debate. At the same time, it is always “enriched” with minerals, chemicals, bacteria and viruses, as well as with myths and religious meanings, and loaded with positive or negative additions or connotations. The contributions to the workshop were published in an edited volume (Hahn et al. 2012).

Over the years up until 2014, Karlheinz Cless concluded his own research in semi-arid regions of Ghana, India and China, finished his dissertation, and published the results in “Menschen am Brunnen. Ethnologische Perspektiven zum Umgang mit Wasser” (2014). It shows the cultural differences in the perception, usage and meanings of water, their complex entanglements, and the social relevance of habits and practices. It is also intended to contribute to the appreciation of water and offer ideas for future research.

Teaching Water Anthropology

Since 2013 the Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology offers a seminar on water under the heading “Water is life”. Since 2014 the department offers a seminar titled “Water: Control and Commercialization”. For the first time the format includes contributions from outside organizations. The content of this seminar ranges from commercialization, through bottled water and its industry, private vs. public water supply, to include projects of the German development organizations, control through dams, and consequences for the affected people. It benefits from contributions, participation and cooperations with ZEF, Bonn (<https://www.zef.de/zefhome>), DELTA, University of Cologne (<http://www.delta.uni-koeln.de>), Bundesamt für Gewässerkunde, Koblenz (German Federal Institute of Hydrology, <http://www.bafg.de/EN>), ISOE (Institut für Sozial-Ökologische Forschung, Frankfurt, <http://www.isoe.de/>), GIZ (Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit, <https://www.giz.de>), Hassia Mineralbrunnen (<https://www.hassia.com>) and Nestle Waters (<http://www.nestle-waters.com>).

One central theme underlying the seminar revolves around the process and consequences of water commercialization. Aggravated by climate change and environmental pollution, water in its humanly safe, clean and consumable form is becoming increasingly scarce. This leads to vulnerability, distress, and conflicts over availability, usage and control. With increasing scarcity, things and materials very generally increase in value and in terms of how much they are appreciated, and often become commodities with prices attached to them. This process is increasingly happening with regard water. Despite recognizing safe drinking water as a human right, it is unclear how this right can be broadly realized, given to people and achieved by everybody. How far do the responsibilities of governments, NGOs, companies and organizations reach towards attaining this goal, and where do the responsibilities of individuals, families and communities start? As a natural resource, water has to be free of charge or at least affordable for everybody. But what is a fair price or charge for the provision, cleaning, transport, investment in and maintenance of infrastructure to make water accessible?

The seminar recently taught at Goethe University has three fundamental objectives. First, it enables the students to gain a greater appreciation of water as a substance and material, which in turn is a precondition for its careful use and a contribution against its increasing commodification. Furthermore, it supports the participants in developing an understanding of the cultural dimensions of each and every activity in the water sector, and to learn that water usage and provision always has a cultural dimension beyond functionality. Finally, it also has an applied dimension for social and cultural anthropologists. The seminar is an attempt to open the minds of the students to various fields in which anthropological insight can be useful and applied beyond science and academia.

The students prepare each session through their own research about the subject based on literature, publications, information available online and empirical data. They present their findings for information and discussion. In this way the participants are prepared for the expert covering their subject in the following session.

Of particular interest and relevance are the sessions and discussions around dams and their cultural dimensions. Dam projects have typically been discussed in terms of their ecological, financial, control and economic benefit aspects. More recently, cultural aspects including loss of subsistence, territory, knowledge, and cultural and religious grounding have increasingly been recognized as equally relevant. In this field, it is vital to do better research, to understand and consider the cultural traumata of individuals, families and communities while they learn to adopt new lifestyles, professions, and ways of living in new environments. Another subject that is generally interesting for course participants has always been the handling of risk associated with water, floods, and high or low water levels in and around rivers or river deltas. It was very eye-opening to recognize the culturally different perceptions and handling of risks associated with floods and flood warnings, on both an individual and a community level. These insights in turn are relevant for programs planned and implemented in the context of international development projects.

A particular feature are cities and agglomerations and their particular challenges for water in society. The socio-ecological systems and dimensions are changing permanently and require historical research and considerations. Understanding infrastructure historically leads to better cultural understanding of religious and ritual forms as well as lifestyles. In this context the research of informal settlements and their infrastructural challenges leads to a better comprehension of communities, social interaction, and relations between authorities, bureaucracy and individuals.

A further instructive project that is discussed during our visit to ISOE (Institute of Socio Ecological Research) is CUVE Waters (<http://www.cuvewaters.net>), implemented in Namibia to help store, recycle and efficiently use (through drop irrigation) water in semi-arid conditions. In cooperation with the University of Darmstadt and local authorities, new technologies are implemented and used. Planning, cooperation, implementation and sustainability involve a deep understanding of local cultures, and experience shows that more ethno-

graphic research during project preparation and implementation could improve project results.

The sessions about myth, religion and art make students aware of the deep cultural meanings associated with water. They create awareness of our own superficial, technical and functional perception of water because of its universal and easy availability. It provokes a rethinking of our own habits and behavior related to the usage of water. It also leads to a rethinking of water planning recommendations.

The seminar participants' visits to the company offices of Hassia and Nestle take the participants in yet another investigative direction. Hassia, as a major local provider of bottled water, helps them to understand the source and the origin of mineral water, as well as issues such as quality control, production, and also the long history of selling water in clay pots. Nestle, often criticized for commercialization, exploitation of natural resources, and profiteering from a common good, point to their own dependence on the availability of safe drinking water for their business model.

The seminar is popular and enjoys favorable comments from its participants and the student council because of its practical aspects and its orientation beyond classic university and science fields, through which it offers professional perspectives.

References

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