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# PEOPLE AT THE WELL

*Kinds, Usages and Meanings of Water  
in a Global Perspective*

Campus



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# Introduction

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Water is a renewable resource, which occurs everywhere on earth, and in many places even in abundance. In its clean and humanly safe and usable form, however, it is becoming increasingly scarce. Water is not always available in sufficient quantity or quality at the right time and to all people. Dirty water and a lack of water are considered responsible for the death of millions of people, primarily children and adults in economically disadvantaged situations and regions. Concerns around the increasing pollution of drinking water, acute problems of supply and droughts threatening agriculture and sometimes leading to famine have sensitized the public around the world to the extraordinary value of this precious resource. The aim of this book is to point out the value, importance and meanings of water. At the same time it is meant as a contribution to a better understanding of valuations of water, its many uses and conflicts concerning access to this precious substance.

Questions concerning which use of water receives priority, which value is attributed to the resource and, more generally, how water is perceived will be dealt with using case studies from around the world. The common starting point for these studies is the assumption that water is subject to multiple, often contradictory valuations. Any perspective which reduces water to a problem of supply or to questions of value and price will fall short of understanding the social and cultural valuations of water. Equally problematic is the reduction of water to being just a carrier of meanings, religious convictions or symbols and rituals, which would involve an exclusively culturalistic argumentation. Water is more than either of these approaches. It always represents both the need to use water and the desire to view it as meaningful or even holy. Both contexts are connected and intertwined and can only be disclosed and discovered through detailed studies of specific cases.

There is no life without water. All life has its origin in water, and many myths dealing with the creation of the world have life come into existence from water. This is true also in a scientific perspective, as the origin of the

biosphere on planet earth can only be explained with reference to the particular attributes of water. It is therefore no surprise that the appropriate uses of water, the *right*, i.e. socially accepted dealings and its related meanings are always culturally grounded. Each culture has conflicts and processes of negotiations about legitimate uses relative to inappropriate uses. Water is not only the foundation of life. It also gives structure to societies and cultures, as well as defining, in various ways, the rhythm of everyday life and rituals.

## Water is full of contradictions

What is water and how can we comprehend it? On an initial level this is a question of water as a natural substance. But even on the level of material description it is obvious that water is hardly ever just  $H_2O$ . Water is a complex material with unusual and sometimes extraordinary characteristics, for example, concerning its behavior at various temperatures. Therefore it requires an assessment from a phenomenological perspective, including the macroscopic level of perceptions. The history of research on water and its characteristics is central to the development of the modern natural sciences, and in particular for the history of the science of materials (*Stoffwissenschaften*) (Needham 2010; Ball 2010).

In his contribution to this book, Klaus Ruthenberg describes the *discovery* of the structure of water more in detail. He develops his argument that the characteristics of water cannot only be discovered analytically, i.e. on the atomic and molecular levels. Rather, there are numerous essential characteristics, like color, viscosity, capacity and absorption of temperature, which are only observable on the macro level. Chemical analysis as such is insufficient to understand even the most basic properties of water. Water reveals its characteristics only in a complementary perspective between micro- and macro-analyses. This reference is important for the overall objective of this book, because it refers to the necessity of connecting different approaches from a wide range of disciplines.

Water is more than a mixture of two chemical elements in a liquid aggregate state. Only as steam or distillate can water be close to pure  $H_2O$ . Otherwise it always contains other substances and ingredients, which are either beneficial or harmful. Many characteristics of water only develop through these additives, which also decide whether the water is appropriate for con-

sumption or agriculture. *Pure* water is neither appropriate for consumption nor of high value in agriculture. Therefore, it is legitimate to assume that these additives substantially contribute to the foundational role of water in many ecosystems, and that these additives facilitate an infinite field of economic activities for human beings.

Water is many different things at the same time. These differences often include contradictory evaluations. A certain kind of water with a specific meaning may achieve a particular relevance which appears to be acceptable only for certain people, but is ignored or rejected by many others. This contradictory character of water is not only valid for distant or old cultures, but also, and no less, for present-day consumer societies. This becomes obvious when looking at valuations and appreciations of certain kinds of bottled water. Although water comes free of charge or at a very low price from a tap, a fountain or a well, people spend money for water in bottles or from mineral springs or spas. There is another example of such contradictions in the daily use of water worth mentioning here: though on the rational level the importance of washing and cleaning for personal hygiene and health is well understood, in reality it is often forgotten.

Water is life and is full of meanings. But it is also a complex and contradictory substance. The collection of papers in this book refers to case studies from various disciplines in the cultural sciences. The cases studies all demonstrate the characteristics just mentioned. At the same time, they are explicitly selected in order to avoid a Eurocentric perspective, conveying rather a global perspective. They are based on philosophical reflections, findings from the natural sciences and hydrological discoveries, as well as ethnographic, archaeological and historical observations. All case studies document local knowledge and specific water-related experiences in order to acquire a better understanding of local uses and use patterns. The volume thus presents an interdisciplinary mosaic of the intriguing, amazing and wondrous world of water. In each case study, the entanglements of appreciations of water, its uses and meanings are at the center of the considerations.