

Heavens, Havens, and Hells of Water: Life and Death in Society and Religion

*Terje Oestigaard*¹

TRANSCENDING CULTURE AND NATURE: BRIDGING GOD AND HUMANITY

The interface between humanity and water is central to a range of ideas and cultural traditions. The dual character of water as nature, on the one hand, and as an element that humans need to drink in order to live, on the other hand, gives water a special role in cultural and religious constructions. What emerges very clearly is how the transformative character of water, which constantly changes between its solid form, liquid, and as vapour, is forcefully used in cultural constructions. This can be seen in a more general way. The evaporation of water, especially by cooking, highlights the transformative borders of humanity. The difference between raw and cooked is what distinguishes culture from nature. Humans create their bodies through consumption of food cooked in water. A culture's cuisine may be seen to be created from water. It is culture, but also nature; it is never either or, but always both.² It is everything in between the extremes, and binary oppositions can be elaborated on, using water as a medium. Water can always be found at the bottom of social and cultural constructions upon which new constructions are made and modified. Since water is an integral component in innumerable spheres, most facets of humanity have water as a cultural

dimension. This is a universal aspect common throughout history, and, because of this shared variable, it is possible to compare humans cross-culturally, regardless of time periods or social complexity.³

The religious and cultural use of water to express essential truths of humanity, and the relation between humans and gods, differ within world religions, traditional folklores, and tribal religions. The theological development in Christianity during the Middle Ages was, to a large extent, the separation between water and fire as cleansing agents. Water purifies, and it was a remedy against sin in this world, first through the deluge, and then by baptism. Fire purges, and it was a more powerful remedy reserved for the Otherworld, either in purgatory or hell. Water is not only an Otherworldly concern, but an integral part of rites and penances. By comparing different uses and variables of water in Christianity, Hinduism, and Buddhism, with empirical cases studies from Medieval Europe, contemporary India, Nepal, and Bangladesh, the importance of water will be illuminated as a life-giving process in changing environments and cosmologies.

SIN AND SOTERIOLOGY: BAPTISM AND DELUGE

Symbolism of water often implies both death and rebirth. In the Christian baptism, the initiate dies in water, and is then reborn from it in the Kingdom of God.

Immersion in water symbolizes a return to the pre-formal, a total regeneration, a new birth, for immersion means a dissolution of forms, a reintegration into the formlessness of pre-existence; and emerging from the water is a repetition of the act of creation in which form was first experienced. Every contact with water implies regeneration: first because dissolution is succeeded by a 'new birth', and then because immersion fertilizes, increases the potential of life and creation.⁴

By the thirteenth century, baptism was expected to take place within the first week of birth. According to the Church, the ceremony

was absolutely necessary for salvation, and children who died before baptism were usually consigned to a state of limbo, where they would be perpetually denied the sight of God.

Baptism was not only a saving rite; it played a crucial role in ‘proving’ witches in the European medieval period through the water test, or float test. If the woman did not float, then it was believed that the holy water accepted her. If the water rejected the woman, then she was a witch, and burnt at the stake. Water and fire are distinctive elements, but sometimes they fulfil a similar function, and sometimes they are most useful when they are combined. The baptism of fire is in the New Testament called baptism in the Spirit, and this baptism is distinct from water baptism. Matthew refers to John the Baptist, who said:

I indeed baptise you with water unto repentance: but he that cometh after me is mightier than I, whose shoes I am not worthy to bear: he shall baptise you with the Holy Ghost, and with fire.⁵

Baptism meant cleansing from sin and full involvement in Christ—His death and burial as well as His resurrection of life.

Fire came to be important in the symbolic system of Purgatory, and became the ultimate symbol of the doctrine *par excellence*. However, in the earlier versions of purgatory, which is even evident in Dante’s descriptions of the eternal tournaments, fire is coupled with water. The symbolic pair of water and fire in hell and purgatory is represented in the different locales where the penalties took place: one fiery, the other damp, one hot, the other cold, one in flames, the other frozen, one in rain of fire. The trial where the deceased was subject to purgatory was not a simple passing through fire; it involved passing in succession through fire, and then through water.

Then there is the deluge. Rather than the Flood being perceived as a hostile and destructive force, it became a ‘type’ of saving rite of baptism. This theme occurs frequently in the Bible. Again and again, the world emerges purified from the Flood. The Flood cleansed the sins of the world, and some medieval theologians made the comparison explicit by stating that the Flood is ‘the baptism of the world’. Moreover,



FIGURE 8.1: Gustave Doré's visualisation of 'Canto XIV: The violent, tortured in rain of fire' (Dante, *The Divine Comedy*, Stockholm, 1876)⁶

the deluge was also believed to be boiling hot. Although the deluge is normally connected to the Flood, as late as the seventeenth century it was also believed that there would be a deluge of fire in the future at doomsday. In short, the eschatological development in Christianity during the Middle Ages was, to a large extent, the separation between water and fire as cleansing agents. Water purifies, and it was a remedy against sin in this world; first, through the deluge, and then by baptism. Fire purges, and it was a more powerful remedy reserved for the Otherworld, either in purgatory or hell, or at doomsday.⁷

CASTES AND CREMATION: PROCREATION AND FERTILISATION

Crucial in the study of water in religion is to conceptualise the different variables and types of water to which people give importance. Water

images and conceptualisations of religion are depended upon, but not restricted to, the physical environment that people inhabit. The physical environment is a holy and cosmological landscape invested with divine meanings. Peoples' worldviews of themselves, and their gods, are a product of this relation between nature, society, and water.

Consider the society in India. The caste system is a social organisation based on transactions of water. The caste system is the most persistent social organisation that has been created; it still exists, and it is, probably, at least 2500 years old. The basic principle is: pure people cannot receive water from impure people. Water and people are one—they are indistinguishable. The fluid character of water enables constructions that equalise humans with their exteriors. The body is a bio-moral substance, which can be transferred onto water. A sinful or polluted person transfers his or her qualities to the water in both positive and negative ways. It is possible to cleanse oneself with water, but also to pollute others by the very same medium. The clarity of fresh water enables notions of purity and pollution, which are inevitably bound up to the water as an organism. Although the caste system as a social principle is abolished in theory and by law, the actual social practices communicated and differentiated by the use of water are longstanding and difficult to change. The pervasive role of water in society, as a structuring principle and means of controlling people, is because water is a very efficacious metaphor and symbol when people explain themselves and the world they live in.

Water is, therefore, also an integral part in religions and rituals. Good water is praised and bad water is banned. The procurement and control of water is not only a realm for humans, but also a divine project. In many religions, cosmos is created from water. Cosmogony—the continuous re-creation of cosmos, gods, and humans—is dependent upon water, and the gods create, maintain, and guarantee humans' life and prosperity by the presence of sufficient and good waters on earth. The intimate relation between gods and humans are seen in rainmaking rituals. Humans are dependent upon the water, and if the seasonal rain does not come when due, the gods are invoked to create

water. Turning absence into presence is an enterprise that necessitates all cosmic forces. Rainmaking rituals are sacrifices to the gods by humans for the return of water for harvest and further life. The divine control of water guarantees the almighty and supreme powers of the gods, since they control people's wellbeing, and their life and death, by the presence or absence of water.

Water and fire provide perhaps the most substantial contradiction, but in Hinduism they are actually complementary. Logically, one calls for the other; sexually, one desires the other. In *Rig-Veda* there can be found hymns where Agni is the son of waters. Fire represents metaphorically the sun, which is associated with male qualities, while water is the moon, associated with female qualities. Moreover, when rain is viewed as the semen of heaven, it is usually personified and attributed as male, and it takes on a male character. The quality and the experience of fluidity and pliability as a source of the creative unconsciousness cannot be emphasised enough.⁸ Earth is seen as female, and ploughing has male sexual attributions, by which the earth is injected and becomes fertile in the form of successful harvests⁹

Regarding the elements of sacrifice, according to *Rig-Veda*: 'The same water travels up and down day after day. While the rain-clouds enliven the earth, the flames enliven the sky'; or, in other words, rain falls from the sun in the sky in return for fire and flames from sacrifices performed on earth.¹⁰ Parjanya, the personification of the rain cloud, is often represented as a male animal, usually a bull. He is closely associated with thunder and lightning, and produces fertility in cows, mares, and women.¹¹ This is not restricted to ordinary sacrifices. In some texts, the deceased is referred to as a person who enters the smoke of the cremation pyre, becomes clouds and rain, then vegetables, and, if eaten, sperm.¹² Death gives life.

Cremation is generally perceived as the most auspicious funeral practice among Hindus. The fire digests the body, but cool water is given to the corpse, either by bathing or immersion before the cremation, in order to try to control the ritual. Finally, the corpse is returned to the river as ashes. The ashes are often referred to as 'bones'. Bones are the product of the father's semen, and thus a source of future fertility,



FIGURE 8.2: Immersion of ashes into Bagmati River, Pashupatinath, Nepal

and the cremation destroys what one has to get rid of: sin and female flesh.¹³ The bones immersed in the female river are therefore a kind of sexual intercourse that creates new life. Water and fire have also other metaphorical connections. *Agni* is not burning the corpse, but cooking it. Cooking is regarded as the opposite of eating, and raises the corpse to a higher state (to heaven), whereas eating reduces the dead body to a lower state (to animals). Thus Agni prepares the corpse for the gods by cooking it.¹⁴

RIVER AND RAIN: THE WATERS OF LIFE AND DEATH

Tibetan Buddhism has four main funeral practices: air burials, water burials, cremations, and inhumations. In Manang, a small mountain village in Nepal situated in the high Himalayas at 3500 metres, the area receives only some 400–600 mm precipitation each year. The Himalayan range separates the Tibetan and Buddhist regions in the north in an arid rain desert virtually unaffected by the monsoon rain, whereas the Hindu regions south of the mountains are situated in a highly humid and fertile area, creating some of the world's steepest gradients regarding both elevation and precipitation. Only 25 to 30

years ago, air burials were the most common practice. A lama appointed two persons outside the family to cut up the corpse. The deceased was chopped into small pieces and given either to the birds or to the river, and these two modes of depositions were equally praised. The deceased's skull could, in some cases, be saved, and used by the lamas for *pujas* or worship. One of the deceased's thigh bones was often used for making a flute, and during rituals the lamas commonly use such flutes today. When the lamas used the thigh-bone flute during air-burial funerals, it was to call on the gods to ask them to make rain.

The practice of air burials was a rainmaking ritual. Two decades ago, there was a common belief among the lamas and the laymen that if the deceased were cremated, the smoke from the funeral pyre would reach the sky and heaven. The gods would become angry because of the smell of burnt human flesh, and they would penalise the people by not giving them rain. During winter, however, everyone was cremated, because then the aim was to get the gods angry in order to avoid precipitation, which would come as snow. In short, air burials were performed during the spring, summer, and autumn in order to create rain, whereas cremation was the proper funeral practice during winter, to avoid snow. Hence, the relation between air burial and cremation was a matter of controlling the amount of precipitation.

Water, in the forms of river and rain, when incorporated into death rituals, highlights some general principles of life-giving processes, and why and how these creative forces are actively incorporated into further life. Whether or not certain forms or qualities of water are incorporated into death rituals depends on the necessity of this form of water to further life, or, more precisely, will the absence of this type of water result in death? It is a matter of how dependent humans are on the main or the exclusive source of water to further life. If the absence of one type of water, whether as a river or rain, is a collective deathgiver in the society, then it is of the uttermost importance to control this water resource, and to incorporate it into death rituals as a source for life and avoidance of death.

BANGLADESH: A HELL FILLED WITH GOOD THINGS!

In this way Ibn Batuta described Bengal in 1345—referring to the richness of the region, but also the dangers of the mighty Ganga.¹⁵ The river is a double-edged sword, as it both gives and takes life, but it is nevertheless the same river. Bangladesh is one of the most fertile countries in the world because of the annual floods, which cover approximately 70 per cent of the country with water. But even though the floods give life, they also take life, and this dangerous ambivalence is culturally incorporated into society and religion.

Kali is traditionally seen as the goddess of death and destruction, and Ganga as the almighty life-giving Mother of the World. Water and death are intricately interwoven. Without consumption of water, humans will die within short time. Absence of water takes many forms, which include droughts, but the presence of water may also take life. Each year the river will kill people and destroy land, but the river and the floods are also necessary for a successful harvest and further life. The most popular deity among the Hindus is Kali, and even Muslims worship Kali in rural Bangladesh. She is the supreme goddess, the Mother of the World. Ganga is also a mother, but Kali is always the most powerful of them. Kali and Ganga are often seen as sisters, or Ganga may even be seen as a daughter of Kali.

Chinnamasta is the most ferocious form of Kali. Chinnamasta has decapitated her own head, from which jets of blood spurt from the neck, feeding two female attendants with blood, but also her own severed head.¹⁶ Life, sex, and death are inseparable. The Hindu and the Buddhist Chinnamasta is the same, and she represents unconditioned reality. She drinks her own blood, and the severing of her own head symbolises the destruction of the illusionary belief in a permanent self.¹⁷ Chinnamasta's two attendants Dakini and Varnini begged and prayed her for food:

We are overpowered with hunger, O Mother of the Universe!
Give us food so we may be satisfied, O Merciful One, Bestower



FIGURE 8.3: Chinnamasta, Bangladesh

of Boons and Fulfiller of Desires. The goddess smiled and severed her head with her fingernails.¹⁸

This is primordial sacrifice and renewal of the creation. The goddess sacrifices herself, and her blood feeds her attendants. Chinnamasta is the food and the feeder; she eats her self and is eaten by others. The dichotomy of giver and receiver disappears—she is the sacrificer, the sacrificed, and the receiver of the sacrifice. Sacrifices of the most vital forces are the most procreative and vital offerings. One's own death may give life to others, but, especially in mother–child relations, the death of mothers might be lethal, and at the same time vital. Life is death, and death gives life.

Food symbolism is always a part of water symbolism. Rivers are not only goddesses, but also mothers who protect and feed their children.¹⁹ The motherhood aspect is also apparent in the names of the Himalayan mountains, which feed the rivers with water. The Annapurna range, with its five peaks rising from 7000 to above 8000 metres, means 'She is Plenteous of Food', and she fills the devotees with food. Dhaulagiri, an 8000-metre peak, means the 'White Mountain', and the 7000-metre peak Gangapurna means 'The Ganges is full'. When the mountains are full of snow, the rivers will be full of water, and the harvest successful, with a lot of grain.

The rivers of India are 'mother rivers', and the nurturing waters are compared to the milk of cow-mothers.²⁰ The river nourishes and fertilises the land through which it flows. Ganga's maternal character is especially seen in her nourishing aspect, and her water is sometimes called milk, or the drink of immortality. In the Chinnamasta goddess, it is as if the blood has been transformed into milk feeding the devotees.²¹ The feminine creative principle in Hinduism is 'the world from her womb'. Kali subsists on the blood of her victims and the animals offered her. Blood is a beneficial and vital fluid. In this sense, blood is more vital than water: it is intensified life-giving water. All procreative fluids, whether milk, sperm, or blood, can be imagined, explained, and understood from water metaphors.

CONCLUSION

Whether there is too little or too much water, or the precipitation comes like snow during the winter, the outcome of not controlling and incorporating these life-giving waters into the sphere of death is fatal for society. Death is life, and life is death—this is the eternal round of birth and death. Life and death are dependent upon water, and have to be seen in relation to the hydrological cycle of river and rain. Water is a substance of life and death, and this link with water is not broken even in death, because it enables new life after death in Christianity, Hinduism, and Buddhism.

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Chapter 8

Heavens, Havens, and Hells of Water

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Chapter 9

Monk, Clan Elder, and Water Warrior

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