
Water and Religion **FREE**

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Summary

There are many different and distinct types of religious waters: holy, sacred, neutral, and even evil. The ways various divinities invest waters with specific qualities and capacities depend upon a wide range of ecological, theological, and eschatological factors; some are shaped by the environment while others are purely ontological and concerned with otherworldly realms, and often there is an intimate relation between the mundane and the divine. Rivers, rain, lakes, springs, and waterfalls are some specific forms of religious water, which also relate to seasonality and changing hydrological cycles. All these variations create different dependencies not only to ecological factors but more importantly to divine actors. Religious water may heal and bless individuals and be a communal source for fertility and plentiful harvests, but may also work as a penalty, wreaking havoc on society as floods or the absence of the life-giving rains in agricultural communities. Given the great variation of religious waters throughout history where even the same water may attain different qualities and divine embodiments, divine waters define structuring practices and principles in ecology and cosmology.

Keywords: agriculture, Ganges, holy, Nile, purity, rainmaking, sacrifice, waterfalls, wells, winter

Subjects: Applied Anthropology, Archaeology, Histories of Anthropology, Sociocultural Anthropology

Introduction

Water is intrinsic and fundamental in religious belief, practices, and the ways divinities engage in earthly matters with cosmological causes and consequences. Not only are there many ways divinities manifest powers and themselves in various water-worlds in different ecologies but the qualities and essences of religious water vary accordingly. While “holy water” is commonly used in rituals and seemingly self-explanatory as a term and concept, this is but one type of religious water enabling specific devotional rites and purifications. The life-giving and fertilizing rains in agricultural communities are the most benevolent gift given by divinities when societies need and depend on this precious water for wealth and prosperity. Failing rains or floods causing havoc have historically been ways divinities penalize people

and societies collectively. The divine waters therefore enable and define human lives in this world and beyond. Water in various forms and ways are actively mediated and work as links between humans and their divinities. Water is thus neither a passive nor a uniform substance.

Since time immemorial and mythologically since the origin of cosmos, water has been intrinsic to all religions, and hence humans all over the world as far back as history can tell. The Australian rainbow serpent is a mythic being of the Dreaming and perhaps one of the oldest legends in the world and first documented by one of the founding figures of British anthropology (Radcliffe-Brown 1926). However, if there is one thing that characterizes water more than anything else in rituals and beliefs, it is that water in religion is highly relevant to the majority of the world's people; from Catholics in Lourdes to Muslims in Mecca or Hindus in Varanasi or Allahabad, and Buddhists in the High Himalayas or Lumbini in Nepal, Chinese religions, or Indigenous peoples from North and South America, including the great civilizations (Tvedt 2016). Water is essential in religious practice because it is fundamentally a divine substance. The unique place water has in religion can best be understood in actual rituals and beliefs apart from abstract mythology, since "water is particular and universal, the one and the many, nature and culture, physical and ideological," and it is "*both universal and always particular*" at the same time (Tvedt and Oestigaard 2010, 13, 16). Divine waters can be holy, sacred and neutral, and even evil or malevolent, and the different types of water can coexist in, for instance, religions like Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The life-giving rains, fundamental for agriculture, are gifts from God, but this water has substantially different cosmological roles and importance than the waters used in ritual baths, baptism, or ablutions for purification. Still, it is the very same water in the hydrological cycle, and the same divinities may also penalize their devotees with floods, droughts, or malevolent waters.

Studying water and religion is a theoretical and methodological challenge given that the most fruitful approach has to be interdisciplinary and which combines the natural and social sciences with humanities and religious studies. Given the hydrological cycle itself and the wisdom of God (Tuan 1968), understanding the flux and variation of water in nature was also cosmology. Both Christians and Muslims live along the religious Nile, and some of the earliest developments and most original forms of these religions are found in Africa (Oestigaard 2018). There are also innumerable other cosmologies and religious practices that reference water and which often are labeled as "indigenous" or "traditional." From a religious perspective, this should be understood positively as human resources and wisdom traditions (Stewart 2018). Oxford Learners Dictionaries 2020 defines "Indigenous" as "belonging to a particular place rather than coming to it from somewhere else" and tradition as "a belief, custom or way of doing something that has existed for a long time among a particular group of people; a set of these beliefs or customs." However, religious waters are also intrinsic to contemporary conflicts, environmental challenges, and societal developments (e.g., Anand 2017; Kane 2012), and in an era of rapid urbanization, climate change, and globalization, the ways water is used and perceived in rituals and religions are gaining new importance.

Hence, given the complexity and omnipresence of water in religious practices throughout history, I will give some glimpses of the ways water works and have been used and perceived in religion by focusing on the structural properties and divine qualities of water. Without pretending to be exhaustive, I will discuss: holiness, water, and the works of divinities as exemplified in Christianity; concepts and practices of purity and pollution illustrated by

Hinduism; hydrological sources and waterfalls as religious waters along the Nile; Scandinavian ideas about lively waters and how to overpower the winter; and concepts about weather, climate change, and almighty gods in monotheistic religions.

Holiness, Water, and the Works of Divinities as Exemplified in Christianity

Water is a source for understanding religion and the ways divinities work. The way holy water is perceived has significantly shaped the understanding of holiness as phenomenon as both process and essence. Although the terms “holy” and “sacred” are often used interchangeably (Eliade [1959] 1987), water enables one to identify different divine processes at work. Willard G. Oxtoby (1987) makes a distinction between “holy” and the “sacred” because there are fundamental different processes at work both with regard to how divinities function and how devotees interact with their divinities. The “holy” is in essence and substance part of the divine in various forms. A holy object contains divine powers—a god or goddess has embodied part of his or her powers in a material form on earth. A sacred object is, however, venerated and treated with respect and religious commitments. Although it might be consecrated, it is a human, not a divine, matter.

Rudolf Otto suggests that there is something “extra” about the holy beyond and above the meaning of goodness. In *The Idea of the Holy* (1923), he puts forward the concept of the “numinous,” which is an intense feeling of knowing that something cannot be seen but nevertheless represents truth being felt as objective and outside of the self (Otto [1923] 1958).



Figure 1. Timkat-festival in Bahir Dar, Ethiopia, 2010.

While religious experiences are undoubtedly of fundamental importance for believers, concepts of holiness as something numinous are by definition undefined and spiritually transcend the mundane and material world. Although holy water is fundamental in defining spiritual experiences and enabling religious participation and engagements with divinities, it is also very physical, concrete, and specific. Holy water is therefore a unique source for devotees because it enables a divine presence and accessibility few other substances or spirituality can facilitate and physically materialize in the same way.

Using Christianity as an example, a sculpture of Jesus on the Cross is a sacred symbol to be venerated, but it is *not* holy—Jesus in flesh and blood. Baptismal water, however, can be holy if divine qualities and essences are transferred to water as a physical substance. However, apart from the question of purgatory, the qualities of the baptismal waters were one of the main divisions between Catholics and Protestants. While Catholics believed that the baptismal water was holy, that is, containing divine substance after it was consecrated by priests, Protestants and Reformers claimed that the water was ordinary. As a spiritual source for heaven, the water in itself did not enable divine grace; it was because of the Word that worked alongside the water (Oestigaard 2013).

Holy water is literally not from this world, and because it is such a powerful substance, it is rarely something official religion will give freely to the laity. A central debate throughout history has therefore been whether holy water works by itself or if it only works when an officiating priest conducts rituals. In the Roman Catholic Church, sacraments are believed to work automatically (*ex opere operato*) without an officiating priest, because they are holy. The sacraments had immanent powers because God works through them (Thomas 1971, 47–57). Thus, people believed that if the holy water worked in one context, it probably worked in others as well, and therefore holy water was stolen from church and used for all different purposes. Although the Church condemned many of these practices as diabolical, these sacraments “were the basis for a genuinely lay Christianity, for they placed in the hands of the laity sources of holy power which were free from clerical control” (Duffy 1993, 212).

Seen from the perspective of organized religion, trusting such a powerful religious remedy in the hands of the laity may easily challenge their authority and divine supremacy, and hence holy water is most often controlled in various ways. First, access to the source, well, or fountain is restricted and guarded by officiating priests at important pilgrimage places. Second, the works of holy water are only conditioned to function in some specific spheres and not others. There are very few divine substances or types of holy water that can be used by everyone for everything. Even when the hydrology enables unlimited access to holy water, for instance along holy rivers, rituals may restrict devotional practices and limit spiritual benefits. Therefore, notions of *ex opere operato* and that water works automatically in all spheres at all times hardly exist. If it works apart from authorized religion, it is usually seen as magic or diabolical. On the contrary, priests enable the right rituals to release, so to speak, the divine powers immanent in the holy water.

Importantly, the works of holy water as a purifying agent are irrespective of the profane pollution of the water, as the Latin patriarch vicar general of Jordan explained in 2013 with regards to the pollution of the most holy River Jordan: “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).

The way water works, or not, directly relates to a fundamental debate in religious studies. Functional or pragmatic approaches emphasize problems having divine origins and solutions, and divine water is one way whereby human suffering is healed by divine action and intervention. The sociology of Émile Durkheim, for instance, belongs to this category. Durkheim writes: "In reality, then, there are no religions which are false. All are true in their own fashion; all answer, though in different ways, to the given conditions of human existence . . . They respond to the same needs, they play the same role, they depend upon the same causes; they can also well serve to show the nature of the religious life, and consequently to resolve the problem which we wish to study" (Durkheim 1915, 3). Substantive approaches, however, focus on the divine substance and ontological realities, like the existence of gods, divinities, and ancestors. Augustine is clearly in this category as he said that religion means "worship of God." However, although these opposite poles have created a polarized scholarly debate, they are at the same time also inseparable, since a divinity needs to exist (substance) in order to work (function) (Schilbrack 2013a, 2013b).

The various ways water works and how divinities give or withhold water exemplify the relation between function and substance. The essence of holy water is that it works, but it cannot work and function without a divine substance.

The essence and substance of divinities is the necessary condition for any functional, practical, or spiritual outcomes, such as the life-giving rains. This also illustrates different qualities of divine waters, because although rain is a gift from God, as a substance on agricultural fields it is essentially neutral. However, when water flows in rivers or lakes, it may attain specific qualities, and particular spots may become pilgrimage sites enabling purification rituals.

Purity and Pollution in Hinduism

Hinduism is the world's water religion par excellence, and its holy rivers are water divinities, like the goddess Ganga. In Hinduism, the soul is immortal while the body decays, and according to karma and the cause and consequences of good and bad deeds, a person or soul may incarnate in 8.4 million (some say 840,000) bodies before eventually the soul reaches nirvana or heaven. The holy city of Varanasi, the cosmic origin and dissolution, is not only a microcosm of the universe but also a macrocosm of the body, and a *tirtha* is a "place where you can settle to religious practice and immediately reap the fruits of it" (Parry 1982, 345). Varanasi is called the Mahatirtha—the great passage or pilgrimage—and Hindu devotees usually embark on a pilgrimage to the city at least once in their lifetime or are brought here at death to be cremated on the riverbank (Parry 1994). A holy and purifying bath in river Ganga or being cremated along her banks whereupon the ashes are given to the waters may release the soul from samsara—the round of birth and death (Eck 1983).



Figure 2. The Muktinath Temple, with its 108 waterspouts, is the second most sacred Hindu place in Nepal, and it is a holy shrine for Hindus and Buddhists. Here, the two religions coexist. 2000.

Source: Terje Oestigaard.

Purification is perfection and impurity is imperfection that results from pollution and sin (Douglas 1994). Auspicious water used in appropriate rituals at the right place may cleanse the body and soul thus enabling a prosperous incarnation, but in the same way impure people may transmit pollution through water, food, or just their mere being and presence. As Bachelard says in another context, water “can be cursed . . . evil can be put in active form . . . what is evil in one aspect, in one of its characteristics, becomes evil as the whole. Evil is no longer a quality but a substance” (Bachelard 1994, 139). Whether water enables purification or pollution of bodily substances, and hence the soul with implications for future incarnation, water is an active medium, which transfers, transports, and transforms impurities. The water enables transactions of bio-moral qualities and properties. Matters of morality are material, and sins are literally embodied in the flesh. Hence, mortality is about cleansing the body and soul before the next incarnation. Pure water changes the bodily qualities since a pure mind in an impure body is an impossibility.

The devotee pollutes the holy water with his or her sins. If the water is a divinity, the devotees transfer the pollution onto and into the god or goddess. Impurities are washed away from the person’s mind and body and hence the ritual practitioner becomes pure and purified through the water ritual. The impurity as a bio-moral substance is transferred to the river, and the river transports it away. However, if the water and the river only transport the pollution away, sin and impurities will accumulate and increase—and the world and cosmos deteriorate. Thus, the most fundamental aspect of holy water is the divine quality and capacity of transforming

impurities to purity. It is holiness and cosmogony in the making. Holy water creates purity out of impurity, and despite the amount of human sin and imperfection, the holy rivers remain pure and eternal (Oestigaard 2017).

The most important cosmic festival in Hinduism is the Kumbh Mela that is celebrated in Prayagraj (formerly Allahabad) every twelve years at the confluence of Ganga, Yamuna, and the mythical, subterranean Saraswati River. "Kumbh" means literally "pitcher" and reflects a cosmological era when gods and demons fought over a pitcher of nectar, and a few drops fell down to earth in certain cities, among them Allahabad. Because of this, the Kumbh Festival has allegedly been held since time immemorial. In 2001, it was estimated that fifty to seventy million people came to this six-week festival, and in 2013 about 120 million pilgrims and devotees came to the holy waters with one aim: to take a purifying bath.

In 2001, January 24 was the most auspicious day to take purifying baths, and it is estimated that some twenty to twenty-five million people cleansed themselves of committed sins in the rivers' confluence. The water at this point in time and space is believed to be so powerful and holy that it may erase all sins, and all Hindus should ideally take at least one such pilgrimage during their lifetime, since "pilgrimage to crossing places may put humans where divine beneficence and even release - are more readily approached" (Gold 1988, 301).

In 2001, the Kumbh lasted for forty-four days; it lasted fifty-five days in 2013 because it was an even more holy event. The Kumbh Mela has a twelve-year cycle, but after twelve festivals it is cosmologically an even bigger and greater event: the Maha Kumbh Mela. This happens only once every 144 years and took place in 2013 (e.g., Balsari et al. 2016). This was the largest congregation of people on the earth in history.

In today's world of urbanization, rapid modernization, population growth, and climate change, the role of water in religion may take new and more important forms and roles. The needs for spiritual purity and religious enlightenment are not declining in the global and modern world. Purifying baths and cleansing rituals become more important in many religions, precisely because the water is a source to divine experiences and mental wellness.

Religious Waters from the Sources of the Nile

The Nile is the world's longest and most legendary river. It flows through eleven countries and since time immemorial, the sources have been an enigma. The source of the Blue Nile is the spring Gish Abay in the Lake Tana region in Ethiopia, which is believed to be the River Gihon flowing from paradise, following both Old and New Testament contexts. In Genesis it is written: "A river watering the garden flowed from Eden; from there it was separated into four headwaters. The name of the first is the Pishon; it winds through the entire land of Havilah, where there is gold. The name of the second river is the Gihon; it winds through the entire land of Cush. The name of the third river is the Tigris; it runs along the east side of Asshur. And the fourth river is the Euphrates" (Gen. 2:11-14).

As a river having its origin and source in heaven, nothing is closer to God and more pure than the water from this spring at this particular place. It is a unique place in the world and cosmos since it is the entrance to, and exit from, paradise. Hence, the water is not only the utmost holiest and can cure any sins, sicknesses, and misfortunes, but it is even believed that

God bestows his mercy on up to seventy generations of the descendants of the devotees who fulfill pilgrimage to the source and drink of its water. While a hydrological source is the remotest spring or discharge point of a river in terms of ultimate length, the spring Gish Abay is not only the hydrological source of the Blue Nile but it is also a religious source and fountain of divine life (Oestigaard and Firew 2013).

As religious sources, particular features in nature and specific water phenomena along the river can be divine sources or revelations of power, linking this world to the flow of cosmos. Most often, it is a fountain, spring, waterfall, or some subterranean source defining and bridging cosmological realms.

In the history of the Nile sources there are many paradoxes. On one hand, the searches for the sources have inevitably been part of colonial enterprises, but on the other when Westerners came to the sources, they did not document the existing traditional and religious practices. From a religious point of view, the true sources are the indigenous religions that have existed since time immemorial. Edison Mhaka says: "Thus in the African world, the religious is inextricably intertwined with culture. The African worldview is therefore basically religious. This religious worldview is the basis of the African interpretation of the world around him. It is not therefore surprising that African traditional religion has been observed to be expressive of African philosophical thought" (Mhaka 2014, 371).

Turning to Uganda and the source of the White Nile, the outlet of Lake Victoria has been seen as its source. Here, there is a subterranean underground source in the middle of the river that creates a countercurrent rising from the Ripon and Owen Falls. The waterfalls were dammed in 1954, but prior to this, they created a spectacular visualization of the divine powers manifest in the waters. While all of the waters in Lake Victoria, the second largest lake in the world, flowed northward and turned into cascading thunders, this particular subterranean source has created a countercurrent flowing in the other direction, seemingly arising out of the waterfalls and challenging all laws and forces of nature. In the Busoga cosmology in this area, from the precolonial era onwards, it is a testimony of the second most powerful god, who is named Kiyira (Oestigaard 2018).



Figure 3. The river spirit Kiyira flowing the opposite way of the natural flow at the outlet of Lake Victoria, the source of the White Nile in Uganda, 2013.

Source: Terje Oestigaard.

In all waterfalls along the Nile in this area, like the Bujagali Falls, which were dammed in 2012, the roaring and thundering waters are testimonies of the river gods living there. Waterfalls are exceptional natural phenomena; there is something extra and extremely powerful taking place at these spots. The water is usually not holy, and the gods residing there may not be water-gods as such, but the raw and brute forces of the waters are visualizations of the divinities' powers, in particular if they seemingly contradict nature by flowing against the flow of the river (Oestigaard 2020).

The most legendary and mythological source of the Nile—in the middle of the river—is the primeval water originating from the first cataract at Aswan in the ancient Egyptian civilization. A priest told Herodotus (484?–430/420 BCE) “that there were two mountains with sharply pointed peaks between the cities of Syene in the Thebaïd and Elephantine, which were called Crophî and Mophî; between them, he said, rise the springs of the Nile, which are bottomless, and half of their water flows north towards Egypt, while the other half flows south towards Ethiopia.” Herodotus concludes: “Now, if this story of the scribe’s was true, all he proved, to my mind, was that there are strong whirlpools and counter-currents there . . .” (Herodotus 2008, 2.28). And true, hydrologically and historically there were countercurrents here, and one was even documented as late as in the 1950s as “The Whirlpool of Osiris.” Thus, parts of the Nile flowed in the opposite direction to the natural flow, in stark contrast to other waters, also changing character in dramatic ways. Seneca (c. 4 BCE—65 CE) gives a detailed description of the cataracts and the very particular and peculiar characteristics of the water and the river at this spot (Seneca 1972, 4a.2.4–5):

The Cataracts receive it, a region famous for its wonderful spectacle. There the Nile surges through steep rocks which are jagged in many places, and unleashes its forces. It is broken by the rocks it runs against and, struggling through narrow places, everywhere conquers or is conquered. It swirls, and there for the first time its waters are aroused, which has been flowing without disturbance in a smooth channel. Violent and torrential, it leaps through narrow passes, unlike itself since up to this point it has been flowing muddy and heavy, but when it lashes against the boulders and the sharp points of jagged rocks it foams and its colours come not from its own properties but from its rough treatment in that place. Finally it struggles past the obstacles and, suddenly deprived of support, falls down a vast height with a great roar that fills all the regions lying around.

As Seneca says, the river was “unlike itself,” and he was only talking about the characters and qualities of the water flowing downward; if there also was a countercurrent flowing in the other direction rising up and from the waterfalls—then the river was truly not like itself. The “unnatural natural” has often been ascribed with religious significance or divine powers. Following cosmology and mythology, this was the source of the Nile, and the very qualities of water and nature proved the divine powers (Oestigaard 2020).

Scandinavian Ideas about Lively Waters and How to Overpower the Winter

Holy and sacred wells are omnipresent throughout the world, and the powers and beliefs of the water vary from being seen as truly holy to magical. Non-Christians may use words like “aura” or “mystical power” to describe this water (Strang 2004, 93), which directs attention to the signification and the meaning ascribed to the agency of water (Strang 2014). In Great Britain and Ireland, for instance, it has been estimated that there were some eight thousand holy wells, and in Wales, two-thirds of the wells were believed to have curative functions, some even being exclusively healing wells (Bord and Bord 1985, 24, 34). Although Christianity has superimposed a cosmology and theology on top of these waters since holy water is used in baptism, the original powers were quite different and contained fundamentally opposite forces, which can be found explicitly in northern regions with cold climates.

The water-world in Scandinavia and the Nordic areas with long and cold winters have certain particular characteristics. In the history of religious studies, it is a paradox that the most dramatic waterscape has hardly been analyzed. Not only is the winter the harshest time of the year and surviving the dark and cold period was an achievement in itself, but water turned into new forms—rain became snow, flowing water became frozen and stagnant, and the life-giving properties became potentially lethal. If there was truly one place where water changed forms and was alive—and dying and representing dangers and death—it was in the cold north (Oestigaard 2021).

While there were no clear and distinct winter and summer gods in Scandinavian prehistory, and the sun had drastic and opposite qualities and characters in January when it was minus thirty degrees Celsius (-22°F) and July with plus thirty degrees Celsius (86°F), certain types of water were truly manifestations of forces from a different world.



Figure 4. Ingbo Springs where 4.3 million liters of crystal-clear water flow from the underground every day. Uppland, Sweden, 2020.

Source: Terje Oestigaard.

All over Scandinavia were certain wells and water-phenomena that were more famous than others. While pilgrimage in Scandinavia was a Christian practice, people still gathered at these wells and springs, particularly at certain times of the year, like the horse races on December 26 where the horses were watered, or for the drinking of water and dancing around wells on midsummer eve. However, although these rituals and perceptions continued in Christian times up to the early 20th century, they were fundamentally non-Christian in origin.

Certain types of water at specific places were more alive and contained particular life-giving powers, which conquered the otherwise hostile forces of nature. Some of the most renowned springs or wells were called *frobrunn*, literally meaning “froth well” or a frothing spring. The immense powers inherent or immanent in the waters were particularly visible during the winter: “These were springs which never froze, or openings in the ice which kept open throughout the winter” (Solheim 1956, 153). While all other water was frozen and dead, this specific type of water was alive and bubbling up from beneath: this water “frothed” throughout the winter and therefore it was seen as “holy” (Skar 1909, 45).

The very waters in these wells or springs contained specific life-giving qualities that enabled health and fertility since they conquered even the harshest and coldest powers in nature: freezing water that threatened health and wealth. Also, many of these flowed toward the north, the dangerous and desolate areas inhabited by malignant forces and beings. The water

conquered these dangers, too. Moreover, many springs and wells contain water of more or less the same temperature throughout the year irrespective of whether it is cold winter or warm summer. To what extent particular wells and waters represented specific gods, spirits, or ancestors is rather uncertain, since the powers of water from beneath has to be seen in relation to the winter and melting of snow in general. Particularly around Christmas or *jól*, it was important to incite the water and underground forces that had the power to “eat” the snow. In rural areas, it was believed that there were many spirits or semigods roaming around, and they had the power of breaking through the icy grip of the snow and winter. Thus, the forces overpowering ice and frost were literally rooted in the underground or the underworld, and these inherent forces contained life and the future fertility of fields and harvests. These powers could “eat” snow and frost and overpower even the most enduring and dangerous winters (Lid 1933, 40).

A *frobrunn* or well was therefore a source and manifestation of supreme power, because it was stronger than the coldest cold and frozen fields. The immanent forces from underground or immanent and within were also explicitly seen in waterfalls. When all other waters were freezing and the snow covered the landscape during the winter, the water forces in the falls were still fighting and resisting nature’s frost and deadly forces. Throughout most of the year and even during winter, the waters were not only free-flowing, but the falls had a torrential force. If and when even these waters froze, the forces from beneath would eventually start roaming and roaring in the waterfalls before any other places (Kaliff and Oestigaard 2020).



Figure 5. Gullfoss Falls, Iceland, 2012.

Source: Terje Oestigaard.

Weather, Climate Change, and Almighty Gods

In traditional farming societies, everyone's health and wealth depended on the unpredictable rains and thus the importance of rain cannot be emphasized enough. "When the weather is everything – when it determines, in ways nothing else can, what will grow and how much, whether and how long time people will do migrant labour, whether it will be a feast or famine year, whether some will live or die – it is unwise not to take such things very seriously," Todd Sanders said with regards to a case study in Tanzania: "That the rain begins promptly and falls regularly each season – indeed, that it arrives and falls at all – is, quite literally, a matter of life or death. Without rain nothing grows. And without growth, people and animals will wither and die" (Sanders 2008, xiii, 3). Thus, although agriculture provides security in good years, in lean years, it is the source of misery and suffering.



Figure 6. Who provides the life-giving rains—the Christian god, spirits, or ancestors? Usagara, Tanzania, 2011.

Source: Terje Oestigaard.

Returning to Uganda and the Itanda Falls just 18.5 miles downstream of the source of the White Nile or the outlet of Lake Victoria, there are numerous gods living and residing in the waterfalls, which also include the angry and hot-tempered rain-god Mesoké. At the outset, it seems counterintuitive that a rain-god lives in the waterfalls as a river-god and not in heaven, but a rain-god needs to collect water before he can give it to the needy devotees. The waterfalls provide the water. Even a rain-god needs to produce water, which links the rain-god, the good rains, the pythons, and the waterfalls in a shining cosmology like the rainbow. There is no rain or water in the sky itself, and Mesoké needs to procure and bring water to the

heavens before he can release it on fields creating fertility. This happens through the python and the rainbow. Each morning when the sun rises, a beautiful rainbow appears above the waterfalls and one can see water droplets in the air and mist, literally being dragged upward. This is Mesoké filling the sky with water, and the python has a shape and colors like the rainbow, and together they connect and complete the hydrological cycle (Oestigaard 2019). Thus, “The rain-god Mesoké, the Itanda waterfalls, the rainbow and the python snakes complete the hydrological cycle. Even the rain-god must create rain, not by magic, but by literally filling heaven with physical water flowing in the river, which eventually will be returned to the catchment area and the river as rain. The force of the waterfalls testify to the immense powers of the rain-god and the python snake and the rainbow are links to heaven making the rains. The clouds need to be filled” (Oestigaard 2018, 224).



Figure 7. The healer Mary Itanda sacrifices to the rain-god Mesoké living in the Itanda Falls, Uganda, 2017.

Source: Terje Oestigaard.

Throughout human history, gods and divinities have used the life-giving waters in the form of rain or flood as the most efficient ways of penalizing sinful and disobedient people on a collective and cosmological scale. Most gods are not water-gods, but they have nevertheless used and controlled the life-giving waters because in agrarian and preindustrial worlds, this is a very powerful tool.

The history of the Old Testament Yahweh is also a story of how God used his divine waters to prove his absolute omnipotent and omnipresent powers. The Deluge can be seen from this perspective; God's divine wrath harmed everyone and erased all humans from earth with the exception of Noah and his progeny. In Genesis 6:13, Yahweh warned Noah: "The end of all flesh is come before me; for the earth is filled with violence through them; and, behold, I will destroy them with the earth." The flooding water erasing humanity was also boiling hot.

Apart from the cosmic origin, Yahweh used his powers in Egypt to control the water; not only did it hardly rain in these deserts but the whole civilization was dependent upon the annual flood. The story about the seven fertile years followed by seven years of suffering is famous (Gen. 41:30-32): "Seven years of great plenty will come throughout all the land of Egypt; but after them seven years of famine will arise, and all the plenty will be forgotten in the land of Egypt; and the famine will deplete the land. So the plenty will not be known in the land because of the famine following, for it will be very severe."



Figure 8. Presence and absence of the life-giving waters. The River Nile and the desert at Aswan, Egypt, 2007.

Source: Terje Oestigaard.

Israel, however, was not only the Promised Land but it was also hailed as a land of hills and valleys, "which drinketh water of the rain of heaven." Israel was a country of benevolent waters. In Tanakh Deuteronomy (11:10-13) it says: "The land you are about to cross into and

possess, a land of hills and valleys, soaks up its water from the rains of heaven. It is a land which the Lord your God looks after, on which the Lord your God always keeps his eye, from year's beginning to year's end" (Châtel 2010, 274).

Receiving rain was a sign of divine glory. "The sending of rain is an event greater than the giving of the Torah. The Torah was a joy for Israel only, but the rain gives joy to the whole world . . . The day of rainfall is greater than resurrection; . . . than when the heaven and the earth were made" (Isaacs 1998, 159). As Max Weber points out, "rain was one of the awards promised by Yahweh to his devotees, who were at that time agriculturalists . . . God promised neither too scanty rain nor yet excessive precipitation or deluge" (Weber 1964, 57). In other words, God controls all humans and all aspects of life through water. This was not holy water, but particularly in a desert environment the life-giving water is everything.

In Islam, too, it is written in the Qur'an: "We send down pure water from the sky, that We may thereby give life to a dead land and provide drink for what We have created – cattle and men in great numbers" (25:48–49), but God also warns: "Consider the water which you drink. Was it you that brought it down from the rain cloud or We? If We had pleased, We could make it bitter: why then do you not give thanks?" (56:68–70).

In a globalized world characterized by climate change, perceptions that gods control weather phenomena and changing climates are becoming less important because control of water relates to food. However, the declining role of rainmaking and beliefs that God controls the weather is not a recent phenomenon.

The role of missionaries and their intervention in water-worlds may illustrate the functional role of rain in agrarian cosmologies in relation to food. Rainmaking was central among the agro-pastoral communities of Ovambo on the Cuvelai floodplain of northern Namibia and southern Angola, but this changed with the missionaries and, in particular, during the Great Famine of 1913–1916. During the drought, the missionaries were not dependent upon the rain to the same extent as the Ovambo, and the missionaries were able to obtain grain supplies from German South West Africa, which saved numerous lives. This had implications for the rainmaking rituals and cosmology, since ultimately it was not about rain as such but access to sustenance for the people. When missionaries provided food independent of the failing rains, it dismantled rainmaking as a practice and its ontology (McKittrick 2006, 406). In other cases, missionaries have tried to include the rainmaking cosmology into Christianity, like in Uganda. In 1913, a missionary promised the local people rain, explaining what took place: "I prayed and it rained straight away, and, in that way, God made me do that as a miracle." On another occasion, the same missionary used the rain card again as a tool for conversion: "If the rain comes, will you come to the church?" and the community members confirmed (Behrend 2011, 16). Practically, though, information technology has also contributed to the decline of these beliefs. In Tanzania, for instance, the number of radios increased tenfold to more than five hundred thousand from the period 1958 to 1968, and farmers heard that the famines were not limited to the kingdom and the regions within the realm of the rainmakers (Feierman 1990, 251–253).

Conclusion

Water is intrinsic and fundamental in religious belief. While holy water represents the most common uses and understanding of religious water, this is but one way of how divinities engage with and manifest themselves in and through water. A central aspect of how water is conceptualized in religion relates to the very physical properties and manifestations of water in nature as a natural and unnatural phenomenon: it exhibits powers and possibilities of transformations unseen otherwise in culture and cosmology. The very physicality proves that there is something else behind, beyond, and beneath the waters: divinities work and their works are accessible. Thus, water is ultimately not only about life but throughout the ages it has defined how holiness can be understood and the ways and means by which one may interact with divinities. However, apart from general characteristics of water in religion, perhaps its most unique aspect is the omnipresent and omnipotent powers it proves to believers that it possesses or reveals. While almighty gods using and manifesting their supreme powers directly in the water-world is no longer a relevant frame of understanding given climate change and humans' impact on nature, water in rituals and religions are gaining more importance and widespread use throughout the globe, whether in Lourdes, Mecca, Allahabad, or along the Nile. Given the central and increasing importance of water in pilgrimage and purification rituals, this is also an area of future study and relevance for anthropological studies of cultures and cosmologies.

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