

Imaginary and Symbolic Forms of Water between Spirit and Culture

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Abstract

Water is a theme connected to human and social development, not only biologically but also in terms of cultural and identity processes; surprisingly, studies that discuss water from a sociocultural/sociological perspective are scarce. The foundational role of water in the construction of social reality should be highlighted: as a matter of fact, thanks to it identity processes develop, and the realisation of the relationship between human beings and the environment, and between culture and nature, occurs. The relationship with water as a primordial substance tied to the roots of existence pertains to the physiological as well as the historical development of societies. Historically, societies see the presence of water in their territories as an indispensable element for establishing the foundations of civilisations, and a central criterion for setting the bases of development. With regards to the management of territorial resources, it should be noted that, although water is a primary resource, it is not available everywhere. Humans had to struggle to secure reliable water sources, using techniques derived from millenary knowledge systems, which enabled individuals and communities to live and survive in times of abundance and scarcity, tumultuousness and poor health. Past narratives and ethnographies related to traditional communities link symbols to history, productive forms, and material constraints due to the physical factors of the environment. Water is a foundational element of the cosmogonic and theogonic myths that governed the evolution of ancient genealogies and epistemologies. For its intrinsic virtues, water is considered a living and beneficial force: it is hard to find another substance that can at the same time wash away guilt, eliminate impurities, refresh and reinvigorate weary souls, and promise renewal and existential rebirth. Starting from these premises, the essay deals with the theme of water, a humble substance with complex implications, considering the foundations of culture, and analyzing the natural element from a sociological perspective with reference to myths of origins, naturalistic philosophical conceptions, and imaginary, up to and including aspects related to religiosity, to get to the roots of identity.

Keywords: water; identity; culture; imaginary

At the Roots of Culture. Water and Identity¹

Water is a theme connected to human and social development, not only biologically but also in terms of cultural and identity processes; surprisingly, studies that discuss water from a sociocultural/sociological perspective are scarce. Water is the primary constituent of the planet, covering 71% of its surface; it also regulates the functioning of the physiological mechanisms of the human body, composed by 70% of it. Beyond these basic aspects, the foundational role of water in the construction of social reality should be highlighted: as a matter of fact, thanks to it identity processes develop, and the realisation of the relationship between human beings and the environment, and between culture and nature, occurs. These relationships often go unnoticed, given the unperceived nature of this taken-for-granted substance, whose pervasiveness in the existence of the planet since the origins of life is well documented.

The relationship with water as a primordial substance tied to the roots of existence pertains to the physiological as well as the historical development of societies. Historically, societies see the presence of water in their territories as an indispensable element for establishing the foundations of civilisations, and a central criterion for setting the bases of development. Thanks to watercourses, it has been possible to give life to countless communities and several civilisations across the globe; their different configurations are extensive but the existence of various, inter-related “water worlds” contained in it is highly noticeable. With the primary goal of meeting the basic need for nourishment and water supply, humans have taken over spaces deemed favorable for the species’ needs and consecrated and recognised as familiar and safe for themselves and their group. Through a process of identification, such places have become meaningful for their inhabitants leading, where necessary, to the development of defensive strategies. The different access to resources has determined the division between central and peripheral cultures, characterised in the former case by the possession of the same language, race, religion, law and customs concentrated in the same place, and in the latter, by greater fragmentation in relation to such criteria. From cultural homogeneity emerged a strong concentration of power and the exercise of territorial control using force. In this way, central cultures developed forms of resource control and communicative channels through a standard language and representative bodies. According to this process of symbolic definition of cultural identity, a framework was outlined in which central cultures could exercise direct control over resources, while peripheral cultures developed forms of dependency and political, economic, and cultural subordination to the centre².

With regards to the management of territorial resources, it should be noted that, although water is a primary resource, it is not available everywhere. Humans had to

¹ Developed by both authors

² Flora, 1980: 381; Rokkan, 1980: 440.

struggle to secure reliable water sources, using techniques derived from millenary knowledge systems, which enabled individuals and communities to live and survive in times of abundance and scarcity, tumultuousness and poor health. In conditions of extreme difficulty, access to water requires the application of highly complex knowledge, stemming from precise understandings of climate, the alternation of seasons, landscapes, and locations. On the other hand, the problematic relationship with water underscores the value of Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) and their teachings on the environment and resources. The choice of sites and locations for the settlement of civilisations has always been tied to water bioavailability: it is no coincidence that cities are founded along riverbanks, near water basins, and on coasts. Water represents the intersection between the history of nature and human history, up to the point that the life, fortune, and duration of the great hydraulic civilisations of the past were based on the capacities, skills, and ingeniousness in collecting, storing, and distributing water³. One could even write the history and culture of humans, the construction of identities, and forms of self-representation starting from the relationship with water – how it is controlled, used, treated, considered, and the symbolic-religious and artistic significance it assumes.

Past narratives and ethnographies related to traditional communities link symbols to history, productive forms, and material constraints due to the physical factors of the environment. They argue that societies have engaged deeply with water, processing it and transposing it onto the symbolic plan in myths and rituals. Water is a foundational element of the cosmogonic and theogonic myths that governed the evolution of ancient genealogies and epistemologies. There is ample evidence of this, dating back to the Babylonian civilisation, which considered the universe to be generated from the mixture of fresh and salt water; the Egyptians believed that the origin of the world was the Nun, an abyss of primordial waters from which the sun – demiurge and father of the gods – came to life; the Sumerian-Akkadian mythology attributes creation to the Apsu, an expansion of primordial water; according to the Hellenic culture, existence is based on a vision that combined animistic and anthropomorphic approaches within a unified framework, where capricious deities expressed their will through the force of the elements; water, represented by Oceanus, a titan full of mysteries and wonders, is the principle of everything, depicted as a river encircling the universe beyond the seas. His three thousand daughters, the Oceanids, are nymphs of the seas whose rule was entrusted to Poseidon, the undisputed master of this unknown and little-explored space. Ancestral fears attached to this are exorcised with songs and epic poems whose protagonists were called to face difficult trials in order to prove their mastery over the force of the element.

The myths and legends featuring fresh waters are as significant as those of salt water, and are often associated with nymphs, creatures born from the union of mortals

³ Wittfogel, 1957.

and immortals, immersed in nature and perpetually young. Alongside the nymphs of mountains, forests and trees, one finds the aforementioned Oceanids, or Nereids, and the Hydriads, or Naiads, nymphs of rivers and fresh water springs. Their lives, devoted to the service of the major deities, is a continuous succession of songs, dances, and sudden metamorphoses: they rarely yield to iniquitous and violent passions, as they are the soul of the faithful and beautiful elements. The complex web of their loves has often been central to ancient narratives, as in the case of the stories about Ila, a young man of pleasant appearance who moved with the Argonauts and was kidnapped by the spring nymphs of Chios, where he had stopped to drink. His story inspired Boccaccio's *Ninfale Fiesolano*, a poem that narrates the love story between the shepherd Africo and the nymph Mensola, and the rivers to which they gave their name as they were dying, while their son Pruneo was destined to found Fiesole and Florence. From importance given to nymphs as minor deities, came the appellation "nymphaeum" in Roman tradition, which refers to rectangular or elliptical buildings where fountains were erected.

These last two aspects lead us to consider the interplay with artistic productions that use water as their central element. Regarding fountains, it is important to recall their function in beautifying public spaces, while they immortalise important figures and events for the memory of future generations: examples include the fountains of Villa d'Este in Tivoli, a UNESCO World Heritage Site since 2001; the Trevi Fountain, whose central theme is the sea and whose waters depend on the Virgin Aqueduct built by Agrippa in 19 BC, the main source of water supply and distribution for the capital; the Fountain of the Four Rivers, created in Piazza Navona in 1651 by Bernini, which depicts the most imposing rivers known by then, namely the Nile, the Ganges, the Danube, and the Rio de la Plata. In poetry one finds countless examples of water as a key inspiration for wordsmiths: consider the verses of *E l'acqua* by Roberto Piumini, *Rain* by Garcia Lorca, as well as *The Fountain* and *Storm* by Neruda. Musical compositions have also been influenced by natural elements in general, and water in particular: musicians have drawn extensively from the sounds of this element and translated them into verses and compositions inspired by the musicality of rain, streams, the sea, but also by the noises produced in an anthropic environment. In the latter, seemingly mundane activities, like water boiling in a pot, or gushing from a tap and shower, became writing material. Examples include *Aquarium* from Saint Saëns' *Carnival of the Animals*; the music of Claude Debussy, who plays water drawing inspiration from ancient legends; the story of the Vltava River composed by Smetana; and Strauss's waltz *On the Beautiful Blue Danube*. Numerous examples can also be found in modern music, as in the songs *Acqua* by Loredana Bertè, *Acqua nell'acqua* by Claudio Baglioni, *Acqua azzurra, acqua chiara* by Lucio Battisti, *I'm Singing in the Rain* by Jamie Cullum, and *Yellow Submarine* by The Beatles, just to name a few. A testament to the centrality of water in music can be found in the instruments made in Central and South America, Africa and Australia, which reproduce the sound of rain, in order to invoke its arrival. Lastly, water occupies

a privileged place in the visual arts as well, in works such as the perspective views made by Canaletto in Venice, Monet's water lilies and Salvati's *Acqua*.

Another significant aspect of the links between water and culture can be traced in naturalistic philosophical conceptions, which consider water a foundational element of existence. According to Thales, everything originates from water, while Heraclitus entangles the idea of the world's perpetual becoming to the image of the incessant flow of river waters. The term *panta rhei* encapsulates the idea that everything is destined to change over time, and one cannot step into the same river twice. As for the relationship with time, in ancient Greece the word for water, *hydor*, was used as an Attic legal term to indicate the time allotted to rhetoricians; their slots were timed using time-measuring instruments operated with water, such as water-filled hourglasses. In trials, the rotation of the hourglass announced the shift between prosecution and defence. In more recent times Dalí expressed the idea of the ultimate hourglass with the famous image of the soft watches, a surreal depiction of a temporal liquefaction that flows slow and inexorable like water.

In the realm of ancient philosophy, a work that stands out is Hippocrates' *De Aeribus*⁴, an anthropological treatise that provides an explanation of the physical and cultural differences among humans. This study argues that water has the capacity to influence the mood of groups settled in a specific territory, through the geography of places where the character of the element is predominant. The environmental determinism imbued in the treatise stems from the climate-centric approach of Greek medicine in the 5th century BC, an approach that signals the shift of attributing causal forces from humans to nature; in doing so, the rules of magic are replaced by a scientific study of the ecosystem. With this intention, Hippocrates invigorates research on the environment aiming at participate in the formulation of a new science, free from the influence of magical beliefs in the medical field. Probably due to the irregularity of its conception, the book is structured upon three working plans: the medical, concerned with the relationship between the environment and diseases; the ethnographic, exploring the characteristics of barbarian tribes; the ecological, focused on the relationship between environment and physical/mental form, and between environment and culture. This multicentric structure corresponds to a heuristic model based on a tripartition: the nature of the territory and climate, the appearance of the inhabitants, and their characters and customs. The multifaceted nature of the themes has, over time, led to partial readings of the text. The study of the environment serves as a unifying perspective, but the author's real intent is to engage in the debate that developed at the times of the Persian Wars. Its central argument is a reflection on the causes that would have determined the military superiority of the Greeks, which effectively places the work in a frame of political-institutional studies. The author contends that

⁴ Ippocrate (1986), *Arie, acque, luoghi*, Marsilio, Venezia.

environmental conditions systematically determine the physical and mental form of human beings, their pathological conditions, and institutions; therefore, to predict such conditioning, it is necessary to study the properties of the forces and elements of nature. With regards to waters, it is essential to examine their similarities and differences in taste and weight, factors that determine power relations⁵. To understand whether the waters are stagnant and soft, or hard and originating from high, rocky places, or even brackish and difficult to digest, the examination must be based on data.

The soil must also be scrutinised, in order to determine whether it is poor or rich in water, as well as the drinking habits of the inhabitants of the chosen locations. From these premises, individual case studies should be addressed, narrowing the analysis to the nature of spring waters⁶, rainwaters⁷, and long-course waters⁸. Once the anthropological model is proposed, and the salient characteristics of the peoples considered are explicated comparatively, Hippocrates concludes the treatise as follows: «These differences in nature are the most important; to these must be added the territory where one lives, and the waters. You will indeed find that, in general, the appearance and customs of men conform to the nature of the territory. Where the soil is fat, soft, rich in water, with very superficial waters and a good climate, the men will also be fleshy, “without joints”, moist, refractory to labour and of cowardly spirit, indolent and sleepy; regarding the arts, they are dull, not subtle and sharp. Where the territory is bare, open, harsh, afflicted by winter and burned by the sun, one will find inhabitants who are hard, dry, “well-jointed”, tense, and hairy; in their nature, one will find a capacity for action, vigilance; they will be, in terms of character and temperament, proud and independent in judging, closer to wildness than to mildness; regarding the arts, they will be more acute and intelligent, especially in war. And you will find that everything else that lives in that territory will be like the territory»⁹. Sociologists have set aside deterministic schemes that employ biological characteristics of the human species and the physical nature of places to explain phenomena; nonetheless, it is interesting to note how, despite the limits of the heuristic model – in a historical moment where the debate revolved around issues such as the ones presented by Hippocrates in *De Aeribus* – a new nature-centred scientific model put water at the core of its critical discourse.

Symbolism and Water Imaginary. Water as a Source of Purification¹⁰

For its intrinsic virtues, water is considered a living and beneficial force: it is hard to find another substance that can at the same time wash away guilt, eliminate impurities,

⁵ Ippocrate, 1986: 73-75.

⁶ Ippocrate, 1986: 85-90.

⁷ Ippocrate, 1986: 91-95.

⁸ Ippocrate, 1986: 95-98.

⁹ Ippocrate, 1986: 133.

¹⁰ Developed by Eleonora Sparano

refresh and reinvigorate weary souls, and promise renewal and existential rebirth. It attracts, enchants and captivates with the clarity and liveliness of streams, the mobility and changeability of forms, subject to continuous renewal. Let us consider baptism or the function of holy water fonts placed at the entrance of churches; or the rite of aspersion used to bless places, means of transport, people and animals, as well as the coffin of the deceased. Due to the thaumaturgic power of its waters, every year about six million pilgrims from 140 countries travel to Lourdes to immerse themselves in the baths of miraculous water, found by Bernadette Soubirous upon indication of the Virgin Mary. Travelers collect this water in containers to bring it with them and share it with the people who could not travel. One can also mention the rite of ablution, which in the Muslim tradition precedes prayer, in observance of the precepts of Muhammad, who indicated cleanliness as half of the faith. In the Hindu world, the purifying power of water is exemplified in the twelve-yearly pitcher festival, the Kumbh Mela: celebrated at the Sangam, the confluence of the Ganges and the Yamuna, it gathers millions of pilgrims who sprinkle their bodies with sacred waters. This ritual reproduces the hierarchy of castes, in which ascetics are the first to perform the royal bath. In post-colonial religious syncretism which fuses Voodoo with Christianity, the pilgrims of Saut d'Eau invoke the Holy Mother, Virgin of Miracles, and loa, the spirit of the waterfall, to seek renewal of their lives while bathing under the impetuous flow of Haitian waterfalls. The communion between the faithful, the waterfall, and the life-giving force of the universe finds expression in the Shinto rite of Misogi Shuho, celebrated in the Mie prefecture in Japan, with the purpose of washing away impurities using the waters of the sacred waterfall of the great Tsubaki sanctuary.

Just as water acts as a benevolent and life-giving force, it can also cause disasters and sudden devastation. The Nile, the sacred river tied to the fate of Egyptian civilization, notorious for the muddy substance that seeped into the ground after being released by overflowing waters, embodies this duality. Regarding the relentless impetus and unstoppable fury of the waters, Seneca writes: «Nothing is so violent, so incapable of restraining itself, so rebellious and fierce, as the enormous force of the waves»¹¹; in his *Epistulae Morales ad Lucilium*, he states the following about lustral waters: «We venerate the sources of great rivers; where immense streams of water suddenly spring from nothing, there altars arise; we worship thermal springs and... consecrate certain ponds». Water thus stands as an ambivalent force, a dispenser of life and death, for while it vivifies, saves, and renews, it also kills, destroys and annihilates. The biblical accounts of the universal flood are strongly imbued with the idea of the duality of water, and indeed water evaporates from rivers, lakes, and the sea, to return to the earth, in liquid or solid form, bringing comfort to living beings, whether it falls from the sky or springs lively from the deep cracks of the ground: «May the waters of the snow-clad mountains bring health and peace to all people. May the spring waters bring you

¹¹ Lucio Anneo Seneca, *Questioni naturali*: III 30, 6.

calm... And may the rains be a source of tranquillity for all», says the Atharvaveda¹². For these reasons, rain is called forward via religious and para-religious ceremonies, or even processions when it is scarce due to climatic and soil conditions, as well after drought. This is the case with pre-Hispanic indigenous ceremonies still traceable in the traditions of the peoples of the Andes. These indigenous communities share a cosmology that sees Creation as an indivisible unity, embodied in the Great Mother Earth, Pacha Mama. Herewith elements converge to live their life, through external manifestations that express their benevolent or angry character. In this landscape, water is seen as a capricious entity that, depending on the seasons, rewards with abundant rains or, conversely, punishes with hail, floods, and drought. For the peoples living along the mountains of the Andean range, soil is rough and hardly arable: therefore, the inhabitants of this hostile land seek a dialogue with supernatural forces to gain their favours. The Pago ritual, dating back to the Incas, asks for the blessing of hydraulic plants by working through ancestral intercession: the ancestors are the protectors and custodians of the places where water infrastructures are to be built. During the celebrations, participants place sweets and coca leaves in baskets that are carried by the currents of watercourses. It is an experience that brings forth the idea of union between elements, considered part of a territory that humans can use strictly to serve the needs of the community: a conception that has far-reaching legal implications, since such elements should be freely available for the well-being of the community, without being subject to the rules of private law¹³.

Water also emerges as an aggregating factor, a fundamental element of bonding and social integration¹⁴: rituals and cults performed to induce rain and to halt the devastating effects of floods are widespread and deeply rooted; religious paths are typically water paths, and the quest for water usually has a religious and sacred character. The religious centre, the place of worship, is generally a location rich in water¹⁵.

The historian of religions, Mircea Eliade, defines water as the most potent archaic symbol, because it speaks to the whole human being: it embodies the sum of potentialities, the reservoir of all existential possibilities, and the religious symbol of death and resurrection, as it is simultaneously a source of life, rebirth, and purification. On this point, in his *Treatise on the History of Religions*, he writes: «As a cosmogonic symbol, the receptacle of all germs, water becomes the magical and medicinal substance par excellence; it heals, rejuvenates, ensures eternal life»¹⁶. In his view, the waters «are fons et origo,

¹² The Atharvaveda is a treatise of magical and medical formulas that draws from the realm of popular beliefs, initially considered unworthy of the Vedas. These sacred texts, written in Sanskrit, are the religious foundation of the Aryans, a people that invaded northern India around to the 20th century BC. Hindu doctrines and belief systems are based on this collection, which has become central in Hindu culture to the point of being adopted as the ritual manual of the Brahmins.

¹³ Sparano, 2015: 472-473.

¹⁴ Cipriani, 2016.

¹⁵ Cipriani, 2004.

¹⁶ Eliade, 1954.

the matrix of all the possibilities of existence... They precede every form and sustain every creation»¹⁷. In this process, the “hierophanic rituals” become a necessary step to towards the orientation of the self in the world, and towards the control and domination of reality. Through hierophanies, the formless mass of chaos was separated from the cosmos; this process elevated the profane world to a higher level than nature, thus surrounding it with a sacred aura which, while conferring legitimacy, offers protection from malignant forces. The purpose of the hierophanic rituals is to reach a point where the different levels of the cosmos, heaven, earth and the underworld converge. At this intersection the sacred breaks into the profane, forming the axis mundi, the guarantee of the order of things. In this context, Eliade’s theory of the “symbolism of the centre”¹⁸ places water in a position of precondition for the hierophanic construction of spaces, that is, at the foundation of the distinction between the sacred and the profane, and therefore at the origin of the axis mundi.

As a universal symbol of general anthropological structures, water holds the dual value of life and death: it is «the watery becoming... a bitter invitation to a journey of no return: one never bathes twice in the same river; watercourses never flow back to their source. Flowing water is the figure of the irrevocable»¹⁹. The idea of Heraclitean becoming of dark and fatal waters, understood as an archetype to which material imagination and the deep layers of the psyche adhere, comes from Gaston Bachelard²⁰: in his examination of the works of Edgar Allan Poe he seeks the foundations of truth in the substance of ideas and explores the imaginative value of hostile and dark waters, through an analysis that combines water and the night, perceived as a universal natural material phenomenon. The common thread linking the work of the epistemologist is that matter dominates form, not the other way around. It is thanks to reverie that the imagination accepts the active, penetrating, and insinuating entrance of the night into the matter of dreams: the night is substance, nocturnal matter captured by material imagination. «And since water is the substance that lends itself best to mixtures, the night penetrates the waters, clouds the lake in its depths, impregnates the pond. Sometimes the penetration is so deep, so intimate that, for the imagination, the pond retains in broad daylight a part of this nocturnal matter, a part of these substantial darkneses»²¹. According to Bachelard, water provides a centre for nocturnal impressions to converge more effectively, to strengthen and multiply: this is demonstrated by the stories that associate cursed places with a lake of darkness and horror, where water becomes a black swamp inhabited by the monstrous birds of Ares. On the shores of the lake, the night brings with it a specific fear, cold and damp,

¹⁷ Eliade, 1966.

¹⁸ Eliade, 1986.

¹⁹ Durand 1960: 109.

²⁰ Bachelard, 1942.

²¹ Bachelard, 1942: 116-117.

that penetrates the dreamer more than the fear of the night alone. As evening falls, the ghosts thicken on its shores, feeding on the water and the night. The presence of a horizon of fear makes the terror even more formidable, as the floating figures cannot be located. The shadows of water are more mobile than those of the land: they are imagination in-the-making. Beside the water, the night brings freshness to the face: it is at this point that, on the skin of the traveller who lingers, runs the chill of water to draw him into the slimy and vibrant depths. A viscous reality lurks in the air: the seductive monster can only be seen with closed eyes: «the throat closes, the features become convulsive, they freeze in ineffable horror. Something as cold as water clings to the face»²²: it is Ophelia reaching her hand out.

In a dyadic and oppositional manner²³, water attaches itself to ambivalent images, bridging complementary aspects²⁴. It is undeniable that its deadly aspect coexists with the vivacity of waters, eternally gushing at the source that symbolises continuous birth. Among the possible combinations is also the composition of water with the feminine and the maternal character, via the unconscious which associates the memory of the enveloping, nourishing, protective amniotic fluid. In this framework, the love for the landscape takes on a specific connotation, as it is linked to the first sentiment for the maternal figure, whose memory – in the chronology of the heart – remains indestructible, even when new loving forces join it. In Bachelard's reading of Poe, nature represents a projection of the mother, an ever-expansive creature inclined to embrace, willing to nourish with her very essence. A symbol of this projection is the sea, and its deep songs that attract men to it, distant voices from which the memory of the nourishing mother emerges. To love images is akin to searching for a new metaphor for an ancient love. Matter finds its sense through the infinite love for the mother and the designation of an objective meaning distilled from all the infinite possible combinations. To love a reality means possessing it, precisely because it is made of soul and memory. For material imagination, every liquid is water, based on the fundamental principle that places a primitive element at the root of substantial images. This observation is visually justified by the fact that everything that flows is water. Being current binds the epithet to the noun, as material imagination directly targets substantial qualities. Moreover, the first centres of interest touch the organic realm because, in order to express themselves, they need to they need to be channeled into images. The first syntax, therefore, passes through a grammar of needs that sees milk at the centre of primordial aspirations. For the sensual and long-lasting value attached to the mouth and the lips, every liquid, including water, becomes milk, since every enjoyable beverage recalls maternal nourishment. The sea-reality – which is simultaneously sea-food, sea-vital, sea-milk – is fertilised by tiny beings that transform

²² Bachelard 1942: 119.

²³ Durand, 1960.

²⁴ Dumont, 1991.

it into the mucus of a sweet and infinite womb, where the little ones swim like in warm milk. Nothing suggests this image objectively, as everything is subjectively motivated. The great fatality of the world, the hunger experienced on earth, is pre-empted and ignored, because in the sea the search for food is not driven by movement: it is enough to lazily open the mouth to inhale, like fish, from the breast of the common mother²⁵. In marine waters, food floats as in a gigantic all-embracing dream: in this pan-biological vision water becomes an animal liquid and the primordial source of nourishment for the living.

Bachelard's epistemological work, aimed at re-anchoring the integrity of images to their realism, leads to consider Jung's association with the Great Mother, identified as the greatest numinous power of the unconscious. This association happens through a dichotomy that was not noticed by his contemporary Bachelard. The singularity of this note lies in Jung's use of the metaphor of the river currents to explain the nature of archetypes: «Archetypes are like riverbeds which dry up when water deserts them, but can be found again after some time. An archetype is like an old watercourse along which the water of life has flowed for centuries, digging a deep channel. The more water has flowed in it, the more it has cut out a peculiar channel for itself, and the more likely it is that sooner or later it will return to its old bed». ²⁶ The archetypal relationship between water as a source of life, death and the woman is laid in the realm of "depth psychology". Jung describes this as «what is benevolent, protective, tolerant; what fosters growth, fertility, nourishment; the places of magical transformation, of rebirth; the instinct or the flowing impulse; what is secret, hidden, dark; the abyss, the world of the dead; what devours, seduces, intoxicates; what generates anguish, the inescapable»²⁷.

Conclusions²⁸

In this essay we have addressed the theme of water, a humble substance with a simple name, yet a highly complex element due to its implications on numerous social, symbolic, and cultural levels. As an omnipresent element in both the individual and the collective existence, water makes life possible on Earth, while its constant erosive action, both slow and progressive, violent and destructive, shapes and moulds the Earth's crust, designing the landscapes where civilisations settle.

Looking at the history of humanity alongside cultures and beside humans, one finds a universal element: water. Where there is water, civilisations arise. Thanks to

²⁵ The powerful intertwining of matter and imagination can be found in the description of fish proposed by Michelet (1861): according to the historian, these animals are covered in mucus to better flow in the marine fluid through a rhythmic and sinuous movement. This characteristic has earned them the nickname of "organized animal water".

²⁶ Jung, Carl Gustav, *Aspetti del dramma contemporaneo*, 1945.

²⁷ Jung, 1997.

²⁸ Developed by Nicola Strizzolo

watercourses, humans have obtained sustenance and developed techniques that have allowed them to expand spaces, communication routes, and interpersonal exchanges. In this regard, it is interesting to note how in shamanic practices water assumes a crucial role as a mediator between the physical and the spiritual world. Water plays a crucial role in shamanism and is viewed not only as a source of life but also as a spiritual element. In many shamanic cultures, water is seen as a means of purification and renewal, facilitating communication between the physical and spiritual worlds. Shamans often use water in healing rituals to cleanse the aura and enhance spiritual visions. Water can also symbolise fluidity, adaptability, and the depth of the unconscious. Shamanic practices regard bodies of water as sacred places, where messages can be received from spirits or ancestors²⁹. Shamans, who are central figures in many traditional cultures, see water as a powerful tool for purification and communication with the spirit world.

As highlighted hereby, the body thirsts, but so does the spirit with its imaginative power. Rituals and cults that are performed to induce rain and halt the devastating effects of floods are widespread and deeply rooted; agriculture, pastoralism, breeding, fishing and hunting depend on the presence or absence of water, the ability to store it and retain it, and today's water crises further proves this point. «From our entry into the world in an excess of amniotic fluid, to the ritual ablution of the dead, water flows through our lives, tracing a line between the sacred and the profane, between life and death. We are bathed, dipped, immersed, sprinkled, and blessings flow, wide and deep like the Jordan River of the Holy Scriptures, wonderful like the spring of Lourdes, cathartic like tears»³⁰. In this flow of life, shamans play a fundamental role, using water in their rituals to connect the physical world with the spiritual, thus demonstrating the universality and sacredness of water³¹.

According to our findings, a possible interpretative framework for water could refer to Hirschman's concept of staples as symbolic, religious and magical-sacral resources of common value³², whose foundations rest at the roots of cultural identity. These resources are crucial reference points in the construction of social spaces, which orient the frameworks of collective memory³³; they also facilitate processes of self-definition and self-positioning in the world and in the community. Water reminds us of the fundamental entanglement of humankind, the biological oneness of peoples, and the matrix connecting different human groups: what differentiates them is history, culture, and what defines their relationship with the environment, natural resources and other humans. As an element, it simultaneously indicates unity and division: it

²⁹ Harner, 1982; Eliade, 1964.

³⁰ Newman, 2010: 40.

³¹ Harner, 1982.

³² Hirschman, 1987.

³³ Halbwachs, 1925, 1968.

is global, common and shared, albeit contested, and with major implications and differentiations at local level. A history of water, in its biological, material, symbolic, religious, and social aspects, could coincide with the history of the world itself: water acts, in this, as a criterion for identity configuration, an aggregating factor, a material and symbolic agent of entire civilisations, a distinctive element of the representations of social worlds. Water, in short, is a foundational criterion of identity³⁴.

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³⁴ Sparano, Abdelmalek, 2021, 2023.

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