



At the Sources of the Sacred: Evoking Nature and its Cults by Listening to the Rivers

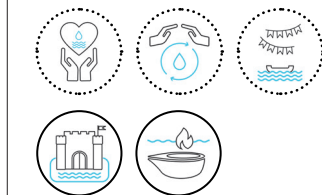
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Zones of fluvial influence, which were the cradles of many human societies both past and present, are key in today's discourse on how to manage water, culture and heritage in ways that are compatible with sustainable development. Water/river customs have served environmental/cultural practices. This article discusses the interdependence or dissociation between "nature/water" and "culture," which has forged a more or less strict dualism depending on specific religious frameworks. This dualism can be critically analyzed by sociology, phenomenology and political ecology. The relationship between the reverence accorded to the "sacred" and "nature" and how humans have maintained this respect is however not enough when addressing environmental crises. Could a new approach involve exploiting religious history to restore practical and moral meaning to contemporary challenges, including water-related environmental issues? Very few research programs or development projects really consider transdisciplinary and transcultural perspectives. A suggestion would be to combine the history of science, the comparative history of religious beliefs, the political sciences and cultural studies to define a "global history of religious ecology." This would aid understanding of the multiplicity of religious conceptions of nature.



KEY THEMES



< Fig. 1 Precarious temple in the Mekong Delta, Vietnam. Living with yearly flooding and under the protection of Buddha and the deity of the soil (Source: Pascal Bourdeaux, 2005).

Introduction

Earth is referred to as the Blue Planet, because two-thirds of the lithosphere is covered by the oceans. Yet it is the continents and not the seas that have long defined the destiny and mobility of humans. Since the acknowledgment of the waters as an element of separation and a multi-faceted danger, people have definitively circumscribed and partially domesticated their natural environments. Traces of ancient human settlements have been found on the most favorable banks of rivers and streams, indicating that the first sedentary people established a specific relationship with rivers - for living, to facilitate movement and to support their agro-pastoral activities. The cycles of nature gave rise to rites and festivities celebrating Earth and the river; communities have been preserved by using material technology and also by devoting spaces to protect themselves from the violence of nature and to venerate the spirits of cereals. Exceptional heritage sites that had disappeared due to rising sea levels and climate change have been uncovered, such as the port of Alexandria in Egypt, and the river port of Arles, where unique remains have been found at junctions between rivers, estuaries and the sea, and also between confluences inland.

Rivers are interfaces constituting natural circulation and communication routes. They are a central element of our biotopes, although we are no longer always aware of them today. And yet, rivers are much more than that. As vectors of civilization, they drive and regulate human activities. As a source and vital power, the river is still today the base of material and immaterial cultures that have continued to diversify and reinvent themselves. But as a source with destructive power, a river can also be uncontrollable and dangerous. It knows how to use violence to overflow the increasingly reduced

domain that people have conceded over time. It can become deadly when it dries up or begins to carry materials that are naturally toxic or transformed by humans.

Archaeological Exploration of Heritage Sites: The Mekong Delta

The history of contemporary religions in South-east Asia or, to be precise, in the societies surrounding the Mekong Delta in the south of Vietnam, serves as a landmark and geographical framework to situate various religious dynamics in space and to recontextualize them in time, taking into account how they are structured around local beliefs or reinterpret scriptural traditions (fig. 2). Modern Buddhist pagodas, temples dedicated to supernatural deities on riversides or hills, and also archaeological relics and on-site museums give materiality to this cultural heritage from Indianized, Sinicized and Indigenized traditions (Tucker and Duncan 1998; Grim 2001). Over time, the Mekong Delta has become as much alive as the populations that stretch along its shores, who move on its tributaries and canals, that live thanks to it. It has revealed itself as an essential, familiar and even central element of what is rightly called the "fluvial civilization of the Mekong Delta," namely the set of lifestyles, popular and scholarly expressions of material and immaterial culture, of original representations of the phenomenal world and imaginary worlds (fig. 3), of pragmatic adaptation to nature.

During the first half of the twentieth century, the digging of canals and aerial photography made it possible to discover a civilization known in texts but never precisely located in space, that is, the case of the Mekong Delta, where the kingdom of Funan once existed. The numerous vestiges (ornaments, statues of deities, founda-



^ Fig. 2 Phước Hậu Pagoda, Trà Ôn, Vietnam. An example of a religious site located at the crossroads of different rivers and canals in the Mekong Delta (Source: Pascal Bourdeaux, 2012).

tions of monuments) prove that people organized their activities according to the rhythm of the river, its layout, its relationship with the maritime coast and the network of hills and places of surrounding elevation. Even today, the ancient establishment and presence of religious communities along the rivers, still marked by archaic places of worship, ancestral and modern places of collective prayers (and meeting places), tell us how people have maintained this relationship with their river, in both rural and urban areas.

Religious Variants

From the cult of nature, which had to be protected by propitiatory rites and seasonal pilgrimages, forms of the divinization of nature and rivers, which formalized this passage from belief in abstract forces to individualized entities, were created by religious leaders. In other

words, there was a passage from myths and legends to the ritual practices of agrarian and hydraulic societies. Endowed with a personality and a history, deities act as a reflection of human activities.

Rivers illustrate this alliance between nature and the sacred. It should be noted that the river is distinct from water which, as a generic and sacred element, partially encompasses it. The river is not either the sea or the ocean, a real antinomy of the earth, but rather an in-between. Wanting to “listen” to the rivers means, first, respecting the rivers for what they are, situated in their ecosystem, and not for what people have tried to do with them during the course of history. Wanting to return to the “sources” is then to remember that every river has an origin and an endpoint, that it only represents a segment in the discontinuity of the water cycle. Finally, it is to remember that the river is at the origin of human societies and that it is the respect



^ Fig. 3 The fourth level of Hell (the river of mud) in the Sino-Vietnamese tradition (Source: Riator Léon and Léofanti, 1895).

and deference expressed toward the river that has forged myths, legends and beliefs. The latter have not completely disappeared, including in industrialized societies where the marks of respect and the rituals of founding industrial works, for example, have taken the secularized forms of “baptisms” and “commemorations.”

We still find today, especially around the Mediterranean or in Asia for example, the memory of these foundations through myths and cults (fertility, mother goddess, agrarian cycles, propitiatory rites, funeral practices) that have distinguished between profane and sacred activities since ancient times; similarly, these myths and cults have distinguished what pertains to nature or culture and even what relates to nature or the supernatural. We also find these distinctions in the sacred texts of revealed religions, the cosmological representations of the religions of Asia, the oral literatures of people without writing in Africa, Oceania and the Americas. There are essential differences between the Western world and the Asian world in terms of defining monism and dualism (are humans part of nature or are they in a position to dominate the latter?), and in distinguishing theological thought from cosmological thought (was the world created or is it uncreated? Does it correspond to a divine plan or does it follow an incessant mutation?). In Indian culture, certain rivers are thus gods or constituent elements of the cosmic entity falling under the category of monism. In Chinese culture, there is a fundamental difference from Indian culture in the “domestication” of the river, in the way of living with the river or protecting oneself from it to form a society. In ancient Buddhism, we also find the realistic or metaphorical evocation of rivers. According to a legend, Siddharta Gautama intervened to settle conflicts over the use of water around the Rohini River; he also crossed the Ganges full of deference. Indian Buddhism evokes eight rivers

coming from the same lake, Anavatapta, to better illustrate the notions of the interdependence of all things and of differentiated and gradual progress (eight rivers) toward the same deliverance (original lake).

Many ancestral cultures have transformed the river, for example the Amazon River, into a malevolent genius. The river can be considered an environment inhabited by real or imaginary monsters who, on the one hand, urged respect for the gods of the soil and the rivers, and on the other, who called for humility and vigilance. These beliefs expressed in their own way, in metaphorical forms, what scientific knowledge has since described as physical, chemical and bacteriological phenomena, which made crossings, uses or domestications of rivers perilous, if not inadvisable or impossible; in other words, against nature.

These archaic or refashioned beliefs in the “religions of the world” tend to reappear in the current context of awareness of the environmental emergency. The latter can be alarmist and catastrophist when it points to the irreversibility of the overconsumption of natural resources and climate change. It can also be instructive when it seeks to bring the path of a re-enchanted modernity to scientific debates and political decisions, in other words, when it seeks to rebalance the issues, on the one hand, of the anthropic development of nature and the recognition, on the other, of the spiritualization of nature.

Relations between religion and nature (fig. 4), more broadly between the sacred and nature, have indeed always existed – even if, as we have set an example with rivers, it is primarily a question of the relationship to the supernatural world as if nature has escaped from religious thought to the detriment of science, which fundamentally deals with a desacralized nature.



^ Fig. 4 Dakar, Senegal. Early morning prayer turned toward Mecca and in front of the sea and Gorée island (Source: Pascal Bourdeaux, 2018).

Humans now recognize that if modern science and technology know how to act on natural laws to exploit their potential in the collective interest, the latter very often perceives nature only superficially. In the replacement of the state of nature, which is relegated essentially to mystical contemplation and sensitive life, but also in the replacement of nature religions disqualified as archaisms, it is productivist systems and consumerist lifestyles that have been sacralized. However, these systems also show their limits here in societies that care little about environmental ethics or a holistic acceptance of nature. The loss of religions' influence on modern societies has not only weakened the political, social and cultural functions of religious practice; it has also affected what is often the forgotten relationship of humans to the sacred-

ness of their natural environment.

Contemporary Responses

Can we restrict this nature to a mechanism or does it hide a part of unfathomable mystery connected to water? In recent decades, the spiritualization of ecology has taken various forms, such as bioregionalism and eco-development in the 1960s, and discussions have been revived under the joint effects of secularization, environmental crises and development ethics. Some have engaged in critical re-readings of the Anthropocene and the history of all forms of "living" things, including fauna and flora; others have turned more specifically to an updated analysis of practices and sacred texts, in other words, a ritual and doctrinal reassessment of religions in their relationship to ecology (Gottlieb 2006). A major program developed

in the United States has, for example, enabled the creation of the Religions of the World and Ecology collection. The method and the objectives of the research were to find an answer to the moral challenges caused by environmental crises, to replace the concept of nature at the crossroads of the material world and expressions of the sacred, and, one might add, to promote interreligious dialogue.

It seems that we have been progressing toward an increasingly comparative approach, between human societies and also between systems of thought, to define the policies and logics of development, an ethics of international aid, and even the shared meanings and understanding of “commons” and collaborative economy (Cornu, Orsi and Rochfeld 2017). A survey of all these traditions on other continents and in other societies would undoubtedly illustrate the wealth of cultural expressions that have always linked humans to the river, partially found in all the museums worldwide dedicated to rivers and their infrastructures.

Conclusion

Humans cannot dominate ecosystems by artificializing them, because they are part of the whole living world with which they interact. The natural environment, social space and the phenomena of beliefs which interpenetrate should be considered not only in the same movement but also through their interactions. The history of ideas and techniques can prove useful in bringing back ancestral and local knowledge that is much less archaic or antithetical to scientific progress. In an even more limited context, religious history can also be an essential resource for restoring practical and moral meaning to contemporary challenges, including development and water-related environmental

issues in a time of climate change (fig. 1).

Returning to the general theme of rivers and cultural heritage, we therefore realize that it is not only the notion of the “sacred” that must be questioned and compared according to cultural and religious traditions, but perhaps even more that of “nature,” as we see that the relationship that humans maintain with their direct environment and with the “values” that they attribute to it have been able to evolve from one society to another, from one era to another. Simultaneously preserving the tangible and intangible heritage can certainly help us promote the use and exchange values of ancient societies, to bring our contemporary societies and cultures into dialogue, to find solutions together to current challenges, or at least a shared definition of what the universal commons are, among which we certainly find the river civilizations.

By considering the current situation, we should rethink environmental history as “global environmental history,” taking into consideration the multiplicity of epistemologies from Western countries but also from the “South.” We should reread the sacred texts and discuss them together to understand better how each defines relationships between nature and culture, pursuing the study of comparative religions under the lens of ecology and cultural heritage. We talk about the will to “listen” to the rivers: we also have to listen to the riparians at the same time. What can we learn about local and popular knowledge of protecting the environment and preserving heritages? Developing programs on cultural and religious history could be useful.

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Pascal Bourdeaux, Doctor of history and Vietnamese language graduate, has been a lecturer at the École Pratique des Hautes Études since 2007 and a statutory member of the Groupe Sociétés, Religions, Laïcités GSRL (UMR 8582 EPHE-CNRS) since 2010. His initial work focused on the history of Hòa Hảo Buddhism, an expression of religious modernity and the southern culture of Vietnam. His complementary field studies aimed more broadly at the analysis of contemporary socio-religious specificities of the Mekong Delta to understand what defines the “river civilization” and how it was historically inserted into the framework of the nation-state. As part of the activities carried out during his delegation to the French School of the Far East from 2012 to 2015, Pascal initiated a multidisciplinary research program on the sociocultural and environmental transformations of the Mekong Delta, which aimed at promoting the local literary and written heritage. He is also a member of the Rivers committee for the Initiatives for the Future of Great Rivers (IAGF).

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