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## Editorial

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## **Editorial**

### **Zdenka Kalnicka**

The theme of this special volume of *Wagadu*, “Water and Women in Past, Present and Future,” might cause some doubts about its relevance at first sight. However, the shortage of water, especially fresh water, is starting to threaten large portions of the globe to such a degree that the United Nations proclaimed this to be the century of water. In a short period of time, water is predicted to become more valuable than petrol, and some leading private companies are prepared to profit from it. To stop such an attempt, organizations like the United Nations efforts to wake up governments and international organizations throughout the world and push them to take actions to prevent the catastrophe, which is already visible, especially in Africa.

As all contributions to this issue clearly show, water is closely associated with women, this connection being firmly rooted in the mythology, symbols and legends of different cultures. The association of water with women still forms a part of the gender stereotypes accepted in many cultures, thus influencing the real lives of millions of women in the world. As a result of the negative impact caused by the shortage of water especially on women, the organization Alliance of Water and Gender was established. The Interagency Task Force on Gender and Water also came into existence, with responsibility for monitoring the situation and recommending and implementing programs and actions to improve it.

The issue can be divided into two parts: the first deals with real problems of water management and its consequences for women, and the second analyzes the symbolic bond of water and woman in mythology, religion, and especially in art and literature. However, they are intertwined, as it is impossible to decide which one is more relevant: in our lives, the symbolic and real aspects are always working together to shape the framework of our actions.

The first paper, written by members of the Interagency Task Force on Gender and Water, Marcia M. Brewster, Thora Martina Herrmann, Barbara Bleisch and Rebecca Pearl, “A Gender Perspective on Water Resources and Sanitation,” offers an almost global overview of the relationship between water and women throughout the world (especially, but not exclusively, in the global south). The authors explore the issue of water supply and sanitation within the framework of the United Nations’ program on water and sustainable development; however, they analyze it from the gender perspective usually omitted from the global commitments in these areas. From that perspective, they address the connection of water supply and sanitation with health, education, land ownership, agricultural production capacity and resource development, alleviation of poverty, privatization, and even war, clearly showing the urgency and importance of the problem. They also point out several positive results of actions pursued and give us a list of recommendations for further actions. According to the authors, the main problem lies in the gender division in water management: in most cultures, primary responsibility for the use and management of water resources, sanitation and health at the household level rests

with women, but they often have no voice and no choice in the decision-making process. To improve this situation, it is necessary to involve both genders, especially women, into the process of improving the water supply and sanitation. The authors take water as a basic human right and warn against the privatization of water services. According to their view, water for basic needs should be identified as a public good and not as a commodity to be traded in the open market. When connecting the shortage of water with the possibility of war, the authors address a very serious issue.

The importance of incorporating gender perspectives into all policies and programs aimed at improving the water supply is noted by Nana Ama Poku Sam in her article “Gender Mainstreaming and Integration of Women in Decision-Making: The Case of Water Management in Samari-Nkwanta, Ghana.” The author describes in detail the strategies and results of the implementation of the Samari-Nkwanta Water Supply and Sanitation Project in rural communities of Ghana, which was designed with conscious consideration of gender issues, with the aim to ensure that both women and men participate in the implementation of the project in all its phases. As Poku Sam shows, such an approach was effective and ended with even wider gender consequences: it led the community to re-evaluate the existing gender roles and to shift from male-dominance to a more equitable sharing of power.

With the paper “‘The Place of Cool Waters’: Women and Water in the Slums of Nairobi, Kenya,” written by a collective of authors, Chi-Chi Undie, Johannes John-Langba, and Elizabeth Kimani, we move to Kenya and to informal urban settlements. As the authors remind us, it is incorrect to think that living conditions are more favorable in urban settlements than in rural ones. As their contribution documents, the situation in the slums of Nairobi is much worse than in some rural areas of Africa. The authors give experiences of female slum-dwellers, particularly how they are affected by water in its many forms, the economical consequences of the shortage of water for them, and what strategies women employ to mitigate these consequences. It is significant, that the study originally sought to clarify the link between food insecurity, childhood diseases, and the school drop-out rate. However, it ends with the finding that the root cause of all these issues is water shortage. According to the authors, there is an urgent need for government attention to informal settlements especially concerning water purification and organized provision of water, as two-thirds of Africa’s urban population lives in informal settlements. It is predicted that by 2030 Africa’s population will be largely urban, with the largest proportion living in slums.

Our exploration of the connection between water and women leads us now to Nepal and Asia. Bhawana Upadhyay asks “How Beneficial has Water Technology been for Rural Nepalese Women?” Her research is framed in the broader question of the impact of technological innovations on rural populations, especially on rural women. She studies the impact of irrigation technology, specifically treadle pumps, on women’s lives in Nepal terai, examining its effects on women of three different socio-economic classes: landless, small, and large cultivator households. She looks at changes in their workloads, access to and control over income, and access to consumption. Upadhyay’s research focuses also on the effects within the respective class, taking into account intra-household

gender relations. On the basis of her findings, she challenges two generalized claims about the relationship of technological innovations and rural women: that technological change has unfavorable effects on rural women, and that agricultural modernization schemes have affected rural women in developing countries positively. The case studies reveal that the treadle pumps have brought different changes to women's lives, not only related to their class but also according to intra-household gender relationships.

With the paper, "The Changing Role of Women in Water Management: Myths and Realities," written by Nandita Singh, the problem of false gender generalizations comes to the forefront. On the basis of the holistic anthropological theory of gender, and the complex analysis of the particular case in a rural Indian setting (introduction of hand-pumps), the author criticizes the belief that women universally face the problem of access to safe water sources, undergo hardships in fetching water, or that they always lack a forum or mechanism to have their voices heard. According to Singh, the research is more realistic in its findings, and more efficient in its consequences when based on postulates that gender relations are multi-faceted and must be understood first in terms of the context. Singh offers persuasive example of this approach, taking into accounts not only caste (class) differences but also the whole social structure and belief system of the population (religious view on the purity of water, the inter-caste relations of women and men, and the relations among women themselves in accordance to their age and position in the society). She creates a highly complex picture of the society, noting that the project to introduce hand-pumps in the states of Bihar and Madhya Pradesh was not successful because of the adopted universal perspective. Singh identifies the myths that caused the unsatisfying outcomes: that technological intervention will be adopted uniformly and spontaneously by women, and that participation of women in water management decisions needs to be fostered through equality-based opportunities.

The article by Colleen Kattau, "Women, Water and the Reclamation of the Feminine," intertwines the real problems of women's right to water with mythological and symbolic aspects. She explains the roots of the association of women with water pointing to their symbolic connection in mythology where they represent life-giving capacity. She contrasts the holistic knowledge of traditional cultures where human beings are understood as part of nature with a dualistic pattern of thinking culminating in instrumentalist knowledge about earth (water) and their reduction to a resource for 'man' to use it. This struggle reveals itself in the linguistic war over the concept of water as a resource versus water as a human right, having far-reaching consequences: either transforming water into a commodity for privatization and trade, or keeping water within a public or community service-system. However, water as an element is the least possible phenomenon to be reified and divided into parts as its essential nature is to move and change. As the symbol for regeneration and rebirth, it has deep meaning for the oneness of all creation. The tendency toward commodification of water is balanced by emerging resistance to it, not surprisingly coming mostly from women. Kattau dismantles the hidden requirement of the econo-cultural approach, that of cutting the bonds between humans and nature (the concept of nature-culture duality) with the aim of giving nature to the disposition and control of human beings. By inter-connecting the mythological, philosophical, and political aspects of the water issue, the author introduces an important

aspect into the theme: the potential of femininity and water for the future of our civilization. Her analysis of the water-woman relationship in many ancient mythologies, such as Indian, Pre-Columbian, and Afro-Cuban, tackles many themes elaborated in more detail in the following articles.

“The Ladies of the Water: Iemanjá, Oxum, Oiá and a Living Faith” by Cláudia Cerqueira do Rosario is a first-person account of a popular festival in Brazil devoted to Iemanjá. The author proves on the basis of her own experience that the goddess of water is still alive in contemporary culture in spite of many attempts in history to suppress the rites in her honor. Rosario’s paper gracefully combines accounts of her personal experience as a participant in the celebration (stressing both sacred and profane feelings), the descriptions of characteristics of the goddesses, and philosophical considerations about the contemporary water crisis. According to Rosario, this crisis shows that the pseudo-rationality of our age has a very irrational aspect, and reminds us that the supposed irrational side of the myth has a neglected rationality (an interdependence between humans and the environment). Rosario agrees with Kattau that the crisis is caused by the loss of a holistic approach to nature.

Blanka Knotková-Čapková in her “Symbols of Water and Woman on Selected Examples of Modern Bengali Literature in the Context of Mythological Tradition” concentrates on interpretation of symbols found in literature, especially poetry. She finds in the background of modern Bengali literature the traditional Indian women deities and their characteristics, now secularized. After examining many contemporary Bengali poets, she reveals different aspects of the water-woman homology (the archetypal symbol of creation and destruction, symbol of the womb as the beginning and end of life and rebirth, and also of the womb as dark mysteriousness; a symbol of the continuation, preservation of life, symbol of transience and elusiveness, traditional male poetic symbol of charm and beauty). The specificity of Bengali literature is found in its combination of a metonymic and a metaphoric union of river and woman. The author also points out the ambivalence of water as a symbol of life and death.

The last theme became central for my paper “Images of Water and Woman in the Arts.” I elaborate my thoughts on the basis of the interpretation of the artworks (fine art), created by both male and female artists with the aim to explore the hypothesis of the differences in art determined by the gender of the artist. I claim that in the course of history the aspects of life and death, originally united in ancient mythologies of the Great Mother, were divided and separated from each other (especially in modern European art). To document this division, I interpret pictures, connecting woman with life and connecting her with death. My examples show (with no claim for generalization) that sometimes men and women evaluate the symbolic connection of woman with water differently. As a symbol with the potential to overcome the separation of life and death, the old symbol of frog is offered (representing the cycle of life, death and rebirth).

“Narcissuses, Medusas, Ophelia...Water Imagery and Femininity in the Texts by Two Decadent Women Writers,” by Viola Parente-Čapková, returns us to literature. Dealing with the particular problem of the Decadent period, the author connects the findings with

the main theoretical problems of feminist philosophy and aesthetics. Her essay is an example of very complex, multi-layered and contextual analyses of water-women imagery of two Decadent women writers, Rachilde and Onerva. The text is enriched by the re-interpretation of the symbols of Narcissus/Narcissa, Medusa and Ophelia by Parente-Čapková herself, enabling her to challenge the existing interpretations of Rachilde's and Onerva's works. The author identifies two different strategies of creating gender identity these writers use in their texts (constructivist essentialism and masking and masquerade) but also shows that the strategies are, in fact, much more complex. In the process of writing, women writers encounter the necessity to work through various images of womanhood as well as the notions of self-portrait, self-representation, authorship and creativity, based on both the symbolic, discursive and the empirical, material historical dimensions of their lives.

The story of Undine in "The Heart of Undine: The Im/possibility to Love under Water," written by Ulrike Hugo, serves as an apt example of the above-mentioned process of re-interpretation and re-evaluation of the content of traditional symbols: Hugo transforms the symbol of the mermaid as a fatal seducer and victim into a symbol of the exploration of woman's subjectivity and her return to life.

This issue identifies several strategies of how to look at the connection of water and women. It can be approached from the perspective of the real lives of many women, especially in developing countries, with the aim to document the real and practical responsibilities of women who supply and manage water for their families representing a great burden for them, and being obstacles to their development. It is legitimate to make every possible attempt to lessen this burden by improving the water supply in their territory and to involve women into the decision-making process. We just need to keep in mind that our help should take into account the local (cultural and social) context. We also can use the potential of the water-women association in our own actions as women, not only to create opposition to privatization and pollution of water, but also to bring a positive message to the world pointing out the suppressed value of water (women) and its potential to overcome the governing dualistic, instrumentalist and economic approach to nature. However, water-woman symbolism is highly ambiguous, and can be interpreted differently in accordance with a given theoretical and cultural context. When interpreted as chaos and indetermination to be overcome by symbolic order (Jaques Lacan), it can serve as a part of the patriarchal culture. When connected with the magnitude of life, continuity and flexibility (Luce Irigaray, Helène Cixous, Julia Kristeva), it is transformed into a device of feminist subversion of this order (and for re-thinking the philosophical dualities, including duality of gender). There is also another possibility, not so visible in presented papers, but found in feminist literature (Michèle Le Doeuff): to reject all attempts to find specific traits of femininity (connection of water and women being one of them), claiming them to be artificially constructed, with harmful consequences for women.

As an editor, I am glad that this special issue of *Wagadu* is really transnational, having collected a variety of papers from all over the world that address significant issues prevalent not only in the north but especially in the global south. I am deeply indebted

not only to all the contributors but also to the editorial staff, reviewers and editors of the final texts, and especially to Editor-in-Chief Mecke Nagel.