

# The numinosity of water

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## Abstract

Numinosity refers to the spiritual power in the relationship between the individual and other people and things. The numinosity of water is discussed in the context of culture and religions. Science without consideration of numinosity can be dehumanizing. Often considered supernatural, other synonyms of numinosity include transcendent, ineffable and marvelous, not necessarily including religious belief. Secular expression of numinosity includes poetry and other literature and arts. Human connection with water is expressed in the sublime, poetry and myth, and the shadow, torture and disease. Loss of the spiritual and cultural meaning of water is a risk associated with coming shortages and potential conflict over supply. Culture loss is associated with adverse health consequences.

*Keywords: water symbolism, sacred sites, indigenous rights, symbolic power, numinosity.*

## 1 Introduction

A numen is an object or idea, which has power to an individual via its abstract meaning. Numinosity describes the supernatural or mysterious quality of the relationship between the individual and the numen. Data sources on the meaning of water to populations worldwide are extensive and rich. Much of this accumulated knowledge is available in publications on cultural symbolism. Literary criticism and art history address the transcendent nature of water in those genres, which are not the particular focus of this discussion. The objective here is to apply various lenses through which to see the numinosity of water, identify helpful references on the topic, and demonstrate the importance of addressing the numen of water to populations, cultures and politics worldwide.

Numinosity comprises myth, including creation stories, epic narratives and regional fables. Geertz calls these various forms of oral and written tradition



“master fictions” [1]. These fictions are endowed with an attractive charisma, reflected in various rituals and signs, which include elements of psychology and culture. Centers arise manifesting leading ideas and leading institutions to create arenas for events which express this charisma, whether moral, aesthetic, or scientific. Leaders participate in this charisma, linking the symbolic and the political in what Geertz calls, “the glowing center”, a location for serious acts. Whether individuals or groups identify with common beliefs or spirituality, Demerath cites a prevailing human need for meaning and belonging [2]. Despite movements toward secularization, sacralisation continues as a human tendency. A route toward the various meanings of water in culture, religion and landscapes follows.

## 2 Water as religious symbol

Water is holy, sacrosanct and that which we cannot do without [3]. Water is a ubiquitous symbol in world religions, as stated by Eliade, “in cosmogony, in myth, ritual, and iconography, water fills the same function in whatever type of cultural pattern we find it; it precedes all forms and upholds all creation” [4]. Immersion in and immergence from water in Christian baptism are more than symbolic of dying and rising in Christ. Eliade contends all religious uses of water symbolize the origin of creation out of water, a rebirth as significant as the first birth of life on earth. The Moses myth is constructed around water with Moses’ name itself meaning “draw out” [5]. Moses was drawn out of the Nile by Pharaoh’s daughter, and he drew the Hebrews out of Egypt, and water out of the rock at Massah Meribah.

Water is the key element of the Koran, the holy book of Islam [6]. Muhammad was challenged by would-be followers to produce a spring from the earth, which he did, reminiscent of the Moses story. The cosmos and every living thing owe their existence to God’s creation of them with water. The daily ablution rituals of Islam require water as a sign and living expression of purity. The repeated reward for right living in the Koran is a promise of a paradise where running waters flow.

Water is therapeutic in its effect on the human body and the soul. Bouguerra cites the following examples of the importance of water to the spirit of public life, and posits water as the source of almost all religions. The god Horus uses holy water to purify the Pharaoh in a statue in the Louvre. King Norodom Sihanouk of Cambodia sprinkled holy water on his son, the new king, Norodom Sihamoni. In 1999, the Catholic bishops of California called for recognition of the Columbia River as a “driving force of the spiritual life of the region” [6].

## 3 Water as sacred site

Water in nature inspires reverence and the development of ceremonies of thanksgiving and worship. The oldest religious building in the world is said to be the Mousterian monument in southern Tunisia at El Guettar, which is dated at 45,000 BC. It was built to protect a sacred spring. [6] Sacred sites can be thought



of in Geertz's terms as places where "serious things happen". Indigenous people oppose "wilderness" as a connotation of landscapes, which have been modified in a native management manner [7]. Sacred sites are not the result of nature having no owners. They are cultural landscapes. They were also mapped by indigenous people, before the landscape was appropriated by mainstream interests and place names thereby changed [8].

Some conservation efforts have overlooked the indigenous contribution to the maintenance and meaning of sacred sites in what is known as the "Yellowstone model" of national park management [9]. These approaches generally exclude indigenous perspectives of living on the land, which becomes a "management" concern. An alternative approach would be to learn from the monastic and indigenous communities that do so successfully how to protect sacred sites. A quarter of a million sacred sites worldwide could benefit from involving the local stakeholders in continued conservation of these sites.

Sacred sites may be edifices of mainstream religions in developed countries or the mountains and streams of tropical cultural groups. Indigenous populations in developing countries face more complex problems in cultural survival [10]. Many religious groups are active in competition for converts among traditional people. The land tenure of indigenous people is at risk from powerful elements in governments. Indigenous spirituality is considered illegitimate and superstitious by many in mainstream religions. Oviedo advocates an ethical approach, which values all forms of spirituality, ecumenism, human rights and equity for vulnerable groups.

## 4 Water as suffering

Biblical accounts of the Hebrews wandering in the wilderness presage the real experience of the promise of a land with problems of water access [5]. The land "flowing with milk and honey" was not only not real, it was a portent of the continuing struggle for water. Milk and honey are not a substitute for water. Moses, who survived the drowning of the innocents in the Nile, who turned the Nile into blood as a curse on Egypt, who parted the sea, and drew water from a rock was forbidden to enter the promised land for having offended Yahweh. The Moses myth relates to a transformation of a search for a homeland to the establishment of a law, using water as a central symbol in the wilderness and in the person of Moses.

Suffering from water quality is well documented. Ennis-McMillan demonstrated the social dimensions of people suffering from water scarcity in a Mexican community [11]. "We are suffering from water," a research participant expressed, indicating a collective bodily distress to the researcher. Paying for water; hauling water; not receiving purchased piped water because the delivery system has broken down; tampering with the supply line by neighbours; inadequate amounts of water per family member; and water borne illness were all causes of suffering from water. Thirst and the struggle for water have a dispiriting effect of highlighting powerlessness and social inequality. As one segment of society suffers pain, anxiety and discomfort from lack of water,



another group can be observed using drinking water for lawns and gardens and washing automobiles. Ennis-McMillan characterizes this as a human rights issue. Although food is mentioned in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, water is not identified as a human right [12]. Millions of women and children worldwide are occupied in the endless task of hauling water for daily use from ever more distant and often compromised sources, keeping these labourers out of their usual roles in work, families and schools.

While indigenous populations may see water as a bounty of nature readily available, among larger population groups water has been treated as a commodity since ancient times. The price has gone up with modern bottling facilities, but the fact that water is a commodity is nothing new. The price is likely to accelerate with shortages and conflict over water sources. The number of people who suffer from water will increase also.

## 5 Water as life

Water is the most important key for life on Earth and merits the metaphor “bloodstream of the biosphere” [13]. Ancient civilizations evolved agricultural practices which determined whether they would evolve to be a water culture or a dry culture. In the Far East rice was cultivated in well managed wetlands. In the Mediterranean countries cereal grain cultivation with irrigation created net water loss made worse by the growth of concentrated population in cities. These differences derived from human interaction with the natural cycles of evaporation and precipitation and manipulation of the route water took on Earth.

The connection of water to life is made in various ways. Springs are the soul of the Hopi Native Americans [7]. The Igorot of the Northern Philippines believe every living being has a soul, including springs and rivers, which possess powerful spirits [14]. The Central American Nahua share food or drink with the being that inhabits a stream or pool [15]. “Living running waters” are promised to observant Muslims in the Koran [6]. To the Bhilalas and Bhils of India’s Narmada River Valley, the river is their mother. Compartmentalizing culture, ecology and spirituality is not an option for these individuals, who lost it all in order for a dam to be constructed [16].

## 6 Conclusion

Numinosity is about the extraction of meaning from life experiences. This meaning then goes on to structure an individual’s encounters with the natural, cultural and social world. Western thinking continues in the dualistic mind-body dichotomy of belief. Indigenous cultures live in a natural-supernatural unity of experience. The problem with so-called development is less one of losing the world of religion and more of losing connections in life. Western values privilege individuality and self improvement. Indigenous values support the common good. Mining and river dams are the technological activities with the potential of having the greatest deleterious effects on water quality and distribution, and the lifeways of native people. The numinosity of water should



place it in an internationally designed protected category, along with the populations who insure water's livelihood.

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