Week 1 The Fish Do Not Talk about the Water

The title the Fish Don’t Talk about the Water is a metaphor which helps us to understand that it is difficult to be aware of our own cultural values. We are too immersed in our basic assumptions about the world we live in so as to recognize them as cultural specific. One aspect of our practice that we often consider completely ‘natural’ and ‘universal’ is that we can value things by attributing them a price, a monetary value expressed in a number and a currency.

When we read a classical anthropological work on an African Society where political leadership is associated with rainmaking, we see this as a study of cultural and religious belief, but what to make of the way the term ‘rainmaker’ which is used in North America in the world of financial services, with the meaning of ‘moneymaker.’ What do we make of that?

In this presentation I want to look at cultural perspectives on valuing water. I take my case from conflicts over mining in Latin America, a first case is situated in Peru and concerns the mine of the American mining giant Newmont a second in Chili, a mine operated by the Canadian company Barrick.

Importantly, the gold deposit in the Peruvian case was located in a mountain which serves as major water source for downstream cities and communities. The anthropologist Fabiana Li studied the contestations between stakeholders in favour and opposed to the mining project. One aspect of the conflict is key to a more radical approach to water values.

First of all, the question what is in a name? How do we call the mountain where the minerals are located? do we call it an Apu, a sacred mountain, as local farmers would have it, an aquifer, a major water source for cities downstream as underlined by activists, or simply a water reservoir as engineers working for the mining company would prefer to call it?

The choice of these names has consequences for what you can and cannot do with this waterbody: a sacred mountain has eternal values, embodies life as such and should be treated with ancestral dignity, a water reservoir on the other hand can be managed, its value may be calculated in cubic metres which can be priced and even replaced by the same quantity of water taken from elsewhere.

Calling a mountain sacred is easily identified as cultural phenomenon, I want to stress that technical terms such as aquifer and water reservoir are equally cultural in the sense that they express cultural assumptions, for instance about the question whether water can be a commodity or whether water in one place is ‘the same’ as water in another.

Water is important issue in mining operations for processing mineral ore. Companies may be in competition over water with other water users, for instance farmers who need water for irrigating their crops. Managers of mining companies often try to mitigate water conflicts by means of financial compensation of other water users. Our second case, the Barrick mine on the border of Chili with Argentina, is interesting in that respect. The Pascua Lama mine is
situated near glaciers. The mining company had to remove 10 hectares of the glacier for pit construction.

This was contested for instance by farmers below stream who depend on the temporary flows of melting water for agriculture. The mining company reacted to contestations by renaming the glacier, they call it an ice reservoir, ice fields and glacierets with an insignificant contribution to the hydrological balance of the watershed.

The company did become sensitive to water needs of farmers and successfully proposed monetary compensation for loss of water. Farmers reluctantly accepted the money and thereby this commodification of ‘glacier-material’.

Things changed however after 2013: the Chilean government blocked the mining project, arguing that the mining company was transgressing environmental regulations. It emphasized the value of glaciers. In the current and ever more urgent moment of rapid and significant climate change Glaciers have become symbols in the fight against irreversible destruction. Now commodification of water and extraction in mountains was not contested on the basis of ‘religious’ ideas about sacred and ancestral mountains, but on the basis of scientific knowledge about systematic destruction of planet earth.

Both contestations are concerned with valuing land and waterscapes, both are expressions of grave concerns about when the measure of things is reduced to monetary value.

For water management there are important lessons to be learned; First of all, by asking what's in a name? What does a technical term like ‘water reservoir’ allow us to do, secondly by asking questions about the tacit understandings of how water issues can be regulated. Commodification of water is often seen as a rational device to get water properly distributed for instance through tap water to citizens, to organize mitigation for loss of land, water and crops. For working with water it may be very important to try and ask radical questions which may bring out that the idea we can ‘manage water’ or that we can sell it per cube meter is dependent on cultural assumptions just like the beliefs surrounding the realm of the rain queen. Our start with the two meanings of ‘Rainmaking’ tried to bring home how we can think of ourselves as fish who try to learn how to talk about the water we are immersed in.

The next slide is your assignment. This slide itself is an emblem of this Water Works Course. You see the rain falling from the sky. Below it, all sorts of water related activities and places are portrayed. The slide portrays socio-hydrological connections. This model of transformative water-related processes is dependent on monetary conversions. Try to debunk the economy of this model: how is this representation of the water cycle ingrained with assumptions about commodification of water? Single out one of the water usages which is portrayed to illustrate the place of money in transformation of rainwater.