Water, Culture and Power Negotiations at the UN

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COMMENTARY

In January 2008 I attended the inaugural meeting of UNESCO-International Hydrological Programme's water and cultural diversity initiative. Serving as a UN advisor for the first time, I was excited about this opportunity to impact a critical global issue. I hoped to encourage international concern for threats to water and biocultural diversity posed by a resurgent water infrastructure building-boom.

The World Commission on Dams' (WCD) review of last century's boom in dam building had produced a sobering set of conclusions. Many large dams failed to meet projected energy and economic goals. Siltation and sedimentation reduced their operating life. Environmental impacts included endangerment or extinction of 30% of the world's freshwater fish, and the building of some 45,000 large dams caused displacement and severe poverty for an estimated 40 to 80 million people, mainly indigenous peoples and ethnic minorities (*Dams and Development*, 2000). Reassessments of development-displacement produce more alarming statistics.

The 2007 budget announced by Chinese Prime Minister Wen included annual stipends for some 23 million rural migrants officially recognized as "dam-displaced without adequate compensation." The total displaced is likely higher. Many forcibly-displaced become urban migrants who, because of their move from rural areas, are ineligible for this entitlement. And in India, some 14 million were officially displaced by dam development through 1999. Recent reassessment of development records finds some 60 million people evicted to make way for water development. The majority of the unacknowledged displacees were ethnic minorities living on common land claimed by the state, thus not officially eligible for compensation or relocation assistance (Walter Fernandes, "Singur and the Displacement Scenario," *Economic and Political Weekly* 42[3]).

These numbers suggest WCD estimates of people displaced to make way for dams and diversions should be at least doubled. Given the location of dam projects in remote regions and the documented demographics of development refugees, these figures suggest that water development and associated displacement of culturally diverse communities are major factors in the rise of global poverty and decline in biocultural diversity.

Today, just a few years after WCD findings were announced, the nations of the world, their bankers, and their builders are engaged in what may be the final act of containing and controlling the world's fresh water systems. Large dams and water diversions are being built, planned or proposed for rivers and tributaries on both sides of the Himalayas, throughout Africa, the Americas, Australia, Southeast Asia, and truly, across the world.

Paris, Day One

I shared the table with UN staff and 14 other "experts": a hydrologist, civil engineer, anthropologist, geographer, ethicist and indigenous activists representing China, Japan, Canada, Sierra Leone, the Netherlands, Australia, Nepal, Paraguay, Mexico, UK and US (me).

We spent the morning engaged in a conceptual discussion of "What is water?" This, followed by case-specific summations offered by the advisors, left us with a mission statement focused on the symbiotic relationship between water and culture: "Water is the essential lifeblood of our planet, with the power to generate, sustain, receive and ultimately to unify life." This vision reflected advisory concern for ancient waterworks; water and the arts; water ethics; indigenous knowledge, stewardship and customary management systems; the sanctity of water; water and sacred sites; values, norms and behavior that shape a "water culture" of public health risk, and strategies to transform behavior and reduce risk. My presentation injected a sharp note of discord in this otherwise culture-centric interpretation of the agenda. I explored the consequential damages of large dam development, drawing from the WCD, Scudder's *The Future of Large Dams* (2005), Cernea and McDowell's *Risk and Reconstruction* (2000), and my *Chixoy Dam Legacy Issues* study (2005), situating case-specific experiences within broader culture/power contexts (eg, Donahue and Johnston, 1998, *Water, Culture & Power*; Colchester, 2000, "Dams, Indigenous Peoples and Ethnic Minorities"; Oliver-Smith, 2009, *Development & Dispossession*).

For me, water and cultural diversity meant considering linkages between development, failed and corrupt governance, gross violations of human rights, and struggles for justice. To add this power dimension to our mission statement, I proposed recognizing "water as a fundamental human right." This suggestion was rejected. Linking rights to cultural diversity implies a privileged right of some groups over others, and some worried this might cause key member nations to reject the entire water and cultural diversity initiative. The alternative—a "water is life" framing—was politically palatable.

Later, in a hallway aside with UN staff, I asked about institutional goals for this water and cultural diversity project. I thought we were there to help implement UN recognition of water as a human right. Not so. Expanding population, degenerative environmental crises, and fundamental inequities generate tensions and conditions where immense water scarcity and related shortages in food will be the norm. Unless we can build the appropriate infrastructure to capture and move water to where it needs to be, we are looking at an assured future of water wars. Our job, I was told, was to craft strategies that help planners, builders and managers incorporate cultural concerns, involve diverse stakeholders, and diffuse conflict. From an institutional point of view we were there to insure the hydroengineering agenda for the twenty-first century. We were there to deal with the people problem.

A Two-Year Conversation

After a long night of stewing on this, I realized that this framing—water as a human need and economic good with a societal imperative to provide for that need through large-scale techno-intensive ways to sustain industry, the economy and the nation—reflects one end of the conceptual continuum of how best to achieve a viable future (cf, International Conference on Water and the Environment, 1992, "The Dublin Statement"; The World Bank Group, 2009, "Directions in Hydropower Development"). The other end of this continuum is a notion of water commons as a sustaining element in cultural diversity *and* biodiversity, where water is a fundamental human right for individuals *and* cultural groups, where water has inherent environmental rights, and where such rights supersede short-term needs of the state and its economy (ie, Barlow, 2007, *Blue Covenant*; UN *Human Development Report 2006*, "Beyond Scarcity: Power, Poverty and the Global Water Crisis"). My task became how to encourage in the advisory panel and the initiatives that emerge a focus on water as *both* a sustaining element and—in its enclosure, commodification, and inequitable and degenerative uses—a problematic element in cultural diversity.

The conversation begun in Paris was continued through meetings in the UK (July 2008), the Fifth World Water Forum in Istanbul (March 2009), the Water and Cultural Diversity symposium in Kyoto (October 2009), through scientific sessions in professional conferences, and publications (cf, Community of Practice database, www.waterandculturaldiversity.org; UNESCO-IHP water and cultural diversity policy brief, www.unesco.org/water/ihp/pdf/CDW_FINAL_WEB.pdf). We developed ideas to help problematize the conceptual continuum: situating water and cultural diversity within a biocultural diversity and health framework; recognizing "rightsholders" as distinct

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ment theory addressing sustained local-level action in support of an often times local cause. According to Brosius (1999), "The success of a social movement is at least in part predicated on its ability to effectively strategize, both among themselves and in coalition with others. In doing so they have a face to reveal to the world and a face shown only to themselves…" In this light, the YMD's collaborations would suggest that theirs is a historically-based political endeavor with implications beyond conservation itself. This is further supported when we combine the recurrent theme of anti-regulation with Tourraine's (1988) argument that social movement actors recognize that there is a cultural project at stake, not merely a struggle for organizational control or economic production.

This scenario represents one example of cultural dynamics contributing to the global variation of environmental ethics and behavior, and reinforces the argument that communities with different histories and values will not reach sustainability by following a single formula. Through an analysis of cultural norms, histories and beliefs we can see how various components of cultural perspectives are related to one another (Milton 2006). The relationships among these elements can shed light on how communities and regulatory bodies at various scales can accommodate one another's discourses and goals. Water management in the Delta thus demonstrates that it is crucial for those interested in motivating environmental action to incorporate the specificities of culture and locality into their programs. Without a thorough understanding of cultural motivators, it is difficult to inspire local-level participation and almost impossible to perpetuate any organized environmental action.

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Governance

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approaches can be more effective than centralized ones. I am not suggesting that distributed, multi-level governance should be considered a one-model-fits-all solution to global water issues, but I do believe it provides a realistic way of portraying governance as it actually works on-the-ground. It can also help researchers, managers and water users identify the problem-solving potential of these systems in contexts where the most suitable interventions might involve the creation of more inclusive local institutions, recognition of the rights of indigenous communities, development of bridging institutions at the regional level, strategies for more effective social learning, and recognition by all actors of the critical importance of a coordinated approach.

Anthropologists are, I believe, particularly well positioned to contribute to this research agenda. Our discipline predisposes us towards holistic approaches and away from approaches that reduce complex socio-ecological systems to sets of institutional rules, game theory models, or economic formulae. It predisposes us to examine the role of "culture" in shaping institutional networks and to closely attend to the issues of social justice and marginalization that typically arise out of the unequal power relations that shape all governance systems. We are also comparative and global in perspective at the same time as we are (infamously) inclined towards studies of the local. In short, I believe anthropologists have much to contribute to this particular interdisciplinary field of study, and that this agenda has, in turn, a great deal to offer us as an integral part of an engaged and activist anthropology of water.

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from "stakeholders"; recognizing the structural violence inherent in commodification and enclosure of water commons and in large-infrastructure development; assessing the global pattern and long-term consequences of development-induced displacement, ecosystemic destruction, and loss of ways of life in terms of poverty, food security and health; and recognizing these consequences as quantifiable externalities with synergistic characteristics and cumulative effects.

Two years of meetings and the politics that surround the public articulation of water and cultural diversity changed all of our thinking—advisors, project partners and sponsors (cf, my 2009 Pulse of the Planet "Water Culture Wars" commentary). The initial focus on water/culture and goals of crafting culturally sensitive approaches to water resource management has been broadened to incorporate the diverse cultural mindsets, agendas and actions of the powerful—scientists, technocrats, financiers, captains of industry and state, and broader nation-state cultures—as well as the place-based water/culture realities of both the powerful and relatively powerless. "Water as a human right" is an element of the policy brief and World Water Forum contributions. Current goals focus on restructuring priorities in development/management frameworks to insure that water is valued, accessed, used and managed in ways that sustain culturally diverse communities and the environments in which they live. Key to this transformative change will be the identification and prioritization of biocultural health as the primary indicator of sustainable ecosystems.

UN-sponsored discussions help create the architecture to foster knowledge development and exchange, and the emergence of new agreements and implementation mechanisms. At the same time, it is readily apparent that there are much more influential factors driving change in today's water/culture/power world. For more on these trends, see the second part of this essay on the AAA blog.

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South Africa

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only overwrites historical questions concerning the shape of post-apartheid citizenship but also replaces them with a *particular* vision of citizenship inflected, as I noted above, with a neoliberal logic. In the process, a whole series of questions that were central to the anti-apartheid movement's vision of the new South Africa are re-coded via a discourse of sustainability and mediated by technical infrastructures. Here, water is at once allegory and medium of a new relationship to the state.

Talking about water as both mediated and a medium does not of course make its materiality and the very real problems produced by the lack of access to water unimportant; on the contrary, it is often precisely the materiality and indispensability of water that renders such new mediations difficult, ambivalent or morally charged. And yet, in a context in which "sustainability" has become part of a globalized common sense, it is crucial to attend to the ways in which historically salient political questions are reformulated, or indeed elided, via such techniques of commensuration. Such an "anthropology of water," then, is always already also an anthropology of the (techno-) political projects through which water is mediated and that it in turn mediates.

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