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# **WATER IN A TRIPLE HERITAGE PERSPECTIVE: INDIGENOUS, ISLAMIC AND WESTERN LEGACIES**

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I address this international conference on *water* not as a specialist on water-management, but as a student of human society and of comparative culture. I feel more comfortable discussing people than recommending how best to protect water supplies.

But there would be no *people* if there were no *water*. I am therefore humbled to have been given this role of keynote address at such a conference.

But let me begin by emphasizing that although water is a pre-condition for life itself, it can also be a destructive force. Climate change not only threatens us with drought in some parts of the world. Such change also threatens us with floods in other areas. We are at risk not only with too little water, but also with too much.

The paradox of water in the human condition is indeed a paradox of life itself. Water is the supreme element without which life is impossible. But from time to time there is a tsunami or hurricane which kills thousands. Water becomes a killer.

My state of New York has just witnessed a devastation which killed over a hundred people and devastated the lives of millions of others in water-related catastrophies.

Water has nurtured civilizations along the Nile and the *Ganges*, but water has also washed away whole villages and cultures.

We must try and sustain the creative functions of water — and safeguard humanity against the ferocity of water and its destructive aggression.

Noah's ark was probably based on *fact*. If so, Noah's tsunami and flood was probably an earlier case of climate change.

Water *makes* history time and time again. Unfortunately water also *destroys* history, when it washes away massive historical evidence. When water kills history, we witness the phenomenon of *historicide*.

In my almost 80 years of life I have been a witness to history. I had accumulated documents and photographs of African history — including my correspondence with African heads of state over the decades. It took one major storm in New York state about a year ago to destroy all this documentation of the first 50 years of independent Africa. Water perpetrated *historicide* and destroyed my archives.

It is partly for such reasons that water is both worshipped as mother of life and cursed as a deadly force. But let us begin with the small scale of experience.

Everyday life in Africa is affected by a convergence of three systems of values — indigenous, Islamic and Western. These three normative systems approach the issue of water in divergent ways. On the whole, indigenous culture is conservationist in its use of water, partly because fetching water in rural Africa is a labour-intensive process.

Western culture is extravagant in its use of water, partly because of complex domestic needs and love of gardening and flowers. Western culture also came with industrialization and its water-consuming consequences.

Islam was born in the desert of Arabia, but surprisingly became *water-intensive* in many of its central rituals. Since Planet Earth is inhabited by a billion-and-a-half Muslims, millions of gallons of water are used every single day for the five prayers alone.

Policy-makers have understandably focused on the positive aspects of water and how to protect the supply of clean water. But policy-makers also need to address the destructive consequences of hurricanes, floods and future rise of the global sea level, as the ice of the North Pole continues to melt.

On a smaller scale there is also the effect of annual rains on village homes. Modest huts are flattened, and villages are reduced to new levels of poverty every year. As rural families build new homes to accommodate their expanding populations, these mud-constructions are flattened out, thus perpetuating certain forms of poverty. Farmers are blessed when rain is on modest scale. Farmers are impoverished when the rain floods out cultivation and destroys their homes.

The Eastern United States has recently experienced the fury of water. The casualties include over 100 dead. The Caribbean experiences the ferocity almost every other year. In Africa water kills silently without ferocity.

## **INFANT MORTALITY AND PARENTAL IMMORTALITY**

Food aid is a familiar enough concept. Water aid may be “the wave of the future.” Singing (Band Aid) or running (Sport Aid) in order to feed those who are hungry makes

good humanitarian sense. Performing for those who are short of clean water is at least as compelling a cause. In reality, far more African children die because of lack of clean water than because of famine—though the silent famine is disastrous enough. The lack of clean water is the cause of a variety of diseases, which includes cholera, bilharzias, different forms of diarrhea, typhoid—all of them ruthless killers of children and sometimes of adults. Malaria's relationship with stagnant water is more complex, but still relevant to infant mortality. Two to three million children in Africa die every year because of diarrhea alone. Malaria claims the lives of an additional million.

A new hazard has entered the scene with increased Westernisation: bottle-feeding. I took my English wife to Kenya for the first time in 1963. She was startled to see a woman relative of mine pouring sand into her baby's feeding-bottle. Molly asked the relative in astonishment: "What are you doing?" The relative answered in puzzlement: "Well, I am cleaning my baby's bottle, of course!" "*Cleaning* with dirty sand?" exclaimed Molly. The idea of using sand from the pathway as a kind of "scrubbing soap" for a baby's bottle was one of Molly's first culture shocks in Africa. Of course the sand is then washed out and the bottle appears to be "scrubbed clean." But if the water in turn is already contaminated, the risk of polluting the baby's milk increases at every stage.

Contaminated water is not only a threat to the mortality of children. It is also a threat to the immortality of parents.

The risk multiplies further when an African mother goes even more “modern” and uses powdered milk instead of fresh cow’s milk. The powder is, of course, mixed with water. If the water is not clean, the infant’s health is in danger, perhaps the infant’s life.

Curiously enough, the problem of contaminated water in Africa is part of the population explosion. Precisely because many children are dying, many more children are being born. Birth, death and clean water are interlocked in the demography of Africa. Well-meaning foreigners have often asked me why we permit a population explosion in our continent when we have so many economic problems and a lot of starvation. The answer lies in this convergence of forces. African values do indeed favour the birth of many children; Western skills try to ensure their survival. African traditions promote a high birth rate while Western medicine controls the death rate. Water is indispensable for survival, but it is sometimes destructive in tropical storms and tsunames.

According to African tradition, a person’s immortality after being buried depends upon being remembered among the living. To become an ancestor beyond the grave requires having descendants who are still alive. To put it in modern terms, I can never be completely dead for as long as my genes are part of the living, part of my children and grandchildren. Some parents are buried at sea, willingly or by enemies — as in the case of Usama bin Laden after being killed by American troops. Usama bin Laden left behind enough progeny to constitute a legacy.

O joy! That in our embers  
Is something that doth live,  
That nature yet remembers  
What was so fugitive!

And so having children is not only an insurance to protect the parents in old age—it is also a way for them to safeguard their immortality. Clean water is a precondition not only for the mortality of children, but for the immortality of parents.

But parents can be as effectively remembered by two children as by seven, provided the two survive. Although international effort to save Africa's children has intensified recently, the toll of young casualties every year is still in millions. A number of African countries have undertaken nationwide inoculation of children and the casualty rate in the villages is declining, but the annual carnage is still devastating. The quest for clean water is not always successful. The poignancy of small coffins among the luggage on public transportation in Africa is one of the meeting-points between bereavement and deprivation; between personal pathos and poverty. If immortality depends upon one's blood flowing in the veins of the living, bereaved parents suffer a double blow. The funeral of their child is partly a funeral of themselves. The funeral is partly of their own claim to an afterlife, as they bury their loved one today. Death in Africa is a many-sided experience: it links the living, the dead and those yet to be born. The issue of water affects the farmer praying for rain, affects a villager in fear of a hurricane, affects a

mother terrified of river blindness, and affects the whole of society in quest of hygiene in water usage.

In the long run, African couples have to be assured that their first babies will survive before they can take the risk of not having any more. The fear of infant mortality continues to affect the dream of parental immortality. Only when African parents begin to bury fewer children will they learn to bear fewer babies. When all is said and done, African mothers don't need sermons about the prevention of further births—they need the confidence that when they leave the clinical reassurance of the hospital, and take their babies home, death will not be lurking in the village, waiting for their little ones.

The two minimal conditions for survival are hygiene and clean water. The first—hygiene—is a matter of knowledge and understanding. African mothers need to understand what is at stake when they cook near a lavatory, or when they feed a baby from a bottle which has not been sterilised. If African women are traditionally custodians of fire and water for the home, they need to know how to mobilize fire in order to make water safe, and learn about boiling water as a method of disinfecting.

## **ON WORSHIP AND WATER**

Hygiene is sometimes part of the wider culture, and can even be linked to religion. Muslim Africa has a complicated relationship with the concept of “clean water.” Islam is ritually water-intensive. What defines clean is not “fit to drink” but “fit for ablutions.”



The devout Muslim prays five times a day, and each prayer is usually preceded by the use of water for ablutions. The African continent may have 450 million Muslims. The ablution tradition involves wetting hands, arms, feet, head and having a mouthwash before every prayer. At least traditionally, water is “clean” when it is suitable for such preparation for worship. Clearly, the standards of water suitable for sacred purposes are not the same as the standards of water suitable for human consumption. In the modern age, many Muslim families have indeed recognized a dual standard of cleanliness—but in much of Muslim Africa in the rural areas, there is a belief that if water is good enough for communication with God, it is good enough for consumption by human beings. Water for ablutions does not have to be boiled. It simply requires careful assessment as to whether it has been *ritually* polluted. Bird-droppings falling in the water can be ritual pollution; but the diseased hand of a believer is not. In terms of human dignity, this scale of values is correct; but in terms of human health more generally, it is not necessarily so.

Then there is the Muslim use of water after personal excretion. More millions of gallons are at stake. Islam does not encourage the use of toilet paper, and it normally prescribes the use of water itself. Muslims believe that toilet paper does not clear everything from the relevant part of the body after excretion or urination. Only a thorough wash of that part of the body can restore the believer’s ritual cleanliness. This is very hygienic in principle—but it does require that the believer subsequently clean his left hand thoroughly after it has cleaned the anus or genitalia. Normally this works all

right, especially since orthodox Islam discourages believers from having long fingernails. Residual excreta in the nails of the fingers of the left hand are normally cleared away with additional washing and soap (if soap can be afforded). But when water generally is in short supply, these standards of thoroughness may become more lax. The risk of spreading infection from one believer to another suddenly becomes more severe. The fingernails of the left hand can become major carriers of contagion.

There are one billion-and-a-half Muslims on planet earth. The religion was born in a region of the world which is relatively short of water. The Prophet Muhammad was born in Mecca and died in Medina. He unfolded a whole new universe of values concerning water. In Africa there are at least 450 million Muslims, praying and washing.

Perhaps the most hygienic use of water prescribed by Islam concerns sex. Between copulation and the believer's next prayer, a thorough wash of the body (a thorough shower) is needed. Here again Islam is water-intensive. Every inch of the body needs washing, including the hair. Those who need to have sex every night are therefore enjoined to have a shower every night, after sex, for by the time of the dawn prayer, the next morning, the believer should have got rid of his *janaba*: his unholy condition of sexual hedonism. Only a thorough shower can get rid of *janaba* and it is a major sin to enter a mosque before one has had his or her post-sex shower.

It is one of the ironies of history that a religion born in the grandeur of the Arabian desert in all its barrenness, should have prescribed so many ritual uses of water.

Christianity seems to have the concept of a once-and-for-all baptism for each individual. In Islam, baptism is, in a sense, a daily affair—covering five prayers and following every act of sexuality. When available, water in Islam is a continual ritual necessity.

In itself, all this is a contribution to hygiene. The problem arises when water is in short supply, and short cuts are made to make the same amount of water serve too many purposes. A little pond near the village may be used to too many believers to get rid of their post-sex *janaba*. If one of the believers is diseased, the danger of infection occurs. Islam is, indeed, a religion of cleanliness; but it also recognizes that ritual cleanliness is no substitute for real hygienic understanding.

Even the understanding of hygiene is not enough if it is not accompanied by actual availability of clean water. Contaminated water is often a killer. They say that in much of Africa it is easier to get a bottle of good beer than a glass of clean water. Things are not made easier by Western companies dumping on Africa powdered milk which is then mixed with unclean water. Rural mothers are being diverted away from the healthier tradition of breast-feeding. Africa needs birth control far less than it needs *death* control. We need family planning far less than family survival.

And yet, in spite of all this death and devastation, Africa is the fastest-growing continent in the world, in terms of population. Droughts come and go, famine hits and retreats, disease is ever-present in our midst, civil disorder takes its toll—and yet a new

and larger generation of Africans is in the making all the time. There is enough clean water to keep population growing.

I am a citizen of a country (Kenya) which at times has led the world in population growth. I am a native of a continent which is the vanguard of human fertility. And yet the world is staging spectacular singing and sporting events to save us from starvation and death. Why is the land of fertility also the land of famine? Why is a people of fecundity endowed with a continent of barrenness? It does not seem to be fair. It does not even make sense. Yet all is not lost if we are capable of such astonishing growth rates and if we can replace our dead so convincingly. Perhaps part of the explanation lies in the continuing resilience of the African family, in the mutual support it fosters among its members, and in that incredible love for children which is the hallmark of this remarkable continent. After all, the first human child ever was born there, a million years ago. You could say we invented the family. The tradition continues.

But we continue to need the protection of clean water if the family is to be strengthened, and more young ones be served. Next time we run on behalf of Africa, and are ready for a nice, cool drink of clean water at the end of the “race,” let us spare a thought for those to whom such a healthy drink is still a mere dream, a luxury for the future.

## **WATER AND IDENTITY**

This is also a continent in which a quarter of the population belongs to nationalities whose names are shared with rivers and coastlines. The largest African country in population is of course, Nigeria — sharing its name with the river Niger. So does the Republic of Niger. The largest francophone Africa shares its name with the River Congo — the Democratic Republic of the Congo [Kinshasa]. Its neighbour is also called the Congo [Brazzaville].

No other continent has as many nationalities based on not only on a *fatherland* but also a mother *river*.

Other African countries which share names with rivers and coastlines include Senegal, Gambia, Zambia, Upper Volta [now Burkina Faso], the Ivory Coast, the Gold Coast [now Ghana].

## **BETWEEN PETROLEUM AND HYDROLEUM**

Oil and water have been adversarial liquids for centuries. It is a common adage that water and oil do not mix. In earlier centuries water played a more energy-intensive role than oil. When fossil oil was discovered in the seventeenth century, a new era was inaugurated in which water supplies were increasingly at risk from petroleum. By the late twentieth century rivers and lakes were increasingly polluted by neighbouring petroleum industry.

Barack Obama has had policies to govern fossil fuels but no comprehensive strategy specifically about the utilization of water. There had been Congressional legislation to protect clean water for human consumption, but no promotion of water as a source of energy.

As fossil fuel became economically more and more valuable there was less and less protection of water in places like the Niger Delta in Nigeria, or the Gulf of Mexico on the shores of the United States.

The Obama Administration has shown commitment to alternative and cleaner forms of energy. American investment has gone into solar, wind, and even nuclear sources of power. Surprisingly the Obama Administration seems to have shown far less interest in imaginative ways of using water as a source of electricity. Water-policy in the United States is often in the hands of states rather than the Federal Government. California's water needs have often involved elaborate negotiations with other states like Colorado. But there is a role for the Federal Government in water-policy. The Federal Government could be more involved in the politics of water.

The Obama years in power coincided with expanding production of petroleum within the United States, and the discovery of petroleum in more African states. There has also been expanding fracking and production of natural gas in both the United States and Africa. The United States is expected to rival Saudi Arabia in oil production by 2020.

In contrast the Obama years have also coincided with fluctuations in supplies of water, partly because of trends in climate change. The range is from unexpected floods in one part of Africa (such as Southern Nigeria in 2012) to drought and drying rivers in Eastern Africa. There have also increased frequently of hurricanes in the Americas.

Since 2008 when Obama was elected United States president several African countries have become new oil producers or have expanded their production. These countries include Ghana, Uganda, Tanzania, Liberia, and the Republic of South Sudan.

Obama's expansion of oil and natural gas within the United States would not have helped these new sources of energy in Africa — except for the competition of the People's Republic of China. The Chinese are becoming major customers for Africa's resources, especially petroleum. China as the second largest economic power in the world, has developed a great appetite for fossil fuels from Africa and the Middle East. The Obama Administration could not ignore the rising economic power of China, especially its access to vital perishable resources across the world.

The political economy of Africa's petroleum is externally determined by the global market, including such major consumers as China, Europe and the United States. But the political economy of Africa's water supplies is primarily *domestic* rather than international.

The international phase of Africa's rivers and lakes was when Europeans were either exploring or conquering Africa. The struggle by John Hanning Speke to find the

source of the Nile was historic. In 1858 Speke finally discovered the source near to today's town of Jinja in Uganda. The Nile as Africa's largest river emerged out of Africa's largest lake. The British explorer called this lake *Lake Victoria*.

Eventually Uganda and Kenya tapped Lake Victoria for hydroelectric power. By the twenty-first century about a dozen countries were recognized as part of the Nile Basin — either as beneficiaries of the Nile or as contributors to the waters of the Nile.

Competition for the waters of the Nile have intensified in the Nile Basin as associated countries needed more irrigation and more electricity. Egypt's privileged position in the old Nile treaty, which went back to British imperial days, was unfair to Ethiopia. Unless a long term agreement is reached about sharing waters of the Nile, the situation could escalate into a war between Egypt and Ethiopia in the years ahead. Postcolonial Africa cannot afford such potential military rivalries over water.

The shores of Lake Victoria have not only produced electric power and irrigation. Those shores have also produced generations of Nilotic peoples. One son of Victoria Nyanza on the Kenyan side of the Lake was called Barack Hussein Obama, Sr. This son of the Lake went to America, got a degree and a wife. A child was born in 1961. He was named after his Nilotic Dad — Barack Hussein Obama (Junior). This child was destined to become the first Black President of the United States of America.

At the northern end of the Nile near the shores of the Mediterranean Africa produced Ramses II of ancient Egypt. At the southern end of the Nile near the shores of



Lake Victoria Africa produced the father of the most powerful man of colour in world history — the younger Barack Hussein Obama.

Young Barack is already a great African American, but not yet a great President. Indeed, Barack Obama is a remarkable man for having broken the glass ceiling — and became the first Black Head of State of any White majority country.

The great Lake which produced this Nilotic progeny is still ridiculously named after a British Queen — Lake Victoria. The different countries bordering the lake may not easily agree on an alternative name drawn from their own heroes. But would they consider the name of this most illustrious grandson of Victoria Nyanza? Will Lake Victoria one day become *Lake Barack Obama*?

But Barack would have to earn such an honor in his years *after the presidency*. His name would be more relevant for the Lake than that of Queen Victoria — who never even saw Africa's largest lake. Here is a great man who needed a second term to try and become a great President.

Let us now conclude with a poem by another great African American (a Diaspora African). During the Harlem Renaissance in the early twentieth century Langston Hughes celebrated "Rivers" and the blood of ancestors:

“The Negro Speaks of Rivers” (1920)

*I've known rivers:  
I've known rivers ancient as the world  
And older than the flow of human blood in human veins.  
My soul has grown deep like rivers.  
I've bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young.  
I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep.  
I looked upon the Nile and raised pyramids above it.  
I heard the singing of the Mississippi  
when Abe Lincoln went down to  
New Orleans, and I've seen its muddy bosom turn  
all golden at sunset.  
I've known rivers ancient as the world  
and older than the flow of human blood  
in human veins.  
My soul has grown deep like the rivers.*

Yes, water is a necessity and a threat. It is also the oldest of our ancestors. It made life possible on Planet Earth.