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# Women and Water: The Flow of Matriculture Introduction (English)

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Women and Water: The Flow of Matriculture  
Les femmes et l'eau : le flux des systèmes matriculturels

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### Article abstract

The relationships between women and water are deep and fluid, informing the definition of the feminine, the roles assigned to women, and the very perception of life. This issue of *Matrix* seeks to explore certain aspects of these relationships and the ways in which women interpret symbolic systems to position themselves as actors in the great concrete game of relationships with the environment as a whole. In this issue, our authors examine the relationship between women and water among peoples of North America, Northern Europe, Nigeria, the Italian Alps, and Cameroon. Through mythology, personal experience, art, and ritual, they explore the different expressions of this relationship, which constitutes an important part of the lives of communities past and present.





## **Women and Water: The Flow of Matricultures**

### **Introduction**

(English)

**LINNÉA ROWLATT and MARIE-FRANÇOISE GUÉDON**

Fluid and frozen. Yielding and relentless. Ferocious and calm. Sweet and salty. Paradoxical qualities such as these, among others, are attributed to both women and water in many cultures, including the European and parts of the Asian world. Systems of thought supported by ancient mythologies, particularly, perhaps, those exhibiting explicit dualism, create chains of metaphorical associations between woman and water through passivity, fluidity, moisture, the moon, and the maternal breast—all essential elements for life but effectively reductive. These symbolic chains are taken up at all cultural levels, giving them a near-universal value, even in scientific language. The oceans, for example, are known as the ‘cradle of life,’ while in our wombs, women carry the amniotic fluid that nourishes and protects those born human. The breaking of a woman’s water is a clear indication that the baby is ready to be born. Water as a metaphor for women.

The proximity between the semantic fields associated with women, on the one hand, and water, on the other, is taken for granted by nearly half of the world’s cultures. Although assumed to be universal by those who propose it, this relationship, and the metaphors that support it, depend on the cultural context: In particular, mythologies, as well as religious and ritual systems, offer privileged access to the diversity of this relationship. A few examples will suffice to demonstrate this: With all due respect to European psychoanalysis, primordial waters are not essentially feminine. The deities of the ocean and the sea, such as Poseidon in Greece, Watatsumi in Japan, or Wadj-wer (Uatch-ur) in ancient Egypt, prove that they are as likely to be masculine as feminine. Among the Inuit, the sea and the moon, as well as cold and darkness, are male, while



the feminine is associated with the sun, heat, dryness, and light. In the Athapaskan story of the blind man and the loon (also known among the Inuit, and Algonquian-speaking peoples, among other peoples of North America), the loon (whose gender does not appear to be important) immerses the blind man in the healing waters of a lake (without gender connotation); the villain of the story is a woman (who is either his sister, his wife, or his mother).<sup>1</sup> Here, water is not conjoined with the woman, and moreover, the earth is not perceived as a maternal or feminine figure. It should also be noted that in Athapaskan languages, gender - masculine, feminine, or other - is not indicated. We generally speak in the neutral gender, adding a term if necessary to indicate whether it is male or female.

In some Alpine cemeteries, the graves of climbers feature a sculpture of the mountain where they died, and it is the mountains (rather than bodies of water) that are anthropomorphized and considered feminine and responsible for the deaths of those they love too much. Moreover, in certain myths and rituals in Bali, Indonesia, women are both idealized mothers and cruel ogresses, an attitude Margaret Mead attributed to the fact that mothers were often unable to breastfeed on demand due to their other responsibilities in the fields (babies were cared for by their older sisters, awaiting the return of the mother and the maternal breast)—hence the infant's frustration and ambivalent attitude toward the mother. This underlines that the mother, or woman, is not necessarily seen as a nurturer.

Let us therefore remember that water can be antagonistic, active in its manifestations (from brackish waters to tidal waves, including storms, floods, and monsoons, or simply drowning, a form of sacrifice dear to Celtic goddesses). But paradoxically, it is the symbolic link (dear to patriarchal societies) between women, water, and social and mental passivity that has provoked the most damage to the social fabric by maintaining women in a symbolically and socially subordinate position, a position that the matricultural context must take into account. From the perspective of cultural systems analysis, the matricultural is the cultural system that gives meaning to terms such as *woman*, *mother*, *female*, or *bitch*, as well as to all the terms associated with them. The heuristic of the matricultural allows us, among other things, to explore local specificities of expressions of symbolic links between the notion of woman and the notion of water, and in particular the ways in which the symbolic chains, metaphors, and images that nourish the concrete relationships between women and the aquatic realm are reinterpreted.

These relationships are deep and fluid, informing the definition of the feminine, the roles assigned to women, and the very perception of life. This issue of *Matrix* seeks to explore certain aspects of these relationships and the ways in which women interpret symbolic systems to position themselves as actors in the great concrete game of relationships with the environment as a whole. In this issue, our authors examine the relationship between women and water

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1 Marie-Françoise Guédon, *Le rêve et la forêt. Histoire de chamanes nabesna* (Laval: Presses de l'Université Laval, 2005), 34-35, 530.

among peoples of North America, Northern Europe, Cameroon, the Italian Alps, and Nigeria. Through mythology, personal experience, art, and ritual, they explore the different expressions of this relationship, which constitutes an important part of the lives of communities past and present.

The first of six research contributions in this issue, 'Yanawana Pedagogies: Learning with Coahuiltecan Water Teachings,' presents the traditional Water knowledge of the Coahuiltecan Native American community of northeastern Mexico and southern Texas. The authors, Marissa Aki'nene Muñoz, Pablo Montes, and Marleen Villanueva, reflect on their roles as water protectors, mothers, educators, and community organizers, and invite us to remember our responsibilities not only to the world's Waters, but also to what we pour into and impose on them - not least our own inner waters.

Many societies contain legends about living beings that can take on both human and animal forms. Sarah E. McFarland presents the selkie—at once seal and human, and thus aquatic and terrestrial. In her contribution, 'Metamorphosing with Selkies: Shape-Shifting Instabilities in the Self-Conscious Anthropocene,' she presents the selkie as a champion of a non-hierarchical and sustainable coexistence of humans, other living beings, and ecosystems. Selkies, she argues, are situated in a liminal space that exemplifies a radical diminution of human exceptionalism; their nonbinary nature encourages us to reconsider our species' swaggering and destructive passage across our planet. Part prose, part poetry, McFarland presents the seal-wife's perspective as an intentional way of reintegrating ourselves into the living world.

Our third article, 'It Flows From the Heart: *Kiinoomaagewag nibi manidoog*,' is by Barbara Moktthewenkwe Wall, Bodwewaadmii Anishnaabekwe, who shares with us Knowledge from the water spirits. She expresses her gratitude by describing how the Anishnaabekwewag acquire their community knowledge through their relationships with the Anishnaabe water spirits, who are considered elders, and some of the ways they honour these extended kinship ties. Concluding with a portrait of the Nibi Manidoog who watch over the water, Wall grounds the Anishnaabekwewag in their community teachings.

Etim Ekpenyong Mfon's contribution, 'Water, an Agent of Purification and Life Sustenance: The Relationships of Women with Water in the Southern Provinces of Nigeria,' explores the similarities and differences between water-related rituals among the Yoruba, Edo, and Egbo peoples. By highlighting women's involvement in these rituals and their cultural significance, Mfon highlights the connections between the practical and ritual uses of water. Illustrated with paintings and photographs, the article confirms the indispensable and active contribution of Igbo, Yoruba, and Edo women to the maintenance of their cultures, matricultural systems, and societies.

In his article 'Women and Rainfall: An Eco-ritual Among the Alps of the Past,' Dario Bassi focuses the discussion on an in-depth exploration of a single ritual, the skull-washing of Albosaggia, Italy. Bassi provides the religious, environmental, economic, and hydrological contexts of this ritual

performed by elderly women to manipulate the rainfall, whether to cause it or stop it. He deploys little-known texts to conclude that this practice should be identified as an *eco-ritual*, as well as a culturally unique form of agency for these women of the Italian Alps.

Our final research article is by Henry Kam Kah, 'Ehzele Laimbwe and Water Rituals in the North West region of Cameroon,' where he describes the rites and rituals that centralize the role of Laimbwe women. Kah explores these rituals, which are aimed at fertility and healing, as well as community protection, from two different meanings of the term *matriculture*—that of Irene Friesen Wolfstone and that of Marie-Françoise Guédon. He concludes that, despite the challenges posed by Christian mission activities in the region, the Ehzele Laimbwe can both honour their ancestral traditions and create a dynamic synthesis of these traditions combined with the demands of contemporary society.

We are pleased that this issue of Matrix includes three creative contributions: a watershed painting, a photograph, and fibre artwork. Jessica Marion Barr's *Odenabe (the river that beats like a heart) Watershed* revises and remaps the watershed around Nogojiwanong ('the place at the foot of the rapids' in Nishinaabemowin, aka Peterborough, Ontario) using paint created from aquatic plants harvested from a nearby river. That the colour evokes dried menstrual blood may be purely coincidental; the beauty of the work, however, calls up the the beauty of the Canadian Shield.

Greta Ciūnytė's photograph *Fragile Items* represents water as a medium for holding relationships, both with herself and her own feelings and, more complicatedly, with her father. With both joyous and frightening memories of him, elements in the photo evoke kindness and an openness for connection. With *The Finnish water mother Veen Emo*, Kaarina Kailo transcends both geography and personal experience to evoke the Mother Goddess of the Water World, Creatrix of the world, along with Ilmatar, Daughter of Air. Kailo's fibre art summons a textured, layered world that is firmly situated in a watery environment.

The final part of the issue features three book reviews: Carla Ionescu reviews Barbara Alice Mann and Kaarina Kailo's *The Woman Who Married the Bear: The Spirituality of the Ancient Foremothers* (2023); Adriana Kortlandt reviews Heide Göttner-Abendroth's *Matriarchal Societies: Research on Indigenous Cultures Across the World* (2019); and Umasom Amos reviews Laura S. Grillo's *An Intimate Rebuke: Female Genital Power in Ritual and Politics in West Africa* (2018).

The final contribution is an obituary prepared by Lisa Crandall and Donna McIlveen for the Reverend Dr. Cheryl Gaver, a colleague and friend of the *Matrix* editorial team. We are again impressed by the wide-ranging skills, generosity, and kindness that characterized Cheryl's work; proud to have been her colleagues, we offer this obituary as a final tribute to her work and life.