The cultural relations of water in remote South Australian towns

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Abstract

Water is an increasingly scarce resource and the decline in rainfall presupposes people and communities adapting to live in drier, and very different, social and environmental conditions. In rural and remote South Australia residents have always considered water a reflexive resource that requires them to consider their relationship to water and its availability and access. These are material concerns. Yet, lifestyle, identity, sense of place and community is profoundly shaped by the inclusion of 'water' in one's habitus. 'Water' is also a social concern and its material management arises within cultural relations.

Keywords: Water, Culture, Commodification, Water flows, Sustainability

Introduction

Drawing on Alston and Mason (2008) this paper argues that water must be understood as material, symbolic, economic and cultural. We argue that the significance given to the commodification of water and, to a lesser extent, the environmental uses of water, or environmental flows, overshadow the social significance of water in establishing and maintaining communities. In our paper we argue for the need to incorporate into the water debate the understanding of water as a tool for developing and enhancing social interactions and an enhanced sense of community. Borrowing from Nathan (2007) we call this notion the 'social flow'.

Elaborating on this notion of social flow we argue that 'water' has two principal meanings. First, 'water' represents the material resource, this is the common understanding of the term. Second, it refers to the cultural relations of water, its symbolic value and the manifold relations of water that include access and equity, and its cultural and material capital. Water is a material and cultural resource that is contested.

The study

This article has emerged from two field trips to seven remote towns in South Australia in 2006 and 2008. The field trips involved staying within the region for up to five days at a time, meeting with local groups and significant figures and presenting, and undertaking our research. Our field trips aimed at developing an understanding of resident perceptions of the social and economic impact of water supply on the well-being of the town's (or associated community) population and future. The towns included Lyndhurst, Copley, Leigh Creek, Parachilna, Blinman, Beltana and Angorichna. All seven remote towns are north of Pt Augusta in the Flinders Ranges. Figure 1. below maps the region.

Figure 1. Remote towns in the Flinders Ranges in South Australia
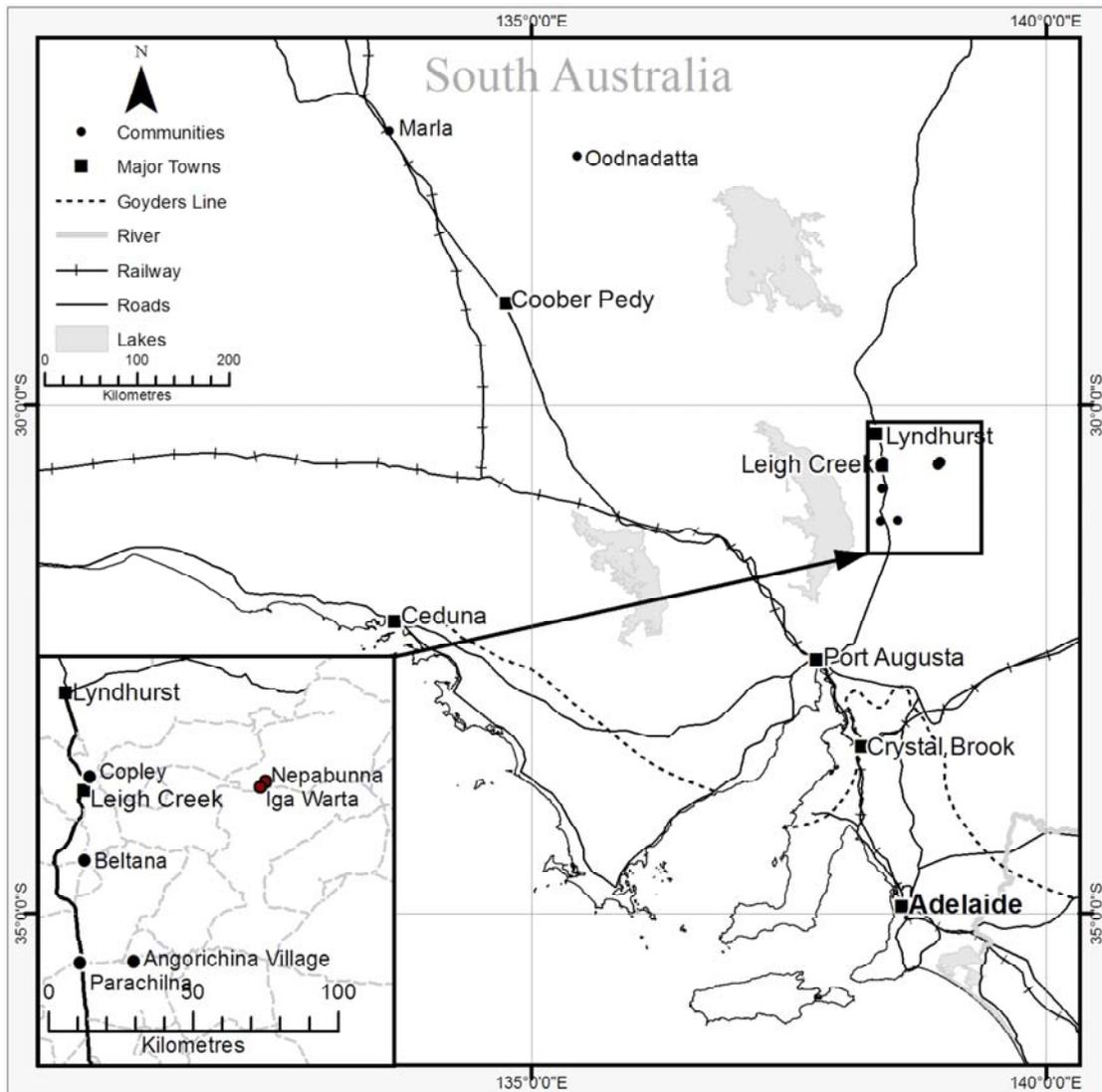
Water as a cultural field: thinking about social flow

Critical theories are valuable for understanding the cultural relations of water because water is a site of cultural struggle. Indeed, given climate change, reductions in rainfall and changing regimes of governance, water is increasingly scarce and contested. Water is a resource necessary for survival, but it is also an economic resource used for development, industry, business enterprise, and residential needs. Water is also a system, a form of capital within a field of cultural relations. To paraphrase Mary Douglas, when she describes the social relations of dirt, in Purity and Danger (1966:35-9) *Where there is [water] there is a system. [Water] is the by-product of a*

systematic ordering and classification of matter… In other words to understand the cultural relations of water we must understand it as a cultural and material resource within symbolic and economic relations.

When we think of water as a cultural product we are drawn to consider the 'field' of water. In this field water is a form of capital that is being struggled over for access, for consumption, for distribution but also for identity, community and social space. By understanding water as a site of struggle we are interested in the different relations of that field. In this sense it is the ethnographic sociology of Pierre Bourdieu (1977 1985, 1988) that influences our approach to understanding water as a cultural product. This approach, has been applied and developed by Nuijten (2005) who describes the role of power relations in natural resource management with a 'force-field'.

> The concept of force field helps us to analyze the weighting of different
> kind of socio-political networks, the influence of law and procedures, the
> role of formal organizational structures, the role of various discourses and
> different positions of power (2005:2-3)

We are interested in the stakeholders and the structures and forms of governance. Theories of governmentality, arising from the Fouculdian notion, complement our understanding of water governance as field of struggle (Dean and Hindess, 1998). A governmentality of water seeks to know the subjects, their rationalities of water, how water is valued as a form of capital, the way water is problematised, and the strategies and practices used to manage water. When a resources becomes scarce or the economy of a resources shifts (eg to User Pays – commodification), then the tensions of cultural reproduction and transformation shift. By beginning to understand the way that the changing relations of water are implicated in community change and struggle we gain insights into managing the impact of climate change on Australian communities. As Alston and Mason, (2008), Nancarrow and Syme (2001), Syme and Nancarrow (2001) and McKay and Bjornlund (2001), have emphasized water must be

managed with the ideals of fairness and equity in mind, as well as making "transparent the way the commodification of water has fractured and divided communities" (Alston et al, 2008:3).

Governing water: water and cultural contest

Firstly, we consider the stakeholders. In this case the key stakeholders we considered were large industries including mining and pastoralists: smaller enterprises such as tourist operators, hotels and accommodation services and local businesses; government, at all levels, and private enterprise associated with water services including SA Water; and finally tourists, who included international tourists, families, and 'grey nomads'. Many of these stakeholders wear the hats of their livelihood as well as that of resident. Stakeholders inhabit particular positions within the field, they possess and bring to the field particular cultural backgrounds and dispositions.

Governance

A defining structure of any community in Australia is the relationship between the 'free citizen' and the bureaucracy of governance. In the region this study was undertaken the local citizenry were touched by various forms of bureaucracy. These included the self-determining local Progress Associations, and/or Aboriginal Councils (eg Aroona Council in Copley), the Outback Economic and Community Development Trust, and a proliferation of State and Federal statutory and quasi-governmental bodies. The principal tension that water produced in this context was a dichotomy between freedom and regulation. This was mediated by a more general tension between having water supplied, serviced and managed by an independent body (SA

Water), as opposed to the local Progress Associations, which drew heavily upon already time poor locals engaged in their own economic activities.

The onerous nature of working for the local Progress Association and supplying the town's water was mentioned by a number of respondents who argued that there was a trade off between autonomy and remote management by another bureaucracy:

> I think it is an advantage to us to be incorporated in many ways, it allows us a certain amount of freedom to operate without bureaucratic strangulation and there is always the risk that this will be removed and we go under the banner of some distant bureaucracy, completely unaware of how life is lived up here, that is always the threat that alright, there are certain disadvantages but maybe they outweigh the so called advantages, to be autonomous.

There was a clear scepticism of government intervention, remote management, and the visiting bureaucrat or contractor even though the obligation of local management through Progress Associations was demanding and in some cases also an economic burden.

For one Beltana resident the idea of any form of government intervention in water supply was preposterous:

> No. We don't want any government interference. One of the glorious things about this town is I pay no council rates, I pay no water rates, I pay no electricity bills. I would sooner take to a shovel and I have, and fill in a hole, I would sooner supply my own water and supply my own electricity rather than get involved in huge bureaucracy.

On the other hand some locations reaped the benefits of greater governance. For example, Parachilna recently received an SA Tourism Commission funded, SA Water maintained effluent plant and SA Water recently sunk a bore for Parachilna improving and upgrading their water supply infrastructure. Management options for these residents would need to consider the maintenance of local autonomy with structured bureaucratic support.

Skepticism of bureaucracy also structures the water supply in this region. Leigh Creek residents (at the time of the study in 2007) did not pay for water, although they did receive a water use statement. One Copley resident (who paid for water) noted:

> The towns' [Leigh Creek] people do not have to pay for water, there is no control and there is no check on leakages, running taps, anything like that, its only now that they're starting to worry about it with the extent of drought….they've only just now started to install meters on houses…a study showed that the usage of water, per household at Leigh Creek versus Copley and Lyndhurst, it was four times…

For the residents of Copley and Lyndhurst the cost of water was contingent upon the management of the Leigh Creek mine, and induced self-regulating water behaviour. This division between those with free water, and those who had to pay, those of the mine and those of the general community, and the managers and the managed were clear line of tension in the community. This tension was enhanced by the changing climate and the changing economic relations of water.

The more marginal the resident and their position in the community the greater their sense of water vulnerability. Copley and Lyndhurst residents spoke of being subject to the Leigh Creek water protocols ... *you've got no security of supply, we don't know if the coal mine is going to continue or not, we rely on Leigh Creek for a lot of community services as well.* Among some residents, particularly those engaged in environmentally sustainable solutions there was a level of resentment toward the taming and development disposition of the Leigh Creek coal field corporation. It was perceived that Leigh Creek residents were privileged, both socially and in terms of their water supply:

> I believe that a study showed that the usage of water, per household Leigh Creek vs Copley and Lindhurst, it was four times, well if you don't pay for it, you may as well leave your tap running, hell you don't care; wash your car, there's no control of it, there's no restrictions on washing vehicles, or houses or lawns or anything. We don't have any restrictions, it's purely the financial restriction and we're all aware of it. I don't wash any of my cars, they can wait till it rains…

For some Copley residents the development of, and ownership of Aroona Dam was a point of contention. An Aboriginal resident noted that buying water from Leigh Creek, sourced from an Andamdunytna sacred site (Aroona Dam) grated on him, given his sense of prior ownership and dispossession of this traditional property.

Tourists and townies

One way in which water identity is established is in relation to perceptions of city people. In this conceptualisation the regional community becomes undifferentiated and whole, in relation to the city community. There is a common assumption that bush people are by definition water reflexive and city people are constructed as a problem to managed:

> Adelaide will drink our rain water no problems at all. It's amazing how lazy people are. We've changed a few of the ways we do things; we had the rainwater tanks plumbed into a lot of the cabins, but you could not train people with signage, different taps that that's rain water, that's bore water. The rainwater tank will always run out. We've disconnected them, put jugs and buckets in and said help yourself to the rainwater, they're all full. Its just people being lazy, simple as that.

A common account of excessive water use was that if it was available then it would be used. Urbanites required intense scrutiny around their water use. Indeed a strategy was to make people work to get their water hoping that people were too lazy to go and find it if it wasn't readily available.

For the roadhouse and station owners the 'caravaners', who were often described as predominantly 'grey nomads' also posed difficulties with water use:

> Normally it'll be 9.30 in the morning; you'll see Ma and Pa in their $120,000 Land cruiser and the proper outback caravan. The minute they pull in, it costs you money. They've been out on the road for 7 – 10 days, so as soon as they pull in, the first thing they do is charge up all their batteries on their reverse system, the generator nearly stalls, you've got to start a bigger generator. The second thing they do, they've got their own washing machine, they start washing all their clothes, the third thing, they

> start filling up all their water tanks and the next morning they've gone and they're set for another 10 – 14 days; empty all their rubbish in your bins and that can hurt, because some of them can take 500- 600 litres of water. How can you police that? A lot of vans just plug into your tap, you don't know where the water is going; you don't know what they're filling. The power, you can with circuit breakers but how do you say 'hey you're taking too long in you're shower, see a lot of them have showers in their vans and they just plug into your water, but it costs us more than we're getting for it; for that service.

The station owners, whose primary aim is to have people stay and use their accommodation subsequently provide water and other services to tourists that do not ultimately put capital into their business. The attitude of tourists to water is also one that is contradictory; they attempt to be self-sufficient but draw huge amounts of water for drinking, cleaning and storage before taking off into the landscape.

An increasing strategy is to develop conservation technologies:

> I get Stateliner buses pulling up with 43 seniors, who queue to go to the loo. I've got a dual flush system, but that's a hell of a lot of water going through to where? If I could bite the bullet and spend $10,000 or whatever it's going to cost me to put in a composting loo in each side, I'd do it.

There is a paradox to tourist excesses however, in that without visitors tourism would become unsustainable. Indeed drought and climate change more generally have already change the demographics of visitors to the region. These tensions between local tourist operators and visitors are further enhanced by disparities in the governance of the different operators. Depending on one's 'corporate' status, as either remote town or station, some operators have access to subsidy while others, such as the Angorichina station, do not. The commodification of water, coupled with drought, exacerbates these tensions and inequalities.

Sustainable living: differentiating the rural community

Many local residents questioned the viability of a range of enterprises, in particular pastoral activities. In this case an existing tension between different groups of locals,

established by their economic status, is enhanced by water scarcity and water commodification:

> I think the pastoral activities in this sort of country is no longer sustainable... It appalls me, just driving up here, you see some places that are still over – stocking and you'll see one side of the road there's a reasonable amount of vegetation; other side there's nothing. How can they be allowed to do this?

This is further borne out by the realization that pastoralists in the region were turning to tourism to supplement their pastoral traditions.

> … if they didn't have the … hotel, I wouldn't doubt [Pallava] would supply them with an adequate living. I would think … if it wasn't for some mining that takes place on their land, they would be hard pressed to make a living... Sometimes some people probably deny that that is the case, but I think that this area is, well, right for the government to say 'sorry, Mr Goyder was right, this area up here is not sustainable for pastoralists, take your sheep away'.

Residents at Parachilna and Leigh Creek provided accounts regarding the questionable sustainability of pastoral and mining activities. The critique of local corporate enterprise describes a community tension between the development activities, seen as unsustainable, and more general, local economic and community enterprise seen as attempting to be sustainable.

> There are quite a few wells in Copley, mostly all dry, and there are about 19 metres down, so that's an awful long way down, and most of the wells have been filled in and covered over. I think the reason it is so far down is because the miners have been using so much of it …the bore water, so the water table has dropped dramatically since the mining began; all the wells in the town, I believe, were quite sustainable until that time.

Concern regarding the sustainability of the water supply given the low average rainfall over the last 5 years and the low water level at Aroona Dam, was a common experience.

Questions of sustainability bring into relief the distinction within these communities. These distinctions are principally defined by one's economic location, general resident, roadhouse or station owner, tourist operator or pastoralist. Indigenous

Australians, are also located in this broad field or economy of water, yet their position is marginalized largely because it exists through a government support economy.

Conclusion

A key practice in Western constructions of identity and community is the tendency to generate divisions based on constructed ideas of unity. The imperative of this logic is the generation of a sense of self, or an identity, that is exclusive of Others to varying degrees. Under conditions of stress or scarcity this logic of identity becomes heightened. This logic is dualistic in character and generates hierarchies of oppositions (Young, 1990) that work to preserve the subjects endogenous notion of self and community over another.

The selection of interview accounts regarding water concerns demonstrates accounts that water talk creates notions of us and them within communities. While these lines of tension exceed the three discussed in this paper: governance, tourists and townies and sustainability, they do identify a field of community relations that are reproduced and transformed by the changing capital of water and the subsequent changes in water relations. These lines of tensions include issues pertaining to the implications for all residents of the commodification of water and its changing regime of governance under the National Water Initiative (and more local responses); the driving paradox between water scarcity, water cost and industrial activity and corporate privileges; and regional identity (or territory) in which local residents identify visitors as problems with regards to water management and regional sustainability. In order to manage water relations in these communities further attention must be drawn to the way water shapes cultural (and community) relations in a changing water climate, including the economic and symbolic elements of water.

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