settlements. Since the mid-1990s, the younger generations have been far more actively engaged in orchestrating Christian rituals, especially church bands.

**CONCLUSION.** Despite colonial and postcolonial pressures, the **Jukurrpa** as a cultural form continues to provide a fundamental structure to the lives of the Warlpiri people. The **Jukurrpa** cannot change and give to Warlpiri men and women feelings of continuity in a world of uncertainty. In their enactment of **Jukurrpa** itineraries, the Warlpiri reaffirm their ties to their lands, their ancestors, themselves, and other Aboriginal people. Even though the frequency of ceremonial performances has diminished and the length and scope of performances modified, the power of the **Jukurrpa** remains strong. Through their ritual activities, Warlpiri participants demonstrate the importance of the **Jukurrpa** and their land to the world at large.

**SEE ALSO** Australian Indigenous Religions, overview article; Cosmology, article on Australian Indigenous Cosmology; Dreaming, The.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


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**WATER.** In the mythical narratives in which it is frequently employed, the image of water takes on many different aspects. This article shall try to classify its appearances and seek to understand how the diverse functions that it fulfills are ordered.

**AT THE TIME OF ORIGINS.** Many peoples tell how the world, already created in ancient times, was transformed and became what it is now. According to certain Australian traditions, the earth was originally surrounded by water, and in it were many spirits. Through the action of one of these spirits, the earth grew warm, and the first humans emerged from it. According to the Zuni Indians, a complex network of waterways circulated underground; the first Zuni were born there, at the lowest level. A pair of twins created by the Sun then made them climb to the surface. A pond marks the spot where they finally saw the light of day. A northern Australian myth tells the story of a *derna* (ancestral) deity. After one of his sons struck him with a lance, he threw himself into the sea; there, another of his children drew the lance out of his flesh where it had remained embedded. During the voyage the god then undertook, a spring appeared everywhere he rested. Finally, he plunged into the river Victoria, whose waters he proceeded to stir up until they formed deep branches in the forest; he then disappeared under a rock. From time to time he rises to the surface and causes storms; according to some accounts, he also occupies the region of the rainbow, where rain is formed.

Myths of this type show us water as present in the world from the most ancient times on, but they ascribe to it many
different situations. Whether peripheral to the land or underground, water is first a significant element of the universal order. Sometimes it figures simply as a geographical feature—the sea or a river defining the shape of a country. However, there is something more to take note of. Water can be passive, with a spirit independent of it taking the sole initiative in the act of transformation. And yet water is tied mysteriously to the birth of the first humans or to the destiny of a god, who, after disappearing into its depths, remains bound up with storms and rain. The scope of these differences becomes clear when considering lengthier accounts.

In seeking the origin of all things, many peoples relate how water appeared in the course of cosmogonic events. Their explanations fall into three principal mythic systems. According to the first system, the world is created by a god who remains largely transcendental to it. In this case water, like the entire world, is a product of divine action. According to the Deusa of South America, “Sun created the universe, . . . [He] created the earth, its forests and its rivers, . . . He also created the spirits and water demons” (Gerardo Reichel-Dolmatoff, Deusa: Simbolismo de los Indios Tubanos del Vaipés, Bogotá, 1968, pp. 48-49). An African lament evokes “the one eternal God, the creator of the ocean and of dry land, of the fish in the sea and the beasts in the forest” (Louis Vincent Thomas, Les religions d’Afrique noire, Paris, 1969, p. 218).

In the second mythic context, the cosmogony takes on the aspect of a genealogy. The first ancestor is an entity whose simultaneously cosmic and divine attributes appear in the proliferation of his offspring. The waters that are then born throughout the generations are themselves generative. In a Greek system, the ancestor Earth gives birth to Heaven and to Pontos, the realm of the sea, composed of salt water. Earth then couples with each of these male principles. The first of the children she conceives from Heaven is Oceanus, a freshwater river, with deep eddies; he becomes the father of all the springs and rivers. Thus the deity who goes beyond the world remains immanent within it: In a way, he is present in the waters.

Finally, spirit may be presented as one of the primary agents of the formation of the world. Take for instance one of the Bambara myths: Out of the original void and motion a force, and then spirit, come forth. While the principles of things are being ordered, a mass falls and gives birth to the earth. However, a part of spirit arises: this is Faro, who builds the heaven. Faro then falls to earth in the form of water, thus bringing life to life. Dispenser of life, water is a manifestation of the divine spirit itself.

It is, however, in another type of cosmogony that the breadth and diversity of the functions of water become most intelligible. Here, water symbolizes what existed before the unleashing of the cosmogonic process, or the state of the world in the first phases of its history. There are numerous variations on this theme.

1. In its fluidity and elusiveness water may suggest the absence of form, the unsubstantiality and confusion from which the world will emerge. Inert, water has no power; a god or other being independent of water will be the sole agents of creation. For instance, the following tale was told in the Admiralty Islands. In the beginning, there was nothing but an immense sea; in it swam a great serpent. Wanting a place where he could rest, he said, “Let a reef arise!” A reef then arose from the water and turned into dry land.

Biblical cosmogony illustrates the meaning of water in myths of this sort. The Bible brings together various symbols, including the desert, the void and darkness, the abyss, and the mass of water that the abyss contains and above which hovers the breath of God. This divine breath alone signifies reality. The other images have a negative value, evoking the idea of nonexistence; theologians will see in them a symbol of nothingness. Vedic language can go even further:

Neither Non-Being nor Being existed then.
Neither air nor the firmament above existed.
What was moving with such force? Where? Under whose care?
Was it the deep and fathomless water? (Rgveda 10.121.1)

In this question, the image of water alludes to the state of things prior to the distinction between being and nonbeing.

2. Water has no form of its own, but rivers have a bed and the sea has a bottom. This simple fact inspires several myths. Here is a Siberian example:

In the beginning, water was everywhere. Doh, the first shaman, flew over the primordial ocean in the company of some birds. Finding nowhere to rest, he asked the red-breasted loon to dive into the ocean and bring back some earth from the bottom. This the loon did, and on his third attempt, he managed to bring back a little mud in his beak. Doh made of this an island on the original ocean which became the earth.

The original ocean can thus cover some solid elements. Moreover, despite its fluidity, water itself has substance; it is itself matter, and may contain suspended matter. In some myths the gods capture this matter or condense it. Thus the Atharvaveda (12.1) reads: “[The Earth] was originally a wave in the heart of the Ocean; the Sages went looking for it with their magic.” A Guianese myth tells how Ha made an immense sea of mud, and then, by solidifying the mud, created the earth. According to the Kojiki, Izanagi and Izanami drove a lance into the sea that extended below them. When they withdrew it, the salty drops that fell from it solidified and formed the first land: the island of Onogoro. A Greek commentator on the myth of Proteus expresses himself in more abstract terms:

There was a time when all that existed was formless and muddy . . . there was nothing but matter that had been spilled out. A formless inertia reigned until the artist of all things, having attracted order in order to protect life, imposed its imprint on the world. He dispersed the heavens from the earth, separated the conti-
nent from the sea, and each of the four elements . . .
assumed its own form. (Heraclitus, Hymnic Allegories
64ff.)

In this type of myth, water no longer signifies nothingness;
it possesses a true existence. The gods use it, but it remains
inert; they alone are active.

3. Very similar accounts, or even variants of the same
myth, however, endow water with a certain spontaneity.
This is the case in a story told by the Muskoq, of North
America. Before creation, they say, a vast expanse of water
was the only thing visible, and two pigeons flew over the
waves. At one end, they noticed a blade of grass growing on
the surface of the waves. From this grass the earth gradually
took shape, and at last the islands and continents took on
their present form. One may also refer to an Orphic Greek
cosmogony, according to which the primordial water appears
to have been muddy. The matter it contained was condensed
to become earth, and then from water and earth was finally
born the mysterious god who would engender the cosmic
egg. Despite their very different styles, both of these myths
share one feature: Something happens in the original waters,
without the intervention of any power external to the waters
themselves. They therefore possess a certain intrinsic power.
Other myths go on to explain the nature of this power.

4. In Hindu cosmogonies, waters are often represented
as a receptacle of the divine egg or seed, which grows in the
waters, carrying the god full of activity. But they do not give
birth to what they carry. "In the beginning, he created only
the waters, and then, in the waters, he laid his seed. And this
became a golden egg . . . In this egg Brahmā was born of
himself, the ancestor of all living things" (Māṇḍūka
Dharmatāstasa 1.8-9). Auspicious for the development of the
divine embryo, such waters fulfill an almost amniotic function.
Egyptian mythology has a similar body of water, known
as Nub. The primordial water is considered divine. It bears
its own name and assumes human attributes. It can speak,
and it can form a couple with its feminine double, the
goddess Naunet. In Helleno-Babylonian tradition, it is in Nub
that the autogenous solar god is born and later rests. There he
begins his creative or generative activity, and there, perhaps, the
first gods begin their existence.

5. The image of a vivifying water that favors the birth
of a god or the growth of an embryo is in fact very close to
that of a fecund and procreative water. Some Egyptian texts
give the impression that Nun himself engendered the solar
god, whom he calls "my son." Nun has thus been called the
"father of the gods." For a more clear-cut example of an
image of procreative water, however, one may turn to the
Babylonians. The Babylonians recognized two beings, Apus
and Tiamat, who existed prior to the formation of heaven
and earth. They are at one and the same time waters, whose
currents, in the beginning of time, mingled in a single mass,
and two personified deities, one masculine and one fe-
male. Their union produces another divine couple, who in
turn will have their own offspring, so that Apus and Tiamat
become the ancestors of all creatures and, in this sense, the
first authors of the cosmogonic process. Greece had a similar
system, which Homer has preserved. Simultaneously cur-
rents of water and anthropomorphic deities, Okeanos and
Tethys couple and give birth; their descendants will include
all beings who will constitute, rule, or people the universe.

Essential to the life of plants, animals, and humans
alike, water can be identified with the life-bearing forces and
with fecundity itself. The regenerative nature can appear in
a less biological fashion. One reads in the Śatapatha
Bṛahmāṇa (11.1.6.1-6): "In the beginning, the waters and the
ocean alone existed. The waters had a wish: 'How shall we
procreate?' They made an effort. They practiced ascetic heat-
ing (tapas), and so it happened that a golden egg appeared.'
This egg contained Prajāpati. Thus not only is water filled
with the desire for procreation (kīma), it is also capable of
truly creative effort and ascetic heat (tapas).

When looking at the role water plays in the later phases
of the creation of the world, one sees these observations con-
firmed. Within one and the same cosmogonic system, waters
can successively assume attributes that enable one to distin-
guish different systems within the most ancient phases. For
example, it was seen that the embryo of Prajāpati developed
in the primordial waters. But then Prajāpati himself under-
takes the creation of the waters. In the Śatapatha Bṛahmāṇa
(11.1.6.16-19), Paramesin, son and hypostasis of Prajāpati,
wished to become all things on earth. So he became water.
Similarly, Prajāpati will become breath, and Indra, the word.
These notions are not contradictory; they represent different
stages in creation. Whatever their amniotic qualities, the
primordial waters are formless and not especially substantive,
since Prajāpati still remains an embryo within them. After
his birth, however, the god creates more defined and con-
crete waters outside of himself. In this way the text shows
that the deity penetrates the waters just as he penetrates the
entire universe.

Other narratives make simpler distinctions among the
successive states of water. If primordial waters are an inert
mass, it would be logical for them, during the course of cre-
ation, to be influenced by the actions of the gods who rule
them. In the Bible, God creates a space in the midst of the
original waters, dividing it into two masses, the upper and
the lower waters. After creating a solid mass, he then separ-
ates that from the lower waters, thereby forming the sea and
dry land.

Waters also submit to the demiurgical action in more
ambiguous accounts. Here is a Fali (African) myth: One of
the first animals, the tortoise, gave the world its first structure
by laying out a ditch on the waters. After the first crisis, when
rain threatened to submerge all things, the toad—another of
the first animals—completed the structure. He separated
standing water from running water and opened up a second
path for the waters, cutting through the earlier ditch. Thus
he divided the world into four parts.
Passive waters can also be mere instruments in the hands of those who confront each other in the course of great cosmogonic battles. In Hindu mythology, the demon Vṛtra holds back the waters and prevents them from irrigating the earth. Indra, who is waging a difficult war against him, is finally victorious and gives life to the world by releasing the waters. Mesopotamian myths are more complex. When the god Enlil decides to destroy humanity, he first holds back the rains and prevents underground waters from reaching the surface. Then, in a second attempt, he unleashes the waters, causing a flood.

Although waters thus appear to be temporarily mastered by the gods who use them, they are not completely inert. Not only do they seem to help Indra in his combat, but they are used by the gods primarily because they have a power of their own. The gods retain them because they are fertilizing; they unleash them because they are destructive.

The life-bearing and generative qualities that have been recognized in some of the primordial waters become manifest in the later phases of the cosmogony. Thus, in a later stage of the Sumerian cosmogony, Enki, the Sumerian water god, impregnates Nintur, a goddess close to the earth, by scattering his seed on a riverbank; he then becomes the father of the goddess Ninu. With Ninu he begets Ninkurra, and with Ninkurra, Nintu. Similarly in Greece, whether they be the primordial pair (as in Homer) or be born of Heaven and Earth (as in Hesiod), the river Oceanos and his spouse Pales have many offspring in the form of springs and rivers; the latter also procreate. In this manner waters contribute to the growth and enrichment of the universe. They also do so in another way: Enki fills ditches, canals, and fallow land with water, thus participating in the organization of the world.

Amma, the Dogon creator god, also has close affinities with heaven and water. His children, the snake-shaped Nommo, who are associated both with water and the primal word, are the most active and successful agents of the cosmogonic impulse. They contribute to the birth of sexuality and permit the birth of the first ancestors. The latter, who in turn acquire the dignity of Nommo, keep close ties with water. After eating the first dead person, one of them furnishes society with the principles of its structure by vomiting up water—a prefiguration of torrents and ponds, the source of the five rivers, and of the waters of parturition.

Finally, water is sometimes tied more specifically to the birth of humanity. A trout out of water couples with a man from the underground lakes to beget the first clans of the Deshána. According to some New Guinea traditions, the dema deities once lived under the earth, except for one of them who dug a hole in the ground. The others came out through the hole; then it filled up with water, and fish began to swim in it. After a complex sequence of events the fish became men. Finally, in Greek mythology, men often appear by coming out of a river.

One may now consider instances in which waters are portrayed as destructive. Several examples can be found in the ancient Near East. The Ugaritic Baal, god of the storm and of rain, symbolizes the forces of life. He perioidically struggles against Mot, the incarnation of drought and death. He must also combat and conquer Prince Yamm, that is, the sea prince. Because of the gaps in knowledge it is difficult to locate this conflict within the mythical history of the world. So much, however, is certain: Yamm is threatening, and Baal's victory is necessary to the survival of the universe.

Things are clearer in the Enuma elish. Troubled by the proliferation and activity of their offspring, Apsu and Tiamat, whose mingled waters had given birth to the most ancient beings of the Babylonian myth, one day tried to destroy their descendants. Apsu, who was the first to try, was quickly conquered by Ea's magic. Ea then built his temple on the waters of Apsu, which were henceforth underground. Tiamat, who tried next, was more formidable, but was killed in the end by Marduk. By blowing into and swelling up the monstrous body of Tiamat, the young god separated the celestial waters from the earth; he opened the way to mountain rivers as he imposed his order on the entire universe. The primordial beings thus appear to want to abolish the agitation that accompanies the rise of the world in order to recover the peace they knew in the undifferentiated state of the first ages. Their inertia proves destructive. Tiamat appears as a monster in the army of monsters she has raised. The original divine waters must be conquered before the organizing gods can accomplish their work by pushing them back to the ends of the world.

**WATER IN THE PRESENT WORLD.** One again encounters the different qualities, functions, and powers of water when looking at the position it holds in the completed world. Waters are one of the great domains of the ordered universe. Evoking the totality of the world, an Egyptian tale lists the sky, the earth, the domain of night, the mountains, and the waters. The ḫerēḏa refers more simply to the sky, the waters, the earth. But despite such seemingly straightforward classifications, water is not thereby reduced to its palpable appearance; it continues to occupy places that are inaccessible to us; it possesses unsuspected qualities and powers.

The cosmic waters. For many peoples waters constitute the limits of the universe. They make up a vast expanse, in the middle of which lies the earth, like an island. They may be divided into two oceans on either side of the world, or they may flow in a river that surrounds the world, like the Greek Oceanos. They also frequently occupy the lower regions of the world in a more or less complex network of waterways underground. Or again, sometimes the entire earth is believed to rest on water. Finally, water is also found in the upper regions, above the heavens. Thus water can surround the world in any of the three dimensions of space. For the Deshána Indians, a region bathed in water extends under the earth; water also circulates in the filaments of the Miluy Way. In Mesopotamian texts the earth is built on the waters.
of Apsu, while the waters of Tiamat occupy the space above the heavens.

Waters can also help to define the center of the world. According to the Sumerian myth already cited, this center is located at the intersection of two open trenches in the waters. A character from an Iroquois myth runs around a lake to make the earth grow; the earth then develops on all sides under his steps. The great Ugaritic god El dwells at the source of the rivers in the midst of the course of the two oceans. The Guaraní Indians call the original abode of their ancestors the “Gushing Spring.” It is the true center of the earth, the true center of the land of their first lost father.

Because they occupy highly significant parts of the universe, waters help to define cosmic order. The Satapatha Brahmana says categorically: “The waters are the order of the world” (11.1.6.24). In particular, bodies of water often establish important boundaries. In one widespread image, a lake or river separates the land of the living from the world of the dead. Examples of such a body of water include the river one crosses to reach the Babylonian Land of No Return and the Acheron of the Greeks. Furthermore, just as one must cross the waters to enter the realm of death, one must also cross the waters to enter the land of the living; according to the Ewe people, a child crosses a river when it is born.

Not all peoples make an explicit relationship between cosmic waters and the waters nearer at hand. Several do, however. Thus rains are sometimes believed to come from the celestial waters, and rivers from waters underground, if not from the waters surrounding the earth. Some texts provide more complex images. In a Babylonian poem, springs and rivers arise from the head of Tiamat’s corpse; they therefore seem to come from the waters that occupy the upper regions of the world, even if these are near the earth, at the ends of the horizon. In ancient India, the Ganges was thought to descend from the heavens.

Waters and the divine. Wherever they are found, waters are often bound up with divine powers. The Hindu world generally holds them to be goddesses. More explicitly, in other cases, it is the sea, certain rivers, and certain springs that are considered to be gods. People in Vedic India, for instance, sacrificed to rivers. The Tigris and the Euphrates appear in a list of Hittite deities. Rivers are invoked in one Homeric oath.

There is something remarkable about these water deities. They are something more than representations of a purely natural element. Thus while the Egyptian Nun is a waterway on which the boat of the Sun sails at night, he is also a personage who can speak. Similarly, the name of the Ugaritic god Yam means the sea itself; another of his names evokes the image of a river, but he also appears with the features of a prince or judge who sends ambassadors to the divine assembly. The Greek Pontos is the salty expanse of the sea; he is also a masculine being who couples with Earth and sires offspring. In Egypt, the Nile (and its floodwaters) is honored as Hapi, an anthropomorphic god. Water is thus the manifestation of a divine power that does not exactly coincide with the tangible appearance of the liquid element. Nevertheless, its immanence within this element is such that water can be perceived as the divinity itself.

In other cases, however, waters simply serve as the abode of spirits or sacred powers. Such spirits may inhabit a lake, a river, or the waves of the sea, or like others may live in a grove, a rock, or a mountain. Several gods that exercise a more extended authority should be mentioned separately. First of all, there are lords of rain, who are in some sense believed to cause it. However, rain also depends on beings whose powers are not restricted to the control of rain. In order to obtain rain, therefore, one must invoke several gods together, or certain ancestors who have become powerful spirits. Rain is sometimes conceived of as a gift from the supreme being, or the god of rain may be made into the supreme being itself.

Several ancient Mediterranean and Near Eastern peoples had a storm god. He rides or gathers the clouds, causes thunder and lightning to strike, and makes the rain fall. This storm god occupies a preeminent position among the gods; he can reign over them, protect the cities or their kings, and extend his power over the entire universe. Less prominent in the Hindu pantheon, the storm god Parjanya is a destroyer of demons; in some texts, he seems to be in command of the whole world.

The power of the gods that reign over the waters in a more general fashion is similarly extensive. The Sumerian god Enki, who comes by sea from a faraway land, established his residence or temple on the underground waters of Apsu, whom he has subdued. Enki is the lord of the waters. After being the major organizer of the world and one of the creators of humanity, he remains the master of fate. Along with An and Enlil, he belongs to the supreme triad. The same can be said of Ea, his Akkadian counterpart. King of the abyss, god of the vast sea, lord of the terrestrial waters, Ea has his place in the celestial world, and his counsel is heeded by the gods. Thus the power of the god of water usually transcends the domain of water.

The inverse phenomenon is also found. The authority of a more universal god is exercised in privileged fashion on the aquatic world. In the Veda, for example, Varuna is a major god who rules over nature, gods, and humans; he is the guardian of rta, the religious order of things. He is often closely linked to water. With Mitra, he can cause rain; with Indra, he can declare: “It is I who have swollen the rushing waters” (Rgveda 4.42). He rests on the waters, and his golden house is built on them. The two oceans are his entrails; he is hidden in each drop of water.

The situation is more highly defined in Greece. Poseidon, the god of the sea, is not essentially an aquatic deity. His name and several myths prove that he has close affinities with the earth. Son of the ancient king Kronos, he was given
sovereignty over the seas when the paternal heritage was divided up; one of his brothers got the netherworld and the other, the heavens. Thus he commands the waters and raises tempests, but he is not immanent in them. Other gods—Pontos, Nereus, and Proteus—are more intimately tied to water. But in the case of Poseidon, sovereignty originates in a region beyond the domain where it is exercised. Whatever their wealth and power, waters are not the source of a political type of power. Political power is closer to the heavens; this is why it cannot be held by a god of the storm.

**The qualities and powers of water.** In their varied manifestations, the water gods and the waters themselves possess in the present world qualities or traits comparable to those that have been seen in the primordial cosmogonies. The waters that extend beyond the world and delimit it may in some cases be a symbol of the void, as they once were of nothingness; but this is not certain. These faraway waters sometimes feed terrestrial waters: They must have the same density. Water's fluidity and elusiveness are, however, manifested in the faculty of metamorphosis found in certain aquatic spirits or divinities. In a Vietnamese tale, a water spirit takes the shape of a seductive boy. Hindu nymphs turn into birds, and Greek sea gods, Proteus, Nereus, and his daughter Thetis, assume several forms in succession to escape those who attempt to detain them. This ability can be transferred. In Burmese narratives, the water of a certain pond transforms the person or animal who drinks it, the former into an ape, and the latter into a human.

Water is essential for human life; it ensures human nourishment by fertilizing the land. It is more than nourishment, because it is the source of nourishment. It may, therefore, be compared not only to milk, but more particularly to the cow. Because of its utility, it is perceived as a privileged support of vital forces. The Vedas, for instance, equate water with the blood, while the Desana view the rivers as umbilical cords joining people to the amniotic waters underground. In both Hindu and African texts, it is common to speak of the waters giving life and engendering humankind.

This is why water is found associated with sexuality. The Diola sing: "Women's sexual organs are full of water . . . , if Ata Sembe sleeps with a woman, he will always get her pregnant" (Louis Vincent Thomas, *Les religions d'Afrique noire*, Paris, 1969, p. 202). In this respect, waters often assume a feminine character. The Apsarasas of India and the Greek Naiads and Nereids are young women, caught up in erotic adventures. But the waters can also be masculine. "They rest on sperm, as Varuna rests on the waters," says the Bhādarāṇyaka Upaniṣad 3.9.22. To the Greek poets, the heavens send rain, like seed, to the earth, in an amorous outburst. The Egyptian god of the floodwaters of the Nile—Hati, the dispenser of life—is androgynous, and the Nile is imagined as half man and half woman. Its waters are male, and its arable land is female. Together, they are father and mother. In Greece the rivers are strongly masculine, and like the gods of the storm and of rain, have the attributes of a bull.

As vital principle, water allows people to ward off illness and to keep death away. Because water makes the plants of the pharmacopoeia grow, or because of the effects of its intrinsic qualities, the Veda associates it with the origin of medicine. In particular, water is believed to be highly effective against the venom of snakes. In a more positive sense, water is said to give vigor, make old men young, and prolong life.

Water is even capable of conferring immortality. Gilgamesh finds the herb of life, which enables people to escape death, at the bottom of the waters. Several peoples speak of a "water of life" that bestows immortality. Similarly, to give her son Achilles eternal life, Thetis wants to plunge him into the waters of the Styx. The Greeks in general establish a relationship between Okeanos and ambrosia, as the Indians do between water and soma.

There is a more enigmatic aspect of water: It possesses wisdom and knowledge. Water seeks the truth, one reads in the Vedas. The Mesopotamian water god Ea, full of wisdom, dispenses counsel to the gods. As a sage, he protects the mythical old wise men who were born in the abyss in the form of fish. The most ancient Greek water gods engender daughters whose names denote qualities of intelligence. Among the Oceanids, these are Metis ("prudence") and Idyia ("the knowing one"); among the Nereids, Panopeia ("the all-seeing one") and Nemertes ("the venacious one"). The latter, says Hesiod, has the same quality of spirit as her father. Nereus is in fact frank, loyal, and gentle, always concerned with justice. He resembles Proteus, who knows the present, the past, and the future.

Where does this wisdom of water come from? A Guaraní narrative establishes a relationship between the freshness of water and the freshness of the soul accompanied by moderation. In a Vedic text the waves, which stave off all evils, also keep away lies. A Greek text associates the extent of knowledge with the immensity of the depths of the sea. But perhaps the wisdom of the water gods is a function of their age. In the Hellenic world, the wisest among them are called "the old men of the sea."

Waters, which at one and the same time are sages and generative forces—to the point of symbolizing at times the creative power itself—are close to the word. To the Dogon, the word and the word are joined in the person of the Nommo, whose civilized activity simultaneously links the arts of civilization with the word and with wisdom; one finds similar associations among the Bambara. In *Inyesa* 10.125, the ritual word itself, whose efficacy is cosmic, says of itself: "My origin is in the waters, in the ocean." Water is not always beneficent, however. In the present world, water can be hostile to humans, just as it could be destructive in the remote time of myth. There are catastrophic rains and floods; people drown in rivers and seas. These are not simply accidents but the manifestation of evil powers allied with the liquid element. One example alone illustrates this: Indigenous peoples of the north of Australia have a serpent-shaped spirit that...
lives in the clouds during the dry season and in marshes during the rainy season. It is he who drowns humans in floods, he who swallows them up when they venture out into swamps.

The negativity of water can take other forms. For the Desana, water is a symbol of illness. In one Mesopotamian text, bad coughs are caused by Apsu. An account from Gabon goes even further: The water spirit embodies rain, cold, and death. Mesopotamia also has waters of death, just as it has waters of life.

This hostile power is sometimes incarnated in monstrous creatures. The Desana believe that a formidable centipede lives in the sea; they also talk of malevolent serpentine creatures, some of whom eat children. The descendants of Pontos, the Greek god of the sea, include several hybrid beings with destructive powers, such as the Gorgons, who dwell near the waters of Okeanos, and the Hydra, in the marsh of Lerna. One recalls that Tiamat took on the form of a monster. Such monsters survive in the beliefs of ancient Israel; they are the leviathan, Rahab, and the dragon Tannin.

In the Hebrew scriptures, the ocean itself is often represented as an adversary of Yahveh. Of course, in imposing his order on the world, Yahweh conquered the waters and subdued the monsters they harbor; he is henceforth their master. However, their menace continues; the sea monster might reawaken, and if he does, God, who watches him, will kill him.

At times beneficent and at others maleficent, close to the principles of life and to creative power but nonetheless capable of destruction, a relative of gods and monsters, water bears within it all the ambiguities of the sacred. It is an agent of purification not only because it bathes, dissolves, and carries off material filth; its cathartic power is even more mysterious. According to a Babylonian text, water banishes all evils, even those that have not yet had an impact but that have been foretold by bad omens. In a Vedic hymn, water frees humanity from the consequences of false oaths and from all the sins people have committed.

The purity conferred by water is a positive trait. Water conveys to humankind certain of its virtues. It causes vision, according to a Vedic text. In a Greek legend, Pherecydes predicts an earthquake after drinking some water from a well. When Okeanos and Tethys purify Glaucus, they render him capable of undergoing the defecation process to which he is subject. Thus, waters are fully purifying to the extent that they are also, to a certain extent, sacralizing.

Several of the qualities of water just discussed are manifest in the world of the dead. For certain Zuni societies, the ancestors inhabit a village at the bottom of a lake. The members of the society believe that when they die they will go to sleep and wake up as young children in this village, at the bottom of the "whispering waters." These waters seem to be the symbol of a blissful condition where ancestral life and childhood comingle. The beliefs of the Desana go even further. A region bathed in water, Aspicon-dia, extends beneath the earth; from there came the first organizer of the world. It is a uterine domain, the source of all life, to which the people yet to be born are tied by a sort of umbilical cord. The best of the Desana will go there after death. Death is thus conceived as a return to the amniotic waters. Among the Polynesians, the dead inhabit a sad region, located beyond the seas; the chiefs, however, go to a different land, where the god Tane gives them a water of life that brings them back to life.

Nun, the primordial water, crosses through the Egyptian land of the dead. At night, the boat of the sun sails over its waves to the east. In some texts, the dead board this boat and make its journey with it. In other texts, they bathe in Nun, into which the sun god also dives. Assimilated to him, they come out again, regenerated. But the infernal waters are not always beneficent and life-giving. They contain reeds that the ferryman’s boat must steer clear of; they contain dangers and are disquieting. The Nun was supposed to be the site of mysterious drownings.

Among the Greeks, Hades contains rivers and lakes. The names of two of these rivers reveal their nature: Pyrphlegethon (Pyrephagethon) means “burning and flaming like fire”; Ceytus (Khyetos) means “groan, lamentation.” The rivers terminate in the abyss of Tartaros where, according to Plato, evil souls suffer a temporary punishment. Other souls, however, purify themselves on the banks of the lake Acherousias, where they pass before reincarnation. Proclus states more clearly that the souls purified in Acheron attain a better fate.

One frequently recurring idea is that the dead are thirsty. Drink refreshes them; thanks to it, they regain some form of life, as suggested by Egyptian texts. Not all waters, however, are equally beneficent to the dead. In certain Greek traditions, there are two springs in the underworld; the initiate knows he must drink from the one that comes from the Lake of Memory. Plato mentions a Plain of Forgetfulness where the Lake of Negligence is found. One of the infernal waters thus suppresses memory while the other maintains and reaffirms it, acting like the water of wisdom and knowledge already discussed. The importance of this opposition is apparent in the privilege granted to Pythagoras and Empedocles, who were said to have been allowed to retain the memories of their previous existences. It would appear from a reading of Empedocles that this privilege belongs to the souls who will shortly escape reincarnation.

CONCLUSION. In conclusion, the wide range of meaning given to the image of water is not without limits, and even opposing meanings given in different myths are not incoherent. These diverse meanings are in large part suggested by the diversity of human experience of water as a natural phenomenon.

Water can be ambiguous. As a fluid, it can symbolize a pure absence or an as yet still amorphous material that will be used by the gods. It may fulfill a positive function. It
bathes, dissolves, and purifies. Essential to human life and necessary for the growth of plants, it symbolizes a generative or life-giving quality, very similar to creative power. It is thus divine and sacrificial. Yet it is also capable of playing a negative role. The gods can utilize the destructive power of its waves. Active in itself, whether divine or monstrous, water erodes everything that takes form and tends to annihilate all distinctions in its own inconsistency. Finally, just as rivers and seas contribute to defining the contours of a country, so the dividing of the waters helps to define cosmic order.

The image of water therefore is not univocal. It can never be interpreted without considering the totality of the myth in which it figures. But it is not indifferent, defined only by the position it holds in the mythic system of a given society. Capable of calling forth the memory of various concrete experiences and numerous emotions, it carries specific meanings within it in a potential state. Each narrative actualizes some of these meanings.

No rule of logic requires that the meaning that water assumes in the evocation of the time of origins must remain unchanged during the course of the cosmogonic process or in the present world. On the other hand, in the small number of mythic systems that this author has studied in some depth, it has been striking that the uses of the image of water, often quite diverse, nevertheless remain coherent, owing to the theological intention that inspires the whole of a given system.

SEE ALSO Ablutions; Baptism; Flood, The; Lakes; Rain; Rivers; Spit and Spitting; Tears.

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New Sources


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WAWARAG. The most important myth and ritual constellation in Australia’s north-central Arnhem Land belongs to the Dua moiety. (Everyone and everything in this entire region belongs through patrilineal descent to one or the other of the two moieties, Dua and Yiridja.) The myth focuses on two sisters in human form who were swallowed by the Great Python, Yulunggu. The sisters are known in northeastern Arnhem Land as the Wawalag and in north-central Arnhem Land as the Wagilag. The dramatic story line, told in narrative or song form or in a combination of both, is now a popular subject of bark paintings created for sale to non-Aborigines.

SUMMARY OF THE WAWALAG STORY. The two sisters leave their home near the Roper River in Wawalag country for their long journey toward the north coast. In some versions the elder, Waimariwi, is pregnant and in some versions already has a small child (or two). The younger, Boaliri, has just reached puberty. (In one version, she is pregnant.) Along with digging sticks and long food-collecting baskets (signifying a feminine domestic role) and one or two dogs, they bring heavy baskets of stone spear blades (also of the Dua moiety) from the stone-chipping quarries in Rigarrra language territory, home of the Yiridja moiety, a source of eligible spouses for Dua moiety Wawalag people. The sisters give names to the places along their way, as well as to all the vegetable foods and small creatures they collect. They are tired when last, late one afternoon, they come to a quiet water hole shaded by paperbark trees and cabbage palms. They do not know it is the home of the Great Python. They collect stringybark to make a small hut, paperbark for comfortable sleeping mats, and firewood to cook their meal.

At this juncture the emotional tone of the myth changes sharply. Either shortly before the sisters arrive at the complex of named sites centering on the water hole (Mirara-minar,