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## Cultural politics and the hydrosocial cycle: Water, power and identity in the Andean highlands <sup>☆</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

This paper explores interactions among water, power and cultural politics in the Andes. It analyzes the hydrosocial cycle as the political–ecological production of a time- and place-specific socionature, enrolling and co-patterning the social, the natural and the supernatural to reflect dominant interests and power.

A case analysis locates community water control practices in Mollepata, Peru, in the broader historical setting of Andean water empires. To see how local worldviews, water flows and water control practices are interwoven, it unravels the ‘meta’ behind the ‘physical’, examining contemporary expressions of the ancient ‘hydrocosmological cycle’ that intimately interconnects the cyclical dynamics of hydrology, agroecology, human lifetime and cosmology. Herein, bonds among mountain deities, Mother Earth and humans are fundamental to guide water flows through this world, the world above and the world below.

Next, the paper analyzes the ‘political’ behind metaphysical patterning of water flows. Since ancient times, elites have striven to reinforce subjugation over Andean peoples by creating ‘convenient histories’ and ‘socionatural order’, connecting local water practices and worldviews to supralocal schemes of belonging, thereby deploying overlapping governmental rationalities.

Continued in contemporary, globalizing water politics and ‘governmentalities’, efforts to establish, demystify or transform frames of ‘water order’ are at the heart of water struggles. Here, dominant conceptual and cultural-political frameworks naturalize the strategic positioning of humans and nonhumans in hydrosocial patterns that support water hierarchies and legitimize particular distribution, extraction and control practices, as if these were entirely natural. Hydrosocial cycles are, however, importantly mediated by counter-forces and alternative water truths.

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*“We control life, Winston, at all its levels. You are imagining that there is something called human nature which will be outraged by what we do and will turn against us. But we create human nature” (Orwell, 1984, p. 216).*

### 1. Introduction

In Andean societies, as elsewhere, water represents potential and power and is the source of collaboration and conflict. Since ancient times, as I will outline below, water is the symbolic and material power linking time, space and place, by connecting origin, life, destruction and regeneration. Water is a basic means of mobilizing

people, the driving force behind local common property institutions, and fuses people, place and production in socio-cultural systems and shared techno-ecological histories.<sup>1</sup> This has led to water user groups’ strong identification with local water sources and territories, and water control has always importantly colored processes of identity formation in numerous Andean communities (Arguedas, 1975; Gelles, 2000; Sherbondy, 1998).

At the same time, this intimate connection among water, space and identity has fused struggles over material control of water use systems and territories with the battle over the right to culturally define and politically organize these socionatural systems. Dominant groups’ efforts to take control over local water resources go hand-in-hand with tactics to naturalize and commensurate schemes of water-based belonging. Hereto, ‘rationalizing water control’ by standardizing and externalizing local perceptions, rights, and rituals, in line with dominant interests, is a fundamental strategy.

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<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., Achterhuis et al. (2010), Boelens (2008), Boelens and Gelles (2005), Gebrandy (1998), Perreault (2008), Zimmerer (2000a) and Vera (2011).

In this battlefield to establish water control and representation regimes, hydrosocial cycles dynamically take shape, involving material water flows and distribution; the rules and rights prescribing how to manage these flows ‘from field and underground to cosmic levels’; legitimate authority to govern these water streams; and the discursive composition of water cycles as depoliticized socionatural hybrids that fit powerful actors’ interests.

In the Andes, long before contemporary schemes of neoliberal governmentality and the creation of globalizing neoliberal socionatures,<sup>2</sup> the strategic building of simultaneously material and discursive human-nature constructs – as hydrosocial cycles – through politics of identification and ‘subjectification’ was fundamental to the art of ‘conducting subject populations’ conduct’ (Foucault, 1980, 1991; Dean, 1999). Struggles over water, therefore, involve regimes of representation that aim to blend society and nature together through water truth and knowledge claims, to define ‘the order of things’. Though thoroughly mediated in everyday praxis, ruling groups’ strategic interest is to deploy discursive practices that define and position the social and the material in a human-material-natural network that leaves political order unchallenged and stabilized. Here, knowledge of nature is not neutral but a human production, co-defining social and natural orders (Goldman et al., 2010. Cf. Latour, 1993; Zimmerer, 2000b; Whatmore, 2002). Also water is a socio-nature (Linton, 2010; Perreault, 2011; Swyngedouw, 2007, forthcoming).

The paper, therefore, focuses on how different forms of governmentality envision to enroll and align humans, nature and thought within a network that aims to transform the diverse social and natural Andean water worlds into a dominant water discourse and governance system, structured according to ‘outside’ truths, categories and frames of reference. I extend the analysis of hydrosocial cycles to include conceptualization and political use of ‘hydro-cosmological cycles’. First, to show how cultural and metaphysical realities, through diverse worldviews, dynamically contribute to people’s understanding of hydrological cycles, welding social and natural to supernatural. Second, to illustrate how analyzing metaphysical water reality construction opens another window to scrutinize water politics and governance techniques (“the art of government according to truth”, Foucault, 2008: 313). It resembles the ways in which contemporary (scientific and interventionist) ‘water policy myths’ contribute to shaping those socionature representations that suit ruling groups’ interests (e.g., “disciplinary” and “neoliberal governmentality”, Foucault, 2008).

This field and literature research started in Peru’s Mollepatá region in 1988, with regular follow-up (long-term and shorter periods) in later years. Action-research involved group discussions, interviews, and interactive water design, while archival and academic research was embedded in the coordination of international research coalitions, such as WALIR – Water Law and Indigenous Rights (2001–2007), Concertación (2005–2011) and, currently, the Justicia Hídrica alliance (since 2009).

The section below introduces relevant connections among water, power, hydrosocial cycles, and Andean identity politics, and how these are linked to different forms of governmentality – respectively, ‘truth’, ‘sovereignty’, ‘discipline’, ‘neoliberalism’, as arts of government (Foucault, 2008; Fletcher, 2010). The third section presents an anecdotal account of my own encounters with diverging water truths in the Andes. I introduce Mollepatá’s Balcompata water problem case as piece of a larger conceptual-empirical puzzle, one that asks for transdisciplinary examination. The fourth section reflects briefly on the diverse, interlinked ‘domains

of water knowledge’, to lend the anecdotal account, in Section 5, a wider context of Andean hydrosocial/hydrocosmological cycle conceptualization, and relating it thereafter to imperial politics of truth, extraction and submission. While ancient empires applied mythological thought to glue such networks together, Section 6 shows how today the globalizing empires of scientific and expert-interventionist representation blend various hydrosocial/hydropolitical system components – regimes with authority to formulate ‘fundamental problems’, define ‘solutions’ and produce ‘truthful water knowledge’. The conclusion argues how producing material nature, producing strategic representations of the nature of nature, and producing subject and subjectified populations, are directly related. The latter, however, are not defenseless victims.

## 2. Water, power, identity, and socionatural water cycles

In the Andes, from Colombia to Chile, territorial management and community water use systems, for irrigation and drinking water, are interwoven with the cultural-political foundations of past and contemporary societies (Gelles, 2000; Vos et al., 2006).<sup>3</sup> Since ancient times, local peasant and indigenous communities have made their agro-pastoral livelihoods in rugged mostly (semi-) arid highland regions, often connecting high and low altitudinal zones to combine different micro-climates, soils, ecosystems and production opportunities (Mayer, 2002; Zimmerer, 2000a).<sup>4</sup> Maintaining these ‘interzonal water territories’ was increasingly complicated when, over the past centuries, communities were forced onto just the higher, less productive, unstable slopes, as powerful newcomers occupied their valleys and disintegrated the vertical production systems.

Because of these complex physical-ecological and adverse political-economic operating settings, water users must collaborate intensively. Despite endless variety, community water control builds on mutual dependence. Fundamental tasks in organizing for water are intertwined with bonds of rights and obligations. Here, strong ties of identification among local collectives and their water sources and territories are common. Bonds and arrangements tend to result from both internal negotiation and collective defense of water vis-à-vis third parties, such as landlords, neighboring communities, mining and agribusiness companies or State agencies (Boelens and Gelles, 2005; Vera, 2011; Vos et al., 2006).

In such settings, water rights simultaneously embody power relations and reveal how common ‘hydraulic property’ is re-affirmed, and how contested notions of ‘identity’ and ‘community’ are given their actual substance.<sup>5</sup> They are formed through “processes of political and cultural creation and imagination – generating meaning in the context of unequal power” (Roseberry, 1989: 14).

Since symbolic and day-to-day empirical matters are closely interwoven in water flows, technology and institutions in the Andes, water control offers significant entrance points for ‘metaphysical’ and discursive power plays to dominate the empirical world. This struggle to conquer imagination is fierce: who establishes which rights and norms, and how these are legitimized, by human schemes of representation but also supported by supernatural power relations. Also, given this interweaving of water, property relations and identity formation, efforts to extract surplus

<sup>3</sup> This is not unique for the Andean region, see e.g. case collections by Benda-Beckmann (2007), Roth et al. (2005) and UNESCO (2006).

<sup>4</sup> For an overview of academic research on historical and contemporary irrigation water control in the Andean countries, see Boelens (2008). See also Trawick (2005).

<sup>5</sup> For a comparative analysis with other regions, on water as a source of conflict and a bonding force among people, territory, production and identity, see e.g. Coward and Levine (1987), Benda-Beckmann (2007), Chambers (1994), Ostrom (1992), and Roth et al. (2005).

<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., Budds (2009), Fletcher (2010), McCarthy and Prudham (2004), and Swyngedouw (2004, forthcoming).

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