



Boundary management and the discursive sphere – Negotiating ‘realities’ in Khorezm, Uzbekistan

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ABSTRACT

With independence in 1991, Uzbekistan, as most of Central Asia, entered into a phase of socio-economic transformation. In agriculture, this state-driven restructuring of the former system has concentrated on the ‘formal’ sphere of land and water governance.

This paper assesses water management in Khorezm, Uzbekistan, taking a social constructivist and boundary work-inspired perspective. Several limitations to effective water management in Khorezm exist. We argue that three types of practices are widely employed to manage these and assure water access: formal, strategic, and discursive practices. The discrepancy between the formal water management institutions, manifested and regulated through formal practices and the informal, widely pursued through strategic practices and acts of deviation, is overcome through discursive practices. Verbal references to formal institutions therefore hamper the formalizing of informal practices. The institutionalized employment of all three types of practices fosters the production and reproduction of boundaries demarcating two, largely separate, spheres of reality in Khorezm’s water management. Consequently, a high degree of resistance to the integration of informal water management realities into the formal regulatory environment prevails, preventing mutual learning and thus the locally informed restructuring towards more efficient and sustainable water management in Khorezm.

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1. Introduction

Since the early 1990s, the countries of Central Asia have been undergoing diverse processes of socio-economic transformation, re-defining their economic, political and social systems. Uzbekistan, one of the most populous countries in the region largely depending on agricultural production, since independence in 1991 has actively restructured its agricultural sector. With regard to agricultural land, state farms (*sovkhoses*) were turned into collective farms (*kolkhoses*), and then into joint-stock companies (*shirkats*, literally ‘associations’). These were further dismantled and divided into *ferms* (private farms) in the early 2000s (Veldwisch, 2008). In the field of irrigation water, the formerly separate ministries, the Ministry of Agriculture and the Ministry of Melioration and Water Management of Uzbekistan were merged into a single, centralized organization at the end of 1996; the Ministry of Agriculture and Water Resources (MAWRs) (Yalcin and Mollinga, 2007; Wegerich, 2005).¹ Furthermore, from 2000 onwards, local-level water management became the responsibility

of the newly state-established Water User Associations (WUAs; Veldwisch, 2008, 2010; Abdullayev et al., 2008).²

Framed by these agricultural restructuring processes, this paper assesses the management of boundaries between ‘the formal’ and ‘informal’ spheres³ in the existing system of water management in Khorezm province, located in the irrigated lowlands of the Amu Darya River. In this region, the majority of the population works in agriculture, either as private farmers (*farmers*), peasants (*dehqons*), workers on private farms, or a combination of the latter two (Veldwisch and Spoor, 2008). Furthermore, due to the state plan on agriculture, three forms of production prevail: state-ordered

² In 2009, these Water User Associations were renamed Water Consumer Associations (Law of Republic of Uzbekistan, Article 18-2).

³ In this paper we employ the distinction ‘formal’ and ‘informal’ as the prevalent emic differentiation of the two spheres in Khorezm, Uzbekistan. We consequently take into account the ongoing debate on the shortcomings of the institutional typology, originally introduced by North (1998) (Greif, 2006; Brunsson, 2002; Mielke et al., 2011; Hodgson, 2006), as well as its further developments (Helmke and Levitsky, 2004). We therefore adopt the distinction and terminology less with reference to North than to the framings employed by our interviewees when outlining and discussing the existing spheres of water management in Khorezm, Uzbekistan. We decided to use the notion of ‘spheres’ instead of ‘layers’ (a term used in systems theory-inspired thought on different layers of functional differentiation), as both spheres stand adjacent to one another, equally influential in the shaping of water management reality. Therefore, the vertical hierarchy implicitly suggested in the term ‘layer’ does not hold.

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¹ For regional and district level presence, 13 regional (*viloyat*) and 163 district (*tuman*) departments were created.

production of cotton and wheat; state-order freed commercial production of rice (fewer vegetables, sunflowers, and fodder); and *dehqon* (peasant) production for home consumption and petty trade (Veldwisch, 2008). Therefore, water for agricultural production is of immediate, everyday importance to the existing system of livelihood provision. However, the ongoing institutional restructuring of the former system of water management is highly state-driven and concentrates on the ‘formal’ sphere, locally regarded as the sphere of ‘upper people’⁴ and therefore the state. As such, we were repeatedly told by our informants “upper people are responsible for this [water delivery]” (field notes, 22/05/2009; 15/09/2009). Moreover, an elaborate and intensively applied ‘informal’ system of water management, which had been partially further nurtured by the shortcomings of the formal institutional systems in place, can be assessed.⁵ While this is not surprising, the wide discrepancy between the ‘formal’ and ‘informal’ systems demands further analysis of the building blocks of these parallel realities and the boundaries between them. Why are ‘the formal’ and ‘the informal’ spheres both so prevalent in the everyday life of post-soviet Uzbekistan, standing parallel in the organization of water management, as well as in the interpretation and attachment of meaning to this management? And why are these spheres apparently not mutually weakening, but instead mutually strengthening?

This paper conceptually draws on constructivist thought, especially the more recent discussions on communicative and discursive constructions of reality (Keller, 2011a,b; Keller et al., 2012; Knoblauch, 1995), as well as on the notion of ‘boundary work’, particularly the boundary crossing framework developed by Mollinga (2008, 2010). We argue that the socially, rather than physically, dividing boundary between the ‘formal’ sphere, manifested and regulated through formal practices, and the ‘informal’ sphere, widely pursued through strategic practices and acts of deviation, is crossed through discursive practices. As such, verbal reference to formal institutions of water management is understood as a way to actively reproduce formal water management discourse instead of formalizing informal practices. We understand ‘practices’ as conventionalized patterns of action, based on collective stocks of knowledge of the ‘proper’ way of acting, after Keller, 2011b, p. 55; Keller, 2011a, pp. 255–257). Keller distinguishes discursive practices and non-discursive practices as constituting the social processing of discourses, as well as model practices (i.e. templates for action) in discourses for the respective addressees. In the following we identify formal, strategic, and discursive practices of water management that are employed to ensure water access while simultaneously managing the relationship between the water users and the state.⁶ These practices, as shown below, are boundary-producing, as they demarcate and separate the ‘formal’ and the ‘informal’ spheres of water management in Khorezm. We understand ‘boundaries’ to be outcomes of human action that divide not merely on a physical basis, but rather on varying spatial and social scales. This is in line with ongoing discussions in political geography (Newmann, 2008; Paasi, 2005), as well as earlier in the sociology of knowledge (Gieryn, 1983; Amsler, 2007). Interested in

the crossing and overcoming of these boundaries for improved water management, we draw on Mollinga’s boundary-crossing framework (2008, 2010), particularly the notion of ‘boundary settings’. He here stresses the role of organizational work in enabling boundary crossing. With regard to water management in Khorezm, this entails a discussion of the further development of the existing institutional system, accounting for ‘informal’ water needs and management practices to the same degree as ‘formal’ water management and its primary determinants.

This paper empirically draws on 3 years of qualitative and quantitative research into the socio-technical and symbolic aspects of water management. The research was conducted within the context of a 10-year, interdisciplinary project on the use of land and water in Khorezm/Uzbekistan. Specifically, this paper is based on extensive qualitative, semi-structured interviews and field observations during the period 2008–2011, primarily in the WUA of Ashirmat at the very end of the irrigation system. This material was further framed by a series of additional interviews in neighboring villages, and at the regional center Urgench, as well as by quantitative data collected through a survey of farmers. However, to allow participants to remain anonymous, we have mentioned no names and have used few direct quotes.

In 2008, we interviewed 50 leaders of cotton and wheat farms from Ashirmat WUA, only 11 of whom persisted as farmers under state plan after the land consolidation late in that same year. In 2009, all 21 remaining cotton and wheat farmers of Ashirmat and of two other WUAs were surveyed. Further interviews were conducted in 2010 to provide further insight: 20 took place with farmers, water managers and local officials in Ashirmat; 30 were carried out with officials and experts in Urgench; and 20 were undertaken with farmers, officials and local experts in other WUAs on the present practices of water and land governance.

This paper comprises five parts in total. The introduction is followed by a conceptual discussion of water management as boundary management by linking ongoing discussions in political geography to Mollinga’s boundary crossing framework, and identifying boundaries between the formal and informal spheres of water management in Khorezm. Section 3 discusses these boundaries and the different spheres of reality they demarcate. Boundary crossing then forms the focus of Section 4. Three types of practices, namely formal, strategic and discursive, are identified as commonly employed for the crossing, as well as the maintaining, of the identified (restrictive, but structuring) boundaries, with the aim of ensuring water access. A discussion in Section 5 concludes the paper.

2. Water management as boundary management: the social construction of resource use

The study of boundaries and boundary management is central to political geography. Although boundaries as the lines that enclose physical territories have formed the main focus of analysis in the past, recent interest has increasingly shifted towards boundaries as lines that separate, enclose and exclude, via varying spatial and social scales (Newmann, 2008; Paasi, 2005). Boundaries are no longer regarded merely as physically dividing lines, but instead as “specific forms of practice, symbols and institutions” that display economic, cultural and political power relations (Paasi, 2011: 18). In the sociology of knowledge, these “boundary producing practices”⁷ have been studied and conceptualized under the notion of ‘boundary work’. Thus an analytical concept studying the ways in

⁴ The expression ‘upper people’ (in Uzbek *yuqoridagilar*) denotes those who have an official mandate to deal with water or other agricultural decisions. Therefore, they include the province or district governors (*hokims*), the village mayors (*shuros*), the neighborhood leaders (*elatkoms*), or the heads of any kind of agricultural organization (*rais*). In addition to their formal role, upper people are often associated with individual power and the role of a patron in an extensive patron–client network (Oberkircher and Hornidge, 2011).

⁵ Drawing on the concept of ‘institutional bricolage’, Sehring (2009) assesses the limited reform effectiveness of multilevel water governance in post-Soviet Central Asia as a result of Soviet, pre-Soviet, and recently introduced post-Soviet institutions continuing to shape actors’ behavior in water management.

⁶ For a discussion of discursive appropriations of state-imposed borders and their influence on socio-spatial identity building with the aim of assuring positive state relations, see also Fondahl and Sirina (2003).

⁷ Scholars point to the spatialization of identity, nation and danger as examples of boundary-producing practices, reflecting power relations (Paasi, 2005; Campbell, 1992; Tickner, 1995).

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