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The Natural and Supernatural Existence of Rivers before, during, and after the Anthropocene

Essay using the method of anthropology of art and history of mentality

Since ancient times, rivers have accompanied mankind – and also man the rivers. Ancient river valley civilizations in Egypt, Mesopotamia, along the Indus and the Ganges, or even along the Yellow River, worshipped them as divine rulers of life and death. The Steppe nomads on horseback had an elemental experience of the 'vascular system of life' (the network of rivers), as did the Siberian peoples; but many other peoples from Amazonia to Africa also attribute a special role to them. They have become an inexhaustible source of our metaphors: as an ever-changing, yet eternal metaphor of existence, we could list philosophers and poets from Heraclitus to Attila József, who saw rivers as a reality far beyond their purely natural sphere. In their reflections, people recognized not only themselves but also their inescapable embeddedness in this worldly and transcendent web of existence. What has changed over the past decades (or millennia?) to turn rivers into energy and food production tools, a terrain to

be tamed, or even an enemy? A situation of constraint due to overpopulation and overproduction? A dislocation of our mentality? Our technological 'progress' that is becoming untraceable and indigestible? Or all of them? In this essay, I reflect on these questions, based on my presentation at the Anthropocene Symposium of the Tenth Theatre Olympiad, inviting readers on a journey through space and time. At the end of the journey, we arrive in Berlin at Frank Raddatz's experimental theatre, the RambaZamba Theater, where the interactive performance Rivers/Flüße is on scene.

When I was collecting legends and myths about the Hunzai ancestors during a research trip to northern Pakistan in 2001, a Hunzakuc shaman, Bita' Ibrahim, asked me if I could imagine a river that came from nowhere and flowed nowhere. After a short silence, he added: man is like that; he who does not know where he comes from does not know where he goes. It was no accident that he drew this poetic image from the river. The Hunza River in northern Pakistan is the transport and spiritual artery of the region; whether the area and the people who live there are named after the river or vice versa has faded into obscurity. It is the only river that breaks through the Karakoram Mountains. For more than a thousand years, two rival kingdoms, Hunza and Nager, shared the right and left banks of the river. The river is also the world axis for the inhabitants of the region: not only a point of orientation but also a gateway between the upper and lower worlds. It is often personified, referred to as a separate form of existence, as a being living here alongside humans, respected for its power over man (Csáji 2022).

Rivers give the impression of timelessness, yet they are often associated with metaphors of time. They flow forever, they flow on and on, they flow from the invisible, seemingly infinite to the invisible, flowing seemingly infinite. But in the meantime they come and they go, they bring and they take. Just like the time. They are both constants and variables. They imply an eschatological process par excellence (they have a beginning and an end, even if they are separated by vast distances in space and time). Cognition and conceptualization are a kind of domestication. That's why Adam named the animals – so that he could take symbolic possession of them. Perhaps we search for the reason, the functioning, the secrets of everything so that we can control it, so that we can bend it into a yoke. Rivers with sources and mouths only seem to have a clear beginning and end. The end of the river is apparently more definable than the beginning: it flows into another river, lake, or sea (even a sea of sand). (Although

as the water of the river penetrates into the other river or sea, its water does not dissolve immediately.) Let's not forget, however, that the river's beginning is marked out by man, who chooses from the myriad of watercourses in the catchment area to follow the path of his chosen riverbed to its estuary. We give it a name as if this single thread were a separate entity in its own right. Just as humans are not the same as individuals, neither are rivers. They are part of an endless circulation of water. According to hydrologists, after a single glass of water is poured into a river, its molecules are dispersed throughout the world's rivers within a year.

Knowing the source and mouth of a river was knowledge that could change history, even in the time of Alexander the Great. When he reached India during his eastern campaign, his scholars believed that the Nile originated there. Because it was also a desert, with palm trees and crocodiles, the Indus was thought to be the upper reaches of the Nile. They hoped that if they sailed down the river, they would arrive in Alexandria, established by the emperor. But it didn't. Alexander the Great's army faced the most harrowing journey of its life, back to the known world of Mesopotamia. The source of the Nile has remained a mystery (Lamb 1980). Caput Nili Qaerere. Searching for the source of the Nile – from antiquity, this was said of impossible undertakings. It is no accident that on Bernini's famous sculptural group at the Fountain of the Four Rivers in Rome, the Nile covers its eyes. This was the artist's indication of the eternal mystery of the source of the Nile.

The source of the Blue Nile – and partly also the White Nile – was explored by a Hungarian traveler to Africa, Flora Sass, together with her husband Samuel Baker. Baker stressed that without Flora's tenacious nature, which could pacify hostile tribes, they would surely have perished on the journey. The British aristocrat bought Flora in 1859 from the slave market of Vidin along the Danube, then freed her and married her. Because the parents of the girl of Sekler origin were killed in 1849, during the Hungarian War of Independence. The little girl, then only seven years old, fled to the Ottoman Empire with the Armenian family who adopted her, but there she was captured by human traffickers. She and her husband set off on the great voyage to Africa between 1861 and 1864. Unlike the British explorers, John Hanning Speke and Sir Richard Burton, who set out with similar aims, Flora and her husband took the more dangerous route, following the Nile southwards, approaching the Sahara, then through the Sudd

swamps and jungles to the equator, and realized that the river had not one, but countless sources, mostly large lakes (Baker 1895).

Through several European explorers in the 1860s, the question of the source of the Nile seemed to have an answer – and then more and more. Nowadays, tourists are shown countless springs in Uganda, Tanzania, Kenya, Rwanda, and Burundi, which are considered to be the source of the Nile (White Nile). There is a lot of controversy about this competition, but the tourism industry makes a lot of money from those who travel there. The river has become a business – and a resource to be exploited. The river that once supplied Egypt (Herodotus' 'gift of the Nile') with fertile silt has stopped spreading its floodwaters since the construction of the Aswan dam. Thousands upon thousands of excavators and trucks are constantly trying to transport the silt accumulating in Lake Nasser to the farmland. The water from the lake began to be drained into the desert along the Darb el-Arbaín, the former slave-trading caravan route across the Sahara, in huge canals in the gigantic 'New Valley' or, in the name invented for the utopian building of society, the 'Toshka' project, launched in 1997. The canal construction has not been completed in a quarter of a century; it is feared that much of the water will evaporate by the time it can irrigate the crops of the Kharga oasis, and the townspeople who have moved there to escape overpopulation have faced a host of new problems (Hope 2012). With the establishment of the hydroelectric power plant and Lake Nasser, the process of flooding and irrigation for thousands of years has been interrupted, and man seems to be trying to make up for his mistake by taking new missteps.

However, some rivers are even more mysterious than the Nile. In his poem The Traveller, Guillaume Apollinaire writes: 'Life is changing, like Euripos'. Euripos is a winding, river-like strait between the Greek peninsula and the island of Euboia. It flows fast, at speeds of up to 12 kilometers per hour, but its flow direction changes at different frequencies, several times a day. Sometimes the water flows from north to south, while at other times from south to north. Sometimes it turns only three times, on average four times, but sometimes five or six times (Eginitis 1929). The narrow strait seems to change its direction and the speed of the water flow as if it were a separate entity. I witnessed this strange phenomenon in 2017. A local fisherman laughed as he told me that to this day, many claim the title as the only one with the right answer. He also told a legend about how Aristotle could not solve the mystery and therefore threw

himself into the water. But is there only one way, can only one right path lead to the truth?

Modern man thinks that he can find out everything, know everything, and have a say in everything. After the Soviet takeover, the Siberian Khanities and Manysies learned quickly that respect for nature and humbleness towards rivers were missing from the ranks of the communist movement. They aimed to control the rivers, conquer them, to completely harvest their fish. The plan economy was to force the Khanty inhabitants of the Kazim River valley to fish off the sacred river stretches and the sacred lakes, which were taboo for fishing, on top of that, their children were forced to a boarding school by the local Soviet leaders. In 1933, an uprising broke out to protect children and rivers, and the Kazimi Republic was proclaimed. It was only in 1934 that the Soviet army was able to defeat them, so our closest linguistic relatives fought the first bloody war of independence against the Soviets (Ajpin 2002). In the 1930s and 1940s, further uprisings broke out among the Nenets and other Siberian peoples. Many gave their lives to protect the rivers in Siberia, but even today, the destruction of nature is still a serious problem: oil extraction causes entire tar rivers to form. The High Dam of the water power station on the River Alta in Norway was built despite the massive protest campaign of the indigenous Sami people. It destroyed not only the biosystem of the river but also the locals' life worlds that were in symbiosis with it (Tamás 2007). Violating nature, like a big slap in the face, can help to recognize that a river is not just a biomass or landmark, but a living entity in its own right.

In antiquity, there was also a river of tar in the underworld, the Styx. Alongside it are several other rivers, such as the still-water Léthe. The dead drank from its waters to forget their former lives and desires before entering the land of Hades.

The Spanish refer to the Lethe River as a living body even today. The river Lima (Limaeas), identified in antiquity with Lethe, or at least similarly regarded as the water of forgetfulness, originates in present-day Spain and flows into the Atlantic Ocean in Portugal. Whoever crosses it will forget their former life, the locals told the Romans. The legions dared not even cross it until the Roman consul Decimus Junius Brutus Callaicus swam across, and listed the names of his terrified soldiers standing on the other side of the river in a neat order (Appianos 2008). Seemingly, he defeated the river. In fact, it is not the river that he defeated, but the quality of the people beyond the River Lethe invented to

protect their land. For me, the bitter lesson of this case is that the search for human truth makes some people winners and others forgotten slaves. This is still remembered in Galicia today.

It seems paradoxical, but the immense thirst for knowledge is accompanied by an increasing tendency to forget. One cannot pour more than a certain amount into a particular vessel; to do so, one must pour out of the vessel something that was in it before, one could say, to take the metaphor of Saint Augustine further.

In the ancient Greek language, 'aletheia', the figure of Lethe, meant 'not forgetting', the truth. Martin Heidegger discusses this at length. One fascinating example is Van Gogh's painting Shoes, which reminds us, reveals a life and is true not because it gives, but because it teaches us to see. Aletheia is not a factual truth, but the opposite of concealment, of indifference (Heidegger 1950).

From the ancient Greeks to Scandinavia and Siberia, the river, death, and forgetting are linked within many people's knowledge of the world. It is one of the deep layers of our worldview, permeating our thought patterns: our metaphors, our symbols. (From the phrase 'many waters run down the Danube' to the Hungarian word 'folyóirat' – periodical – ['folyó' also means 'river'] to the Seine running under the Mirabeau Bridge, I could give countless examples.) We should not underestimate these associations. At the dawn of humanization, metaphor, as a new way of thinking, was seen by many as the first step towards art as a form of knowledge specific only to humans (Morriss-Kay 2010, 163). One of the fundamental insights of cognitive semantics, or anthropological linguistics, is that human beings do not think in terms of concepts as philosophers, and we do not use words according to their definitions, but we evoke, update, and recreate language from cognitions. Individual knowledge issues and calls forth experiences, emotions, data, and values beneath the notions. Communication is based on common denominators, born from similar experiences, feelings, and memories that never totally overlap each other (Tolcsvai-Nagy 2011). The role of metaphor is therefore even greater than we have suspected, as the basis of artistic creative thinking. Art is the continuation of creation. It induces feelings and knowledge that bridge differences between ages, religions, and people.

The knowledge of the mysticism of rivers and their role in connecting us to the transcendent is still alive in Europe, despite the fact that it was scientifically discarded long ago. The process of rationalism and dis-enchantment (see Max Weber's Entzauberung/disenchantment) that began with the Enlighten-

ment meant that art took on the role of 'guardian'. Rivers guard knowledge that cannot necessarily be understood by rational reason. It is promising that the juxtaposition of art and science has been increasingly questioned in recent decades, indicating that science is also recognizing its own limits and new horizons in metaphors, artistic insights, and vision. In cultural and social anthropology, since the 1980s, attempts have been made to approximate these two important forms of human knowledge of the world (think for example of the works of Clifford Geertz, George Marcus, and James Clifford). Make no mistake, we do not need to unite them, because that would lead to further uniformization, but to respect each other and build on each other. According to the eminent French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, the value of humanity and the key to its survival lies in its diversity (Lévi-Strauss 1952). Ecologists say the same about biodiversity.

The knowledge of different peoples is not built on each other in a system or hierarchy. These knowledges are linked by rivers of feelings and memories, without any attempt to do them justice. The river, as one of man's elemental experiences, makes us receptive to the universal and transcendental dimensions because of its axial nature, which defines our existence. It is no coincidence that in many places, besides the world tree and the world mountain, the world river connects the upper, middle, and lower worlds, or at least the spheres of existence. One common denominator in the thoughts of Béla Hamvas, Sándor Weöres, and Imre Makovecz is that when we lose the link that connects worlds, our receptivity to the transcendent, we jerk left and right like a wheel that has lost its axle.

Despite the constitutional abolition of the caste system, university enrolment quotas for 'former Scheduled Castes' (Dalits) have been enacted in India to legally regulate the fate of this section of society, instead of the customary and religious laws of the past. To offset the immense destruction of the rivers, the Ganges and Jamuna holy rivers were declared legal entities on 20 March 2017 (Paul 2018).

Man seeks to replace the law written in the hearts of us all, to use the apostle Paul's metaphor, with more and more intricate rules. We believe that the law will help us keep the world and the people around us in order. Unfortunately, however, legislation is no substitute for a moral compass. Rights and obligations describe the increasingly dense world around us. During an exam at the University of Law, a professor asked his student: 'What do you see out there?'

and he pointed to the window. 'Cars, houses, people...' replied the student. 'No,' the teacher snorted. 'Legal entities, legal subjects, and the legal relationships between them. Unsatisfactory.' We are trying to replace the harmony of a lost Eden with more and more meticulous rules. In many cases, it is precisely because we are relegating morality to the realm of law that we are trying to fill the void caused by the lack of an internal compass with more and more new rules, yet the backbone of morality cannot be replaced by the fence posts of rules. With ever more complex rules being chiselled to the bone, there is no one in Europe today who is familiar with all the EU, state, municipal, and other legislation that applies to them. Nature-shaping man is creating more and more rules to protect the Earth. It is doubtful to me whether the destruction of nature in the Anthropocene era can be prevented in this way. In my essay, I have sketched a path, using examples that are distant in space and time, showing that the bond with nature has been torn thread by thread; so that the beginning of the Anthropocene cannot be linked to a date. When the forests of Dalmatia were cut down in the Roman Empire, leaving the landscape barren (it still is), or when a similar ecological disaster occurred on Easter Island many hundreds of years ago (before European explorers), these were already childhood diseases of the Anthropocene, symptoms of man's earth-shaping arrogance. This arrogance has been lurking somewhere in man since time immemorial. The arrogance of the Enlightenment pervaded the main line of thought in the 'Western world' without rival until the 1970s (its children were also dictatorships and competing democracies).

It is common to call the postmodern era an era of doubts about grand narratives. Is it possible that we are wrong? We do not ask this question often enough. And the critics of postmodernism point out that doubt does not become knowledge, only deconstruction. The apostle of this deconstruction, Jacques Derrida, has only come so far, to the point of dismantling. But extreme doubt does not get us through the problem, it only helps us to recognize that we are on the wrong track, and this is not the only way. Contemporary mankind faces a yawning spiritual abyss if it does not find other paths. It is becoming increasingly urgent to ask whether we want to continue to educate, control with dams, drive into the yoke with power stations and eviscerate rivers with giant nets. But a 'no' answer is not enough to make the world a better place. We have to ask the question of whether we are ready to learn from nature, from rivers. Are we ready to enter into dialogue with them, as Vasudeva suggests in

Herman Hesse's book *Siddhartha* (Hesse 1988, 105)? To do this, it is not that we must forget our own knowledge, but abandon the exclusive and all-powerful rhetoric of the movementists. We must accept rivers as independent entities, as do most indigenous peoples around the world. By shedding our self-awareness, our panic attacks, and our stubbornness, we can learn about the knowledge and attitudes of others, such as so-called indigenous peoples, and their relationship with nature and the supernatural. Maybe we can learn from them, or even from the rivers.

Nature conservationists' fully justified alarms are often directed at cultural deconstruction, and fail to ask: what happens next? (E.g. if a radical environmentalist is elected President of the USA.) When a pendulum starts to swing backward from its endpoint, it cannot stop in the middle and inevitably swings out in the other direction. There are already signs of this, with the figure of the fanatical appearing more and more often among conservationists. Unfortunately, 'the figure of the fanatic has been a constant throughout world history. Sometimes it puts on one mask or another, blustering, ranting, or inciting, depending on the position of power it feels in. The fanatic can appear in the guise of any political ideology since for the fanatic it is just a mask to hide an insatiable desire to hystericalise and thus control the masses. I've seen bragging, stuffed-up conservatives as much as ultra-liberals or, more recently, climate fanatics. Of course, only by looking back in history is it easy to recognize them: the Jacobin, the communist agitator, the narcissistically superior Nazi. For the trouble is that the inquisitor, the eye-rolling Pharisee, the agitator, is called forth from somewhere within us, awakens something there which then blinds us, makes us clench our fists, and, blurring our common sense, becomes a prisoner of the increasingly impulse-driven gravity of our free will. The fanatical oppositionist pisses everything off, and poisons the sprouting of even the most brilliant initiatives with the tired oil of rancour heaps on extreme epithets and bullies. One would think that by doing so, they discredit themselves, but unfortunately, it is not easy to recognize their identity under the various masks. And the fanatical overbearer is arrogant and patronizing. [...] Fearing exposure, they easily become paranoid and shameless. The fanatic is the evil that dwells within us. May God grant that our empathetic humanity, responsible for one another and empathetic, can wisely and soberly resist the awakening of the fanatics within us' (Csáji 2020, 1). For this wisdom and sobriety, knowledge of nature and indigenous knowledge can be a good guide. I hear a lot nowadays that

children should not be taught lexical knowledge, but to be able to search well on the web. Also, problem-solving skills are more important than knowledge of subjects. These skills are certainly important, but it is to be feared that they could make our children susceptible to the manipulated knowledge cadastre of the web, which weeds out their ability to think differently, to forget the knowledge of their ancestors and of previous ages, turning the world into a massive monoculture. Not all rivers can flow in the same direction, and not everyone can think and feel the same way because that would cause a different kind of damage to nature.

Rules, chiselled to extremes, increasingly limit the possibilities for responsible free-thinking, trying to determine what we can feel and what we cannot. There may come a day when people, building on their sense of doomsday dread, will be forced to accept ever tighter shackles. I have an instinctive fear of when some of the fanatics who are dealing with the concept of the Anthropocene will come out screaming with contorted faces: 'Down with the destroyers of the environment!' That would be scary because they would be half right. However, the great tragedies of mankind are often rooted in half-truths. If our inner compass, our receptivity to transcendence, and our reverence for archaic, indigenous, and other traditional knowledge have become too diminished, we may become susceptible to these fanatics creating, under the banners of the Anthropocene and environmentalism, a new world doomed to statarianism (martial law in the state of siege) and intellectual monoculture. It is increasingly likely that a situation may arise on our planet where the protection of nature will require radical measures. When environmental measures must somehow be imposed on states and social groups that, for lack of financial resources or other reasons, are not willing to do so. Surely there will be political leaders who, acting as saviours of the planet, will feel empowered to segregate, even exterminate, peoples and social groups if they are branded as environmental destroyers, all to the applause of crowds gripped in a state of terror. Will the desire to survive (the instinct to live) or the love of man win out in us? (So many times mankind has faced a similar dilemma!) I pray that this terrible vision of mine does not come to pass.

Faced with the epistemological and moral abyss, it is worth recalling the background to Victor Turner's concept of social drama. In his anthropological fieldwork, especially with the Ndembu tribe, he found that the sense of 'de-glamorization', of being outside of the community, which occurs for a time during social

rituals, ritual actions, and rites of passage, helps to overcome social tensions. Among the many roles of these dramatized rituals, one of the most important is that they can also be perceived as therapy. In order to maintain social balance and peace, we need to experience the 'other' (the disempowered, the excluded) so that our empathy is not dulled. The drama helps to articulate, express, and deal with social problems and tensions and is thus one of the most important cornerstones of social solidarity and cohesion (Turner 1974). Such 'simple solutions' are absent in today's mass societies, or they appear in a mediatized, alienated form, degenerating into mass culture. Let's not forget that there is still an urgent need to preserve, alongside respect for nature and each other, the capacity for empathy and for calm and wise dialogue, before the deconstruction of our aging world turns into another unliveable dystopia. Theatre art could play an important and positive role in this dilemma. Rivers are vocalized and have conversations in Frank Raddatz's new interactive performance (titled *Flüße/Rivers*) in his experimental theatre in Berlin (RambaZamba Theater) as he explained at the Theatre Olympics' Anthropocene workshop. The audience not only listens to them but "flows" into the dialog so it becomes obvious that they are emotional entities with cognitive skills that live in a long-term but not an eternal period. RambaZamba performances are positive examples of how to "humanize" the world. Our words are shaped (constructed and constantly reconstructed) by thousands of discourses; the frequency of contents can load, transform, or empty them (Foucault 2002). Who knows, would the Anthropocene mean a positive "humanization" of the environment in the future, where we treat it with respect as our partner which is greater than us? In this case, the notion of the Anthropocene could call forth positive emotions, instead of the tragic Age of Great Destruction.

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