

'Water, water everywhere but not a drop to drink': The lived experience of scarce water and its social meaning in Gozo, Malta

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S U M M A R Y

Malta is among the world's top ten most water scarce countries. Only c.23million m³ of groundwater can be sustainably extracted yet Malta consumes c.65million m³ per annum. These 'dry' facts construct the official portrait which lives on the ground both express and counter through more fluid and intimate interactions with water. An ethnographic encounter with one female 69-year-old part-time farmer traces the way in which water flows through history and relationships, structuring her social domain. Her life is representative of a land-working generation, whose living memory knows water's worth and weight, once hand-pumped and carried in buckets. Born to a large, poor family, unable to read or write, emigrating to Australia where she married and had children before returning – she translates multi-cultured practices through an embodied principle of water conservation that runs in fading parallel to Malta's modernity. 'Scarcity' is experienced in terms of financial, technical and normative flows not liquid resource. At home – the first in the neighbourhood to have a bathroom – she refrains from using the costly taps and shower, proudly installed on return from Australia. Rather, in exchange for helping relations on their land, they drive over gallon-bottles of spring-water, which she stockpiles for watering, washing, and toilet-flushing. Widowed, with her children in Australia, water is a means by which she constitutes and reinforces relationships with neighbours and extended kin. It is also how she communes with nature – garden fruits and vegetables return offerings only when she provides nourishment. Due to scarcity, water, a source of delight and consternation, a discussion point and a matter for concealment in relation to hygiene and access, contains and permeates social meaning.

A R T I C L E I N F O

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Water, Malta, Farming, Phenomenology, Embodied Knowledge, Scarcity, Lifeworld, Gozo, Water Cultures, Water Scarcity.

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Water is everywhere in Malta, and yet it is one of the top ten most water scarce countries (EU Life+, 2012). Swimming pools, turquoise oceans, and fountains contradict media narratives and experiences of low rainfall, drought and increasingly over-extracted, saline groundwater. How is this paradox experienced; how are water and the concept of scarcity lived? Water as an invisible, ordinary, and routinised part of daily life is a difficult thing to research. Anthropology, through its emphasis on 'being there', offers the possibility of unpicking the discourse of scarcity and the meaning of water from the ground up.



Figure 1: Lunzjata valley fountain.



Figure 2: Washing vegetables in the fountain basin.

An ethnographic encounter with a 69-year old woman, Mary, and her part-time farming community on the island of Gozo, the second biggest and more agrarian island in Malta, led me to understand ways that water and a principally embodied, before cognitive, sense of scarcity and value constructs and permeates social meaning and practice in one particular 'lifeworld' (Husserl 1954 [1936]). Strangely, my name, Irma, and the Maltese word for water, 'ilma' were almost inaudibly distinct. My interest in water was the key to accessing this lifeworld – it was immediately understood why I should care about water, testifying to its universality. Although particular, Mary's life is representative of a land-working generation, whose living memory knows water's worth and weight, once hand-pumped and carried in buckets. Born in 1944, and growing up in a poor, Catholic family of 11; in the 1960s she emigrated to Australia along with thousands of others for work. Here she married and had children and, like many Maltese, earned enough money to return to Gozo to rebuild a home on familial land. Unable to read or write, she now finds herself widowed and navigating daily life alone, since her children and grand-children have returned to Australia.

Taking Marcel Mauss's ([1925] 1954) concept of the 'total social fact', this paper urges us to treat water as a 'total socio-ecological embodied fact' – that is, not just a 'resource' but a phenomenon that encompasses all social institutions and practices, natural connectivities, and physical, bodily sensations at once. Blurring the nature-culture, mind-body distinctions, it is something we can both 'think' with and 'be' in, and with. Water is unique in that it engages us as human beings completely. Unlike any other substance, it absorbs all of our senses, as well as flows into and out of our bodies, both part of and apart from them. This paper, will highlight three themes through three ethnographic settings. The first, looks at ways this embodied knowledge produces and intersects with sense of place and belonging, through location at the fountain; Second, it looks at how experiences of scarce water construct ideas of community and kinship, in the field; Third, it touches on how these experiences inform notions of modernity and social order, at home.

Sense of place: At the fountain

I met Mary in Lunzjata valley. Described as 'lush', 'evergreen', and 'picturesque' by tourist websites, Lunzjata is known for its rare and enviable plentiful water supplies due to naturally occurring springs, and its geological formation as one of few valleys on the island. A perfect setting to explore

the paradox of abundant scarcity, or scarce abundance. I found myself descending into a landscape shaped by its ancient relationship to water and gravity. Dry stonewalls, built to prevent soil erosion, created terraces; the land was parceled into neat plots sown with cabbages, lettuces, carrots, parsley in compatibility with the incline of water run-off; a dry and crumbling aqueduct connected one side of the valley to the other; bamboo was planted along a ditch to prevent flooding; and the well-trodden path, reinforced with cobbles, meandered down until it halted in front of a water fountain that poured and flowed into worn stone basins in a constant burble of sound.

It was here where my encounter began, and not by chance. Kirsten Hastrup (2013) describes how wellsprings 'centre social life' and 'frame' a 'particular social world'. Water had led me to community. Sitting on the fountain steps, I was soon taken under the wing of Mary, who, when I told her I wanted to help, told me "come, come!", ushering me along to help prepare parsley for market – which involved sitting on buckets, tearing off yellowed stems from the bunches ready for consumer purchase. It was at the fountain that I was introduced to this, a central practice of Mary's daily routine. Here, I was also introduced to her valley community – a complex mix of extended kin and kin-related friends. The days' work interlaced in loops around the fountain's productive facility. Its water was both material transformed into economic capital, the source of water for the fields, and where vegetables were washed and purified before being edible or sellable at market; and substance of cultural capital, where individuals performed social and bodily practices of washing, cleaning, conversing, and working. In this way, it was the centre of communion with both natural and cultural worlds. My participants did not 'think' with water in the abstract, they were with water, nature, in the present. This being with was augmented in meaning by the knowledge that Lunzjata was special. Beautiful and abundant, a rarity in the semi-arid, rocky terrain of Gozo, it must be shared: "Lunzjata is not just for me, it is for everyone", Mary says.

How is this particular sense of 'place' made? To quote anthropologist Steven Feld (Feld & Basso 1996: 90), 'as places make sense, senses make place'. Here in Lunzjata, sounds, sight, touch and taste, particularly of the rare spring water, accounted in large part for place-making and feeling of secure belonging. Water here is not only 'good to think', but it is also 'good to experience' and 'be with'. "It's good to hear", Mary says to me with a smile, as she walks by and touches the flowing channel of water coming from the spring. "Taste good, no?", she laughs as I cup my hands



Figure 3: Preparing parsley for market in the cool of the fountain's shade.



Figure 4: One of the neatly-tended plots or parcels of land in the valley.

beneath the flow to drink. Tim Ingold (2000) emphasises bodily engagement with the environment as central to place-making, particularly in relation to bodies from the past. In perceiving 'place', we do so through the idea of 'dwelling' rather than visiting – in that perception becomes a form of remembrance; a viewing of land 'pregnant with the past'. The land is almost itself a body, through which experience of water, its flow, storage, and cycle, and other bodies over time is expressed.

Community & kinship: In the field:

Place thus refers not only to the 'environment', but also to the communal relationships that imbue that place with identity and meaning. Mary began coming to Lunzjata the year that her husband died, in 2005, when his land parcel was transferred to his cousin. Her grief at losing him was still palpable. Now a widow, with her children and grandchildren back in Australia, her aloneness and loneliness, which she described to me, was a major motivation for coming here. "I like coming to Lunzjata. Here are my friends, you know? Rita, Joey, we talk. Don't think here. At home cry, for my dead husband. But here, don't think. We friends, you know." The bodily absorption into tasks, such as picking and preparing parsley, watering, washing out containers and rinsing tools, which Mary occupied herself with, were welcome respites from personal difficulties. Rita, her friend, says similarly "I have many worries, but here I can forget about them for a time". The work of water connects - people with people, and people with nature.

This connection is both communal and familial. The fields are owned and distributed along complex lines of kinship that stretch back generations. Almost all farmers of the 7 plots were related through extended familial ties, usually cousins or second cousins, or, in the case of Mary, spouse's cousins. The watering system was structured so that the 7 plots shared 2 reservoirs. Here in Lunzjata, farmers mostly still used the old, hand-built canal system of irrigation, which works by releasing water from reservoirs by lifting a stone gate, which allows water to flow downstream through the canals by gravity. The water is left to flow for 30 – 40 minutes, guided here and then by hand removal and replacement of stones along the channels. This system has in the last 15 – 20 years been replaced by plastic drip irrigation pipes, which are said to be more efficient. Lunzjata valley is one of the last strongholds of the old method. Expense and habit seemed to be the major reasons. But also, a sense of pride for this old technology, tied up with the physical manoeuvring and handling of the

stone stop-gaps, worn through use and touch, linking these farmers to their ancestral heritage and a historic sense of Lunzjata as a place of tranquility, the past; an 'escape from daily life'. Showing me the mechanisms for irrigation, they stood, bare foot, on the earth, looking on with smiles and clear pleasure. "Look, look!"

In return for helping out in the fields, Mary fills up empty laundry detergent bottles with water from the fountain which Rita then drives to her house for her to use instead of costly tap water for washing hands, flushing the toilet, rinsing dishes, doing the laundry, and watering the garden. Mary also fills up bottles for other people in her local village, stopping off at houses on her 5 minute walk home to drop them off, receiving vegetables or eggs in return. This was not a system of direct, instrumental exchange, but rather a cycle of gift-exchange, which had its roots in past practices of distributing resources amongst neighbours on a basis of need and ability. She laments that in the past, everyone would be out on the streets and chatting in the evenings, but that TV meant the streets were now quiet. For Mary, working on the land was her way of earning the water with which she could live with, and water in turn was a method for binding her to the neighbours, friends, kin and place she lived alongside and in. Water, in the context of scarcity, could become gift and friend.

Modernity and social order: At home

Mary grew up in a village, with three public water wells. Locals had to queue up to fill containers to take home for daily use. She recalls arguments at the wells about people bringing too many buckets, taking more than their fair share. By some happenstance, that Mary can't recall, or never knew, her mother had a tap in the home – the only house in the village with a private source of water from the ground, she says in hushed tones. This was a secret from the rest of the village, reinforcing the sense of water access as sacred, special, a symbol of wealth, and of social difference. Access and use was constructed along social lines but experienced in bodily encounters and postures: bending, filling buckets, lifting, carrying, immersing. While water from the village pump was free, today, tap water in Malta is expensive as 55% is produced through energy-intensive desalination. Showing me her bills, Mary exclaims that just for having a metre she must pay a flat-fee of 20 Euros. Her phone bill was similarly 20 Euros. One connected her to family in Australia; the other offered no such connective function. Financial value, it appeared, was also social. She therefore hardly uses the taps at home. In reflecting on the power structures inherent in water use,



Figure 5: Hand-built stone canal irrigation system .



Figure 6: Free spring water bottled up for home use.



Figure 7: Mary's spotless kitchen at home.

Markus Ekers and Alex Loftus (2008: 698) comment that when people "struggle over the merits of various means of water provision, they might also be understood to be struggling over the shape of a future society, one in which the exchange relation is dominant, or one in which use and need are privileged over profit." Even if not a conscious act of resistance, the insistence on making use of free water from the spring speaks to a view of water as a natural right – related to 'use and need' before profit. It also highlights the social inequality involved in water access and lived experience of scarcity. As one farmer commented, "you pay, you get."

Mary uses rain or spring water to wash dishes and hands from two bowls in her kitchen sink, but insists on my using the tap to rinse my hands, going ahead into the bathroom to check, with embarrassment, that the toilet is flushed before she lets me in there. Her embarrassment is ironic, since when we are in the field, she takes me aside daily to join her on a clandestine peeing expedition; peeing into a bucket in a dark shed, before emptying this onto the land. "Don't say", she would whisper to me, looking around her as she offered me first go. This seems to imply a closer hybridity between nature-culture out in the field, where water is immediately felt. Whereas in the home, where water's inner workings and plumbings are hidden, un-sensed, it is a space of more rigid cultured conventions concerning hygiene, bodily functions, and notions of privacy.

Although rarely taking up what they promise, Mary proudly recounts the fact that it was on return from Australia in the 1970s that she had bathrooms installed – the first house in the neighbourhood to have this modern convenience. Soon all on the street wanted the same. Asking her if she thought things were better or worse now, she says "of course better: We have roads and cars and toilets and bathrooms." Despite having these modern utilities, outside of her house are all manner of rain-water catchment devices. Drainpipes have been shorn off in order to fit buckets underneath to catch the run-off from the gutter. On the roof, she has a large rainwater storage tank. She tells me that in the middle of the night, if she hears that it is raining, she will run outside with buckets and basins to fill them up. Her whole body and mind appear wired to water's free flows, perhaps attesting to the fact that "we have never been modern" – culture and nature are still one – as Bruno Latour (1993) contends.

Conclusion

Throughout Mary's life, access to and use of water has required physical effort and bearing, underscored social

inequality, and been heavily implicated in producing and reflecting cultural conceptions such as belonging, kinship, community, social order and modernity. Scarcity, itself a concept, is both constructed, through inter-related social and cultural perspectives, and material, through the physical and financial labour associated with access. These facts have so structured her relationship to this substance that she embodies the resultant principles of care and conservation through a habitual ethic. It is the body, the site of scarcity's lived experience, which expresses its meaning, through practice, emotion, response, and sentiment. Tim Ingold (1995: 58) has said "Something.. must be wrong somewhere, if the only way to understand our own involvement in the world is by first taking ourselves out of it". Thus, in order to understand the social meaning of water and scarcity, we could usefully move from abstract, cognitivist accounts of its elements, to a more embodied, immersed, phenomenological sense of its significance. Perhaps then we will find the key to more sustainable water cultures.



Figure 8: A modern kitchen sink plumbed into the mains with bowls of rain and spring water ready for dish and hand-washing.

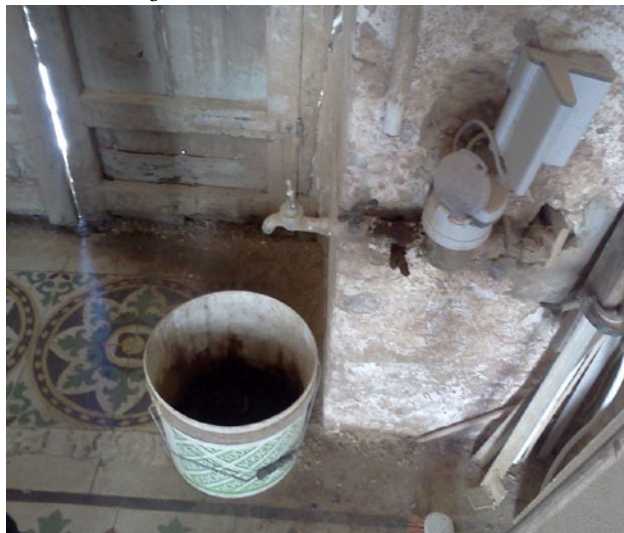


Figure 9: Once the only house in the village with a private tap and water source.

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