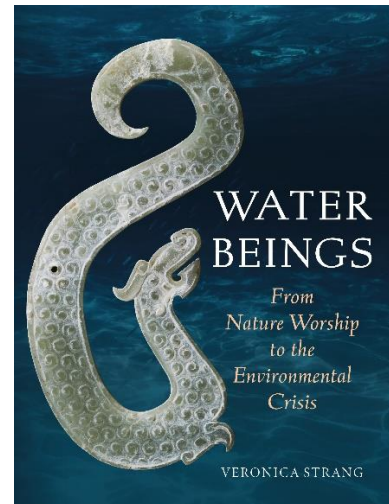


Veronica Strang
Water Beings:
From Nature Worship to
the Environmental Crisis.
Reaktion Books, 2023



Shé Mackenzie Hawke

Serpent gods rose up out of primal seas to create worlds (p. 7).

In the transnational and fluctuating world that we inhabit, water remains a constant, if in flux, complete with its deities and magicians, totems and cycles ever narrating a cosmic story. Strang takes us on an intercultural artistic adventure through the waters of history, iconography, mythology, art, science, geo-politics, and hydrology. To produce a book of this calibre requires complete dedication, rigour, and passion. By her own admission, Strang is obsessed with water, this book is a brilliant outcome of obsession that extends her earlier work in *The Meaning of Water* (2004).

Strang's strenuous efforts to collect and cohere images and text is obvious and worthy of high praise. Her particular interest in water beings such as serpents, that 'swim in the vast aquifer of scholarly material' (p.9) is both anthropologically and archaeologically stunning as well as artistically rewarding. The book is produced on glossy paper with full colour images of artefacts that would certainly not have their full effect in a black and white academic book.



Ceramic tile screen, Behai Park, Beijing 1756
© Veronica Strang



Kungoni Centre, Malawi
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The eleven sections of the book are broken up into “Beings”, such as, “Original Beings” in chapter two, and “Transformational Beings” in chapter eleven. No “being” is without its worth of space on the page. As a self-defined “waterist”, (Hawke 2014), arguably as obsessed with water as Strang, I find the book both extraordinary and necessary, and a call to realise that while water and water beings are ubiquitous, as she narrates in her first chapter “Being Ubiquitous”, they are also endangered by climate crises and an evident loss of elemental and reverential consciousness among the humans that dominate the earth. Aside from the rich historical research, the book explains how we have navigated away from a water reverence or understanding towards g/local environmental crises wrought from human industrial will.

Every few pages she takes the reader to a different part of the planet to talk about a particular water theme, deity artefact, admixture, or historical note. For example, in chapter seven “Travelling Beings” she consults ancient Greek philosophers such as Thales (624-546 BCE) who argued that while water was “rain, hail and dew” (p.135), it is transformative when mixed with earth. And Anaximander (610-546 BCE), who imagined an indeterminate element that was

the primary form matter from “an all-engulfing sea” (p. 135), the *apeiron*. Cosmic inter-elementality has its place.

The vital message is for a renewed realisation that water is everywhere and can embody “sentience and agency”, as well as going about its own sense of work, while simultaneous endangered. Strang draws on several First Nations narratives and creation stories to set forth this argument about water’s critical place in our lives, both physically and psychically. The reader moves on a spectrum between worlds from artefacts and images both ancient and new, such as the Plate 27 Mural of Mwali and Thunga at Kungoni Centre, Mua Mission, Malawi (p. 52) and its story, to the narratives of the “Maori water serpent beings” (*taniwha*) that have contributed to legal debates about the water personhood of the *Te Awa Tupua*/Whanganui River (p. 234) in Aotearoa/New Zealand (Marama Muru-Lanning, 2010). This sovereignty was initialised in 2017 with the river being described as sacred and “an important tribal ancestor” (p.234). Similar quests have taken place elsewhere in the world, where First Nations people have argued not only for the right to cultural connection with water bodies and beings, but for the waters’ actual ancestral authorship of knowledge, as in the case of “Yoongoorrookoo, an ancestral serpent being” from The Martuwarra Fitzroy River in Australia’s Kimberley region.



Temple mural, Ho Chi Minh City,
Vietnam © Veronica Strang



Taniwha Devonport 2018, © Veronica Strang

She also notes the confluences and challenges in different world views and their approach to water. Here the preservation, values and life of water are cross referenced, with “indigenous activists, campaigners for social and ecological justice, nature worshipping religious groups, legal activists, and scholars” (p. 237). Sharing aquatic ecosystems with humans and non-humans alike – “a pan-species democracy” (p.239) is fraught with political tension over who speaks for whom and what and where. Advancing the earlier thoughts of Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities* (2006) Strang calls for “re-imagined communities, in which the notion of community is extended to include all of the living kinds that a river catchment contains” (P. 238), and for her purposes the mythical water beings that inhabit those spaces.

In chapter eight, “Supreme Beings”, Strang presents a critique of how narratives change over time and how “visual representations undergo transformations in form and meaning as belief systems adapt to new social and political realities” (p. 142). Here she unpacks the shift from polytheism to monotheism particularly through the Old Testament (Genesis) to the new Christianity that would see the “Christian God take over all of the responsibilities of [not only] earlier religions” (p. 142) but also all pre-existing water deities. She explains with the detachment of a critical observer that some water traditions and beliefs from old religions and cults, such as Paganism, were conflated with the more modern Christianity to express and endorse new purposes and “theological insights” (p. 142). The later onslaught of science and the Enlightenment Era brought further challenges to water, as industry and its pollutants bent the river to its own purpose.

These are just some examples of where the author takes the reader, emphasising along the way how fluid readership is, and how much of a text, that is, any water course or being, is also broadly understood. In her final comments in the chapter called “Turning the Tide”, Strang offers insights into how we adapt, cohere and re-purpose values and beliefs around water and its sustainable future. As she says:

Today, in a world urgently in need of a change of direction, the stories that water serpent beings tell, and their capacities to represent alternative visions of human and non-human relations, may be the most crucial role they have ever had (p. 228).

This interdisciplinary visual story is a wondrous homage to water, and water beings that also calls us to re-imagine and re-embody water and its place in all life.

References

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