



Guardians of the Water

Mexica People - Mexico

A long, long time ago, the four cardinal points of the Earth, as well as many animals and human beings, were summoned to a very important meeting. Tlaloc, who presided over the assembly, informed those gathered that it was time to make a joint decision about creating a new river. He needed to know their needs so that this new source of life would be accessible to all species.

The North, characterised by his strength and bravery, asked that the river be steady, persistent and turbulent. But, before he could continue expressing his point, he was interrupted by a tiny minnow who demanded that the river be slow so that her eggs could develop. What mattered most to her was that her children would grow up. The duck suggested more or less the same, in other words, that the river should be completely calm so that she could swim in it at peace with her family.

The East, characterised by temperance and self-control, supported the ideas that it should be gentle or at least slow flowing.

It was then that the coalition of the toad and the crocodile requested that the river be very wide, deep and murky, because they would feel comfortable and safe playing in the mud with their children. A great fuss erupted over this request, because it did not seem to everyone to be the most convenient option. Some even accused the toad and crocodile of plotting a deception to create conditions in which they could feed themselves better. So there followed arguments that went no further than accusations and selfish remarks.

It was then that the South, always fair, called to restore calm. It suggested that wells and dams be created so that each member of the assembly could be given a space of their own.

‘What does the West have to say?’ someone asked.

Sensible and judicious, she suggested that a decision should not yet be made because not all the inhabitants of the kingdom were present, and those who were present had not yet had an opportunity to have their say. She even asked where the plants stood in this election. She then commented that, although the reason for the meeting was to seek approval for a better home for all, they should not lose sight of the fact that water was essential for everyone’s life and they had to do their part to preserve it forever. It was then that she asked to hear the Tlaloc’s thoughts.

Then the imposing voice of thunder that characterised the god of water, lightning and tremors was heard to say with authority:

‘According to what I’ve heard this morning, I want to tell you that everyone will live in the most suitable place. The river will have streams, ponds and swamps. Some parts will be deep and others not so deep, and there will be slow and calm places, while other parts will be turbulent and fast. All this is in order to reach the oceans and, of course, to give life and clean the way.’

In the absence of human participation, he continued with his pleas, imposing on them an honourable mission.

‘As the humans have not said anything, they’ll be in charge of protecting the water. If you waste it and pollute I’ll make you suffer, for all life depends on it,’ he warned them.

Many voices whispered, until a wolf, who was annoyed, said to Tlaloc:

‘It’s unfair that we all depend on them to take care of us, being so irresponsible and disrespectful. If they fail, we’ll all pay. How can we be sure that they’ll fulfil their mission, if they haven’t had the courage to even voice their opinion?’

Tlaloc replied that the animals could rest assured that, if humans wasted the water, their children, and consequently their species, would be condemned.

‘Don’t worry, I’ll manifest myself in every existing drop, I’ll know for sure who values the water and who wastes it,’ he said to the rest of those present, and went on, ‘Humans! I entrust you with this most important task, for we all depend on you, including me. It’s not just your duty, nor is it a punishment. I’ve chosen you because you’re undoubtedly the most capable, and although sometimes it may not seem so, you’re also the most intelligent. I’m almost certain that your eyes can appreciate the world better than any other species. Let’s celebrate this union by singing, dancing and eating.’

It was then that the Tlaloques, helpers of the mighty god, came dancing with baskets full of tamales, tortillas, chocolate and atole. Everyone ate and, when they had finished, the birds sang. The humans, happy, tried to distract themselves from what they had been told and from the huge task which had been given to them. Soon they joined in the feast, accompanying the birdsong with fiddles and flutes. Even the rabbits beat their drums loudly. They danced to the four corners of the Earth and it was then that, caught up in the rejoicing, they pledged to take care of every river, lake and spring in our beloved Mexico.

Needless to say, this is the only planet in the cosmos where known life exists, thanks to water. Let us always remember this and let us pass this knowledge on from generation to generation. However, above all, the appreciation and care for the environment is paramount. □

Adapted by César Eduardo García Martínez (2020).

Under license Creative Commons CC BY-NC-SA.



Comments

Early in December 2020, water began to be traded on the Wall Street Futures Market, just like any other commodity or commercial resource, such as oil or gold (Fox, 2020). This meant that, from then on, the markets ceased to hide their intentions and began to openly fight for the

privatisation of water, a commodity that, in the medium and long term, is going to be more valuable than oil (Fraguas, 2020).

But the attempt to privatise a common good like water by large transnational corporations is not new. According to WeReport, a European network of investigative journalists, and corporations such as Coca-Cola, Nestlé and Danone are drying up aquifers, in their privatisation of water resources in France, Germany and Italy. This is polluting rivers while trying to appear ‘environmentally responsible’ through their greenwashing (Campi, 2021). These companies are also evading taxes.

The French company Danone says that they ‘take only as much resources as mother nature allows us’ (ibid.), when they extract billions of bottles of water every day. Between 2011 and 2021 they doubled their water extraction, multiplying, tenfold, the water used by the local population in Volvic, France, where they have their bottling plant. Not only that: confidential reports, obtained by WeReport, indicate that during summer periods Danone has increased water extractions in the area. This was at a time when the civilian population was subjected to severe water restrictions. According to documents accessed by the media, Danone and legislators in the region have been aware of the damage caused to the aquifer and rivers for years, without informing the local population (ibid.).

For its part the Swiss company Nestlé, with its bottling plant in Vittel, France, admitted to having nine large illegal plastic bottle dumps, four of which are buried and contaminating the region’s aquifers. But Nestlé’s lack of business ethics is evident beyond its treatment of water. In early 2021, they acknowledged, in an internal document, that 60% of their products are unhealthy and that some of the food and beverage categories they produce ‘will never be healthy no matter how much they are renewed’. In fact, they claimed this for 96% of their beverages (excluding coffee) and 99% of their sweet and ice cream products (Medina, 2021).

But most serious of all is the Guarani Aquifer. This is where one can see, in detail, what the large multinational corporations are trying to do. This is the third largest freshwater reserve in the world, extending under the surface of an immense territory which occupies areas of Brazil,

Paraguay, Uruguay and Argentina. In 2018, rumours were already spreading that Nestlé and Coca-Cola were behind the privatisation of the Guaraní Aquifer, which they were quick to deny (Comundia, 2018). However, the World Bank had already begun its moves to shape the national legislations of these countries in order to facilitate private investment programmes. According to Hugo Lilli of the Alianza Biodiversidad platform, ‘there are three ways, broadly speaking, to privatise water globally, and most cases involve the endorsement of international bodies such as the World Bank’. According to Lilli,

In the first, there is a total sale of the distribution, treatment and/or storage systems by the National State. In the second, a concession is granted by the National State so that the transnationals take charge of the service and charge for the operation and maintenance of the system in use. And the third is a restricted model in which the national state contracts a transnational company to manage the water service in exchange for a payment for administrative costs. Of the three alternatives, unfortunately, the majority opt for the second, which implies a plundering of such a significant resource in which the only winners are the transnational corporations and the losers, naturally, are the countries that possess this wealth. (Lilli, 2019)

Javier Bernabé Fraguas, Professor of International Relations at the Complutense University of Madrid, explains the situation as follows:

There is a clash of positions regarding the control and management of this fresh water, which we can basically summarise in two: ... as a marketable natural resource (...) that will give a very important weight to the multinationals that take possession of it [the Guaraní Aquifer]; or, (...) as a fundamental good that helps to sustain the right to life on our planet. (...) These two positions are clashing in the international arena ... and are represented by some entities that have clearly given their version of how this water management should be. The World Bank adopts the first of these positions. Its position is clear with regard to privatisation. And, in contrast, we can have positions... as Barlow and Clark point out... of the common good, positions that place freshwater in Latin America as a common good and not as a public good. A common good implies a much more democratising good; it implies, above all, a democratisation in its use (...) If the privatisation of water, in this case of the Guaraní Aquifer, prevails, it is normal that protests and violent confrontations will once again take place in Latin America.

(...) Their positions can help save lives or lead to probably irreversible poverty, in many cases in the long term, in Latin America. The Gaurani Aquifer is an element of geostrategic power and of extreme importance. (Fraguas, 2020, 3:50' to 5:50' and 6:40' to 6:55')

Considering that 70% of the Guarani Aquifer is in Brazilian territory, Dr Fraguas' words may help us to understand why a judicial plot was orchestrated, through Judge Sergio Moro, to expel former president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva from the political contest for the presidency of Brazil, even to the point of imprisoning him (Greenwald and Pougy, 2019). This was in order to give the government to the ultra-right-wing Jair Bolsonaro who was, and is, always open to multinationals from the Global North operating in Brazil.

From The Earth Stories Collection, we would like to express our deepest gratitude to the National Institute of Indigenous Peoples of Mexico for giving us permission to include this story for worldwide dissemination. We also extend our thanks to César Eduardo García Martínez, adapter of 'Guardians of the Water' in this Mexican edition.

We also sincerely thank Álvaro Restrepo, who sent us the book from the National Institute of Indigenous Peoples of Mexico from Colombia, as well as Elena Arquer, Martí Plà, David Nieto and Angelina Portillo, students of the Master's in Culture of Peace at the University of Granada, for their work of selecting the narratives that have brought this story to the Collection.

Sources

Campi, A. (2021.06.02). Waterstories.eu: The dark side of the European bottled water industry. *Journalismfund.eu*. Available on <https://www.journalismfund.eu/waterstorieseu-dark-side-european-bottled-water-industry>

Comundia (2018.02.16). Coca-Cola y Nestlé se unen para privatizar la mayor reserva de agua de América del Sur (Coca-Cola and Nestlé team up to privatise South America's largest water reservoir). *Comundia*. Available on <https://medium.com/@Comundia/coca->

cola-y-nestle-se-unen-para-privatizar-la-mayor-reserva-de-agua-de-am%C3%A9rica-del-sur-5cb77aec981f

Fox, M. (2020 Diciembre 7). Water futures set to join likes of gold and oil and trade on Wall Street for first time ever. *Business Insider*. Available on <https://africa.businessinsider.com/markets/water-futures-set-to-join-likes-of-gold-and-oil-and-trade-on-wall-street-for-first/lm2hdz1>

Fraguas, J. B. (2020.12.08). Vídeo Ponencia: El acuífero guaraní y la geopolítica del agua en América Latina (The Guarani aquifer and the geopolitics of water in Latin America) [Video on YouTube]. *Javier Bernabé Fraguas*. Available on <https://youtu.be/C294-PD-8e4>

García Martínez, C. E. (2020). Los guardianes del agua (Guardians of the water). In Zamora Pérez, N. (ed.), *Crónicas de la lluvia: Leyendas de los pueblos indígenas sobre el agua, los manantiales y los ríos*, pp. 33-38. México: Instituto Nacional de los Pueblos Indígenas.

Greenwald, G. & Pougy, V. (2019 June 9). “Mafiosos!!!” Exclusivo: Procuradores de Lava Jato tramaram em segredo para impedir entrevista de Lula antes das eleições por medo de que ajudasse a ‘eleger o Haddad’ (“Mafiosos!!!” Exclusive: Lava Jato prosecutors secretly plotted to prevent Lula's interview before election for fear it would help 'elect Haddad'). *The Intercept Brasil*. Available on <https://theintercept.com/2019/06/09/procuradores-tramaram-impedir-entrevista-lula/>

Lilli, H. (2019.03.22). El acuífero guaraní en la mira del Banco Mundial (The Guarani aquifer, right on target for the World Bank). *Alianza Biodiversidad*. Available on <https://www.biodiversidadla.org/Documentos/El-acuifero-Guarani-en-la-mira-del-Banco-Mundial>

Medina, M. A. (2021.05.31). Nestlé reconoce en un documento interno que más del 60% de sus productos no son saludables (Nestlé acknowledges in internal document that more than 60% of its products are unhealthy). *El País*. Available on <https://elpais.com/sociedad/2021-05-31/nestle-reconoce-en-un-documento-interno-que-mas-del-60-de-sus-productos-no-son-saludables.html>

Associated text of the Earth Charter

Principle 13b: Support local, regional and global civil society, and promote the meaningful participation of all interested individuals and organizations in decision making.

Other passages that this story illustrates

Principle 1a: Recognize that all beings are interdependent and every form of life has value regardless of its worth to human beings.

Principle 2b: Affirm that with increased freedom, knowledge, and power comes increased responsibility to promote the common good.

Principle 4a: Recognize that the freedom of action of each generation is qualified by the needs of future generations.

Principle 16b: Implement comprehensive strategies to prevent violent conflict and use collaborative problem solving to manage and resolve environmental conflicts and other disputes.

The Way Forward: Life often involves tensions between important values. This can mean difficult choices. However, we must find ways to harmonize diversity with unity, the exercise of freedom with the common good, short-term objectives with long-term goals.

The Way Forward: Every individual, family, organization, and community has a vital role to play.

