

# THE VOICE OF THE HIDDEN WATERFALL

Story: Geoffrey Coffey Photography: Christian Cravo



Neither Non-Being nor Being existed then.  
 Neither air nor the firmament above.  
 What was moving with such force? Under whose care?  
 Was it the fathomless water?  
 (Rig-Veda 10.121.1)

**Call it aguá or l'eau, panni or shwei, may or hudor** — water is another word for the fundament of life. No plant or animal can live without it; we must drink it every day or perish. Water flows through us and all around us. Rains green the hills, rivers carve canyons, and tireless tides stir amniotic mysteries of origin and renewal.

The Darwinist will explain that our richness of birds and beasts evolved from a single ancestral *ur*-creature who emerged from the primordial sea. The Indian *saddhu* will reply that the ancient water gave rise in fact to a golden egg, from which hatched Brahma, the forebear of all living things. The rabbi and the priest will stand by their account of the Lord dividing the elemental waters with the dome of Sky and the disc of Earth. The *mullah* will insist that Allah, not Yahweh, spent six days as creative director from “his throne upon the water”. Regardless of faith, women of every stripe bring forth babies drenched in pregnancy's brine.

Every human culture has used water in religious ritual, often as a passage from the profane to the sacred. Christians and Jews baptize their converts and newborns in a rite of initiation dating to ancient Egypt. Islam requires every believer to wash before the act of prayer. In China,

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families perform traditional ablutions when bringing sacrifice to their ancestors. Ceremonial bathing accompanies the funerals of most African and Indo-American religions. “Water draws a line of communication between the spiritual and the physical,” says Brazilian photographer Christian Cravo, whose current project is *Water of Hope, River of Tears*, a book on the multifarious roles of water in religions around the world.

In the rain that impregnates earth, we understand water as masculine energy. The majority of pagan rain gods were male: Greek Zeus and Teutonic Thor, Egyptian Min and Palestinian Baal, the dragon of imperial China and the buffalo head of the Omaha tribe. The rain is *lingam* sowing wet seed in fertile *yonis*; the storm is rage and destruction, the dark side of physical might; the archetypal flood erodes everything that takes form, whether monstrous or divine, subsuming all distinctions into its own inconsistency.

But in the maternal river and the uterine sea, water is feminine and procreative. The Hindus see the Ganges as the goddess Mother Ganga, whose name is adored by those receiving her milk and honey. She represents the life-giving maternal waters of the Vedic hymns, and is the highest medium of purification. The massive festival Maha Kumbh Mela sees 30 million pilgrims bathing in her muddy shallows, drawn to her breast even as their own overpopulation pollutes her, drinking from her ebb and chanting her hallowed name. In Varanasi and other holy cities known as *tirthas*, the faithful come to cremate their kin and throw the ashes into Mother Ganga's arms, ensuring the departing soul's crossing to the spiritual far bank. In the Buddhist tradition, *Nirvana* is known as “the far shore”. Christians place similar metaphoric stock in the river Jordan. This river-fording metaphor — crossing to the next world through mother, the way we came in — expresses itself in nearly every religious narrative, from the pharaohs to the Chinese emperors, from Gilgamesh to the Baptist church.

Gilgamesh was the Sumerian warrior-king whose eponymous epic (c. 2500 BC) made him the “hero” prototype for all of Mesopotamian mythology. He discovered the herb of life at “the bottom of the waters”, crossed the Waters of Death on his quest for the secret of immortality, and survived the great flood by building an ark (a legend later appropriated and given to Noah). When the deluge receded, Gilgamesh regaled his storied offspring with tales of antediluvian righteousness as law for succeeding generations.

Influential works like the Gilgamesh Epic, the Rig-Veda, and the Bible rank among the oldest literature in history, demonstrating the power of written words to outlive mortal authors. The Mesopotamian hieroglyph for “height” or “transcendence of space” also means “watery sky”, a linguistic bond between rain and the holy. The Old Testament's opening sentence dates water to the time before there was nothing (...*darkness covered the face of the deep, while the spirit of God swept over the waters*); the opening lines of John link this primeval abyss to the mystical properties of words: *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God*. Vedic text is even more explicit — the ritual Word says of itself, *My origin is in the waters, in the ocean*. Just as the fetus floats in the womb, tethered to mother by the pulsing umbilicus, a newborn infant swims into a watershed of language where stories let the dead sit up and talk, like the unknown, remembered channel joining the past to the future.

This transformative power holds the key to our fascination. In ice and steam we see liquid water's ability to become solid or gas, the only element at home in all three forms. Little wonder, then, that a splash of water on the forehead can turn a heathen into a Christian, or that bathing in a holy river can purify a sinner's soul. Protean and omnipresent, linked to the creative power yet capable of vast destruction, a relative of gods and monsters alike — water bears all the ambiguities of the collective godhead.

Typically, we approach an understanding of divinity when we return to the place where we started and know it for the first time. Where the serpent devours its own tail, and Gilgamesh can still speak, two distant ends of the spectrum reconnect and form a spiritual möbius. The source of the longest river and the voice of the hidden waterfall meet in the stillness between two waves of the sea, whose depths we may never fathom. ◦

