

## **ethnographic parenthesis E }**

### **Personal Everyday Water**

---

*For myself water was one of the main issues I was concerned with, before my first visit in the valley, but not as a topic of scholarly inquiry. I was not sure what to expect, if and to what extent water for drinking and sanitation was available. Before my departure I took two notable precautions, besides a well-equipped first-aid kit, I packed a water treatment agent from an outdoor equipment store. These were chemical compounds in two different vials, which, when a few drops of each were mixed, sterilized a certain amount of water after an application time. Because I did not know whether I would be able to buy bottled water at all time, this measure seemed rational. Very quickly it became clear that the access to water and the possibility to buy drinking water was not a problem at all. Not being a huge fan of gastrointestinal infections and with the nearest hospital a roughly two-hour serpentine drive away, I decided nonetheless to be careful in the beginning. Thus, for the first months I mixed my own purified water, using either tap water or water from the river. Gradually I began to drink untreated water on a regular basis, until I stopped treating my own water at some point. After all, everyone else drank the tap water and river water, too. Especially for the people who felt responsible for me and always wanted to know me in the best of health, it was more reassuring that I did not drink tap water at first—just to be on the safe side. It became a well-taken point of reference when later I would tell that my stomach (maeda) was adjusted now and I would drink water just like anyone else. Which at times caused some cheerful surprise. This certainly was a fact that would earn its place in a typical anthropological arrival story of how the anthropologist slowly becomes more acquainted with people, place, and culture. Offering water, in a café, restaurant or at someone's home, was common. Occasionally others would inquire, with the*

people I was accompanying or with myself, whether I could drink it at all, after it was offered to me. For tourists or other Iromin were apparently known for drinking their own water and being very careful and reserved with the collective water bottles. Mostly, these collective water bottles came in two ways. Either, as former plastic bottles for mineral water, lemonade, or oil and holding anything between one to three liters. In addition, individual glasses or cups were usually placed on the table. Or, as water barrel or container with a screw-on lid standing at a central spot in the middle of the room. For these, there was a handle cup—often made of plastic and often tied to the container—with which the water was scooped out of the container and then also drunk.<sup>1</sup>

Besides being indispensable as drinking water, water serves many more purposes in daily life. For baking bread, preparing and cooking dishes such as Tajine or bean stew (lubia) it is just as essential as for making tea—perhaps the single most important and central culinary component in Amazigh Morocco. It is a common opinion, especially and not surprisingly in the mountain regions themselves that nowhere does tea taste better than in the mountains, where the water is clearest and freshest. And at no time is plain water more delicious than during Ramadan. The breaking of the fast every evening became a special event not only because of the variety of food that had been prepared, but also because of the water. After the quiet midday hours it became livelier on the streets again in the evening, because from everywhere mainly children rushed to the river or to the irrigation channels to fetch fresh and cool water. This fresh water was considered tastier than the water from the tap or that was kept in kitchens and homes. As for me it was the first Ramadan to fully participate in, I was struck by the bodily experience. Before dinner I was instructed to refrain from drinking too much, and to eat first instead. Drinking too much would cause the stomach to fill quickly, so it was explained to me, and thus preventing me from eating properly, which was more important after a whole day of fasting. When the time came to finally drink I would become

---

1 Sharing one communal glass or cup, either in public places such as restaurants or at home, was also topic in health workshops organized by the NGOs active in the valley. The aim thereby being to provide for medical and hygiene education in order to raise awareness about the origin and spread of potential infectious diseases. One lesson to take away from these workshops was the use of a personal water cup.

*quite enthusiastic, for the joy and amusement of all present. This led to a recurring phrase that lasted throughout the Ramadan period: during Ramadan, water is way more delicious than a Tajine (yuf nu aman tajine)!*

