in Isfahan, Iran, ist Ausgangspunkt für ein Gespräch mit und eine Reise zu sich selbst. Wasser als persisches Symbol für Reinheit und eine Verbindung von Himmel und Erde prägt die Wahrnehmung dieses Stroms, der in den letzten Jahren immer öfter austrocknete.

The river Zayandehrood ('life-giving river') in Isfahan, Iran, is the starting point for a journey to oneself. Water as a Persian symbol for purity and as a connection between heaven and earth shapes the perception of this river, which has dried up more and more often in recent years.

Mahroo Movahedi   A Reminiscence of Stillness

It can be an ocean, a big lake, a small lake, river, stream, or pond; it might be placid or fast-moving, tranquil or falling, with trees reflected or with rapids. Water is a highly prized element in the landscape.[1]

Water – seen from very different perspectives – is a well-known topic in anthropological research, and not at all new to ethnographic studies. Anthropologists can explore human-environment interactions through many different methodologies and research strategies.

The Zayandehrood, which literally means the 'life-giving river', is the biggest river in the centre of Iran, a source of livelihood in Isfahan city, and the main factor in the fertility of its land. It plays an essential role in providing drinking, industrial and agricultural water in the province of Isfahan.

Isfahan is one of the most historically significant cities of Iran and is located in the heart of the country. The Life-giving river flows from the Zagros Mountains, which lie to the west and the south of Isfahan. It divides the city into two parts which are connected by many historical bridges that have been built across it, such as Khaju Bridge (erected during the Safavid dynasty), Si-o-se pol ("Bridge of 33 Arches"), Marnan Bridge, Shahrestan Bridge, Zaman Khan Bridge and several others. The river ends in the Gavkhooni swamp, in the south-east part of the city of Isfahan.

The drought in Iran recently became one of the country's most serious problems. It is a consequence of several fundamental factors, such as rising temperatures, evapotranspiration, and increased consumption patterns. The citizens of Isfahan believe that the authorities diverted the river's flow to provide water to drier provinces nearby, such as Yazd and Kerman. Environmental mismanagement in the country is another root cause of the river's drought, and water shortage has become a serious issue in the city.

I am the storyteller of a phenomenon, of a vital source in the city with a peculiar environmental geography that is entangled with my own mental geography. I am walking in the dry river bed, gazing at the rough surface. Things shift in this space, creating a kind of new perception. I seek out my own experiences here, and interrogate my old memories. I experience my walk along the Zayandehrood in a way unimagined in the history of this city, and unknown in the memory of its residents. It is hard to narrate a river by walking on a dried-out, cracked surface. I hear my own footsteps; I sense the volume of stillness in the heart of the river, with the crowds of the city in the background, engaged in their everyday activities. This is a new sonic experience in the middle of this dry river bed, standing almost 200 metres from the Bridge of 33 Arches. I am drowned in a silence that intersects with the hustle and bustle of the city. Like an immense, enclosed hollow, with many great noises in the background. This river can tell of its past, but it can also convey the rage of the corners of the city. I am listening to the city in the middle of a dry river where sound and silence generate different meanings. I am not hearing the city; I am listening to each of its corners.

I am immersing myself in a new sort of contradiction: a stillness in the city, and a space with a solid noise pollution in the background.

There, sound is a dominant stimulus that triggers my senses. The more I walk, the more I feel this sense of alienation, not only from the city and the crowds, but also from the past, the present and the presence of my memories. It is a fluid perception, with time and place juxtaposed. I am describing the Zayandehrood not as a river, but as an everlasting phenomenon that has inhabited my mind, and I contemplate it as an object of reminiscence that awakens my memories. These memories float between fiction and the real. The reality is displaced by sand and dust. It is a kind of reality that melts into virtuality. The Zayandehrood is an allegory of liveliness in the city of Isfahan. Such shape-changing and transformation is converted into a new face in the city with different sensations, creating an inconsistency between the rhythm of memory, experience and the cultural behaviour of people in this area. I feel an unexpected event that saturates my senses.

I reach the bridge where the oddest thing to me is to watch the Zayandehrood as a cycling path or a pedestrian walkway. It has been converted into an ordinary habitat, as if the river had never existed. It seems as if the current reality has not only created a new texture in nature, but also in the culture of everyday life. I ask myself: how do people perceive this texture, and how does it impact on people's perspective for them to become indifferent to the reality of it? Does this unthinkable event, this totally shocking process, become a mere matter of habit for the inhabitants? I observe how powerful such a resource interconnects nature and culture not only as matter of economics and supply, but also as a social phenomenon that connects our natural world to our social and cultural world.

When the water flows, people observe how it streams beneath the historical bridges, terrified by the attractiveness and beauty of the river. The water flows, and people blend intimately into the arches and every nook of the bridges. Then each arch is a frame encompassing bitter and sweet stories of ordinary people. In contrast, they now pass through the lower porches of the bridges where the Life-giving river is no longer. This transformation means that a new pace, a new sight, a new level of stillness in the river comes out in the pedestrian. The pace of the people is harmonised with the pulse of the river.

The Life-giving river provides a platform for inner speech and inner travel. It creates a new sort of discourse for people to share their own memories and emotions. In Persian culture, water is a symbol of purity, and the key element in order to show the calmness and cleanliness. It is the symbol of freshness, brightness, life, innocence, and is a link between earth and sky. The language of this area has its own identity for its geography. This part of the city is full of inventive dialogues, poetry, Persian idioms and peculiar conversations. Jeff Malpas believed that place is often associated with the world of the past, and space (location) with the world of the present and the future.[2] The Life-giving river transforms a particular lived-in space with its various human interactions. It experiences a duality: on the one hand, it is the life of a nostalgic, regressive and reactionary place; and on the other hand, there is the perceptible death of a progressive and radical space. The Life-giving river, replaced by the dead river, says it all: the place is lost and there is placelessness. This river is a tangible asset for the residents. People create a specific

place rather than a general space; when there is no continuity to vitality, it becomes a space without any sense of place.

I remember when I was a child, I never tried to put my toes in the river in my city; it was always forbidden. But now I am touching and experiencing the dried-out river under my feet, and there is no water, no motion, but instead a rough, coarse texture. I have a deeper connection with a sense of alignment in the river bed that I never experienced when it was alive.
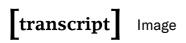
Heraclitus[3], the ancient thinker and philosopher (530–470 BC), offered his thoughts on motion in the river, saying:

"One can never step in the same river twice".

Humans and the river both flow in the stream of life. Despite the shapelessness of water, its flexibility and its animistic quality, people perceive in it a real meaning of liveliness. The Life-giving river, however, is experiencing inconsistency and gradual death, NOT life. What if one steps in a dead river? Experiencing a dead river under your feet is an unforgettable moment. One can never be the same person after confronting such dryness and bitterness that surround the heart of the city.

1 Rachel Kaplan / Stephen Kaplan: *The Experience of Nature. A Psychological Perspective*, Cambridge 1989, p. 9.
2 Jeff Malpas: *Heidegger's, Topology. Being, Place, World*, Bradford 2006.
3 The Greek philosopher suggested a distinctive theory, expressing it in oracular language. He is best known for his flux theory – that things are constantly changing.

Thomas Gartmann,
Christian Pauli (Hg.)

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Erschienen 2020 im transcript Verlag,
Bielefeld
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