

When Water Leaves the Market. Gifting and Social Redistribution of Water in Khartoum

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In the past decades the debate in the political ecology of water was dominated by the question which role the private sector should play. The perspective is focusing on the formal providers of water, ignoring firstly processes in the neighbourhood and secondly that water can change its nature in the passage from the producer to the consumer. In case of Khartoum, substantial amounts of water flow from well served households to those who cannot or do not want to obtain water from the public network or informal water providers. Water is stripped from its commodity identity while passing from the intermediary to the final consumer.

In this presentation I will follow the biography of water and I will show the social mechanisms which lead to free transfers of the same water that was 'produced' for the market before. I will differentiate between two kinds of transfers. While some water is given to neighbours as a gift, imbedded in a system of reciprocity, other water is completely disconnected from the social relationship of the donor and the donee. Guided by social rules it is redistributed.

These water transfers have relevance on two scales. Inside the neighbourhood they maintain local systems of solidarity and the norms behind. On the scale of the city, inter-household transfers of water along with informal sector activity significantly reduce the social pressure on the formal private or public water providers, allowing them to fail without consequences.

