



8th ASAI Conference
Africa and Its Waters: Flows, Fates and Frameworks
University of Pavia, 1-3 July 2026

Call for panels
deadline 15 November 2025

ASAI (*Associazione per gli Studi Africani in Italia*, Association for African Studies in Italy) organises its 8th Conference at the University of Pavia and invites colleagues from all disciplines in African Studies to submit panel proposals in Italian, English, or French. The Conference is titled “Africa and Its Waters: Flows, Fates and Frameworks” and it aims at gathering researchers on a theme that encompasses key issues in fields such as economy, politics, society, and the environment – in our times like in the past.

Water, like any other natural resource, is socially, politically, and culturally mediated. In addition to being fundamental to human survival, water plays a role in most economic activities (fishing, agriculture, animal husbandry, mining), in commerce, and in communication more broadly intended. Internal mobility is historically connected to waterways, while oceanic and maritime crossings have defined external migrations, be them voluntary or forced. Placing waters at the centre provides an analytical key to study infrastructures and technologies involved in water management and distribution (wells, dams, channels, pipelines, bridges), as much as the production of energy (mechanical or electric), the unequal access to services (tap water, drinkable water), water-grabbing, water conflicts, and climate change and its consequences on various regions of Africa. Scientific literature has shown time and time again the central role that water management (in all its forms) had and keeps having in organising networks of exchange, means of political organisation, conflict dynamics, social inequalities, economic activities, and wealth accumulation. The study of these hydro-socialities highlights water’s contribution to the shaping of social, economic, and political relations. It likewise proves how human actions directly influence water cycles and water quality.

Water is a symbolic resource, too. As such, water means much in various religious systems of Africa. Indeed, water constitutes a particularly visible ritual element not only in many societies living in riverine, lacustrine or maritime environments, but also where it is materially scarce. Water has been an element “good to think” and sacralise, most notably in rain-invocation rituals, in ceremonies to appease aquatic deities, in ablutions, and in baptisms. Studying the ritual and symbolic meanings of water offers valuable insights on African history in the *longue durée*. It captures the manifold relations between humans and non-humans. It interrogates the linkages between those very rituals, the creation of the self, society, and the environment. Water’s ambiguous nature is manifest: waters can be purifying, or corrupting; necessary, or dangerous; under control or unchecked; absent, or overflowing. This complexity makes water a privileged theoretical ground to elaborate imaginaries, visions of the future, and policies for the management of rural and urban spaces.

Scholars such as Bauman (liquid society), Vigh (social navigation), Ross (liquid empire), Dawson (liquid imperialism), Schmitt (sea powers) have found heuristic value in water metaphors, not unlike the “liquid” metaphors of many African languages. The “spatial” and “oceanic” turns have introduced spatial configuration centred on rivers, lakes, and seas, but more in general academic

jargon is imbued with water. Examples abound in methodology (“sources”, “archival fonds”, “untapped sources/archives”) and in figurative speech (“flow of time”, “currents of thought”, “fluxes”, “human tide”, “wave of protest”). These expressions often allow to represent the dynamism of African societies, the movement of people, goods, and ideas that have historically connected the continent to the rest of the world, and the ways in which people navigate social contexts and unequal positions of power.

In this perspective, the Conference aims at developing the following thematic areas:

- waterways, sea routes, and the construction of economic, political, and social networks;
- waters and economic activities;
- waters and infrastructures;
- conflicts on water resources and water-grabbing;
- inequality and policies of redistribution;
- climate change, water crises, and human mobility;
- rituals, symbols, and imaginaries connected with water;
- water in literature and in other artistic productions;
- the role of the state, of local authorities, and NGOs in water management;
- terminology, concepts, and metaphors about water in African languages;
- waters and analytical frameworks.

The call for panels is open to both structured and unstructured panels. Panels should comprise between three and four papers per session. Panel proposals should be written in Italian, English, or French, and be submitted before 15 November 2025 to info@asaiafrica.org. They should include:

- title of proposal
- language of the panel
- description of maximum 300 words
- name, affiliation, and email address of the proposer(s), of the chair, and of the discussant. Proposals for structured panels should already include the name, affiliation and email address of all participants, and the title of their presentations.

Acceptance will be communicated by 15 December 2025. A call for paper will be opened subsequently.

Proposers of unstructured panels will be asked to accept or reject paper proposals in cooperation with the scientific committee of the Conference. Panels could be divided in maximum 2 sessions on the grounds of the number of accepted papers. To avoid overlaps, it is not allowed to be chair and discussant in more than one panel.

ASAI will provide invitation letters for visa purposes to panel organisers. Requests should be directed to info@asaiafrica.org. The visa procedure itself is entirely managed by the panelists. Information about the application process can be found here: https://www.esteri.it/en/sportello_info/domandefrequenti/sezione_visti_entrare_in_italia/.

Scientific committee: Federica Colomo, Valentina Fusari, Marco Gardini, Aurora Massa, Daniela Melfa, Ettore Morelli, Antonio M. Morone, Marco Pinfari, Massimo Zaccaria