

Social structures, cultural norms and water use practices of Lake Ahémé in the commune of Kpomassè in Benin

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Abstract

Access to and use of water in communities living near natural water bodies are not determined solely by technical or environmental constraints; they are also embedded in specific social and cultural dynamics. This article analyzes the sociocultural determinants of water-use practices related to Lake Ahémé among riparian communities in the municipality of Kpomassè, located in southwestern Benin. The objective is to understand how social structures, cultural norms, and collective representations influence the ways in which this water resource is used.

The study adopts a socio-anthropological approach combining field observations, semi-structured interviews, and an analysis of everyday practices related to water use. The findings show that the use of Lake Ahémé's water is strongly shaped by the sociocultural composition of the riparian communities, particularly the predominance of the Xwla ethnic group, as well as by social norms and beliefs associated with the lacustrine environment. Water-use practices are also characterized by a social division of labor, in which women and young unmarried men play a central role in water collection and domestic use.

Furthermore, the results highlight the coexistence of multiple water supply sources, reflecting a hybridization of practices between natural water resources and modern water infrastructure. The choice of water sources is influenced by a combination of economic, practical, and symbolic factors. The study therefore underscores the importance of integrating sociocultural dimensions into public water management policies in order to promote water access strategies that are better adapted to local realities.

Keywords: Water; Social Representations; Water-Use Practices; Cultural Norms; Lake Ahémé; Kpomassè; Benin

1. Introduction

Access to water has become one of the major challenges of sustainable development, particularly in countries of the Global South where water resources lie at the heart of social, economic, and environmental dynamics. In this context, numerous programs and public policies have been implemented to improve populations' access to safe drinking water sources, which are widely regarded as essential conditions for improving public health and community well-being. However, several studies in the social sciences have shown that water-use practices cannot be analyzed solely through

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technical or infrastructural factors. They are also deeply influenced by social, cultural, and symbolic determinants that shape people's behaviors (M. Douglas, 1966; P. Bourdieu, 1977; J. Linton, 2010).

In many African societies, natural water sources such as lakes, rivers, and wetlands play an important role in social organization and in the daily practices of local populations. Water is not only a vital resource but also an element imbued with social, cultural, and sometimes spiritual meanings. As demonstrated by M. Douglas (1966), the notions of purity and impurity associated with water are often socially constructed and play a key role in shaping collective behaviors. Likewise, sociological analyses of social practices particularly those developed by P. Bourdieu (1977) and A. Giddens (1984) highlight that everyday behaviors are embedded in social structures and normative systems that contribute to their reproduction over time.

From this perspective, water-use practices can be understood as social practices in their own right, shaped by local social structures, cultural norms, value systems, and collective representations within communities. Social representation theory, notably developed by S. Moscovici (1961), emphasizes the importance of collective perceptions in shaping individuals' attitudes and behaviors toward social objects, including natural resources. Consequently, decisions regarding water supply sources are not solely based on rational considerations such as accessibility or the objective quality of the resource. Rather, they are embedded in more complex social logics that combine material constraints, social habits, and cultural perceptions.

In Benin, Lake Ahémé constitutes one of the major lacustrine ecosystems in the southwestern part of the country and represents a central socio-ecological space for the surrounding communities. In the municipality of Kpomassè, local populations maintain close relationships with the lake, which plays a significant role in local economic activities particularly fishing as well as in several domestic and social uses. The lake's water is used for various daily activities such as laundry, dishwashing, bathing, and certain communal practices.

However, the continued use of lake water occurs within a broader context marked by public policies aimed at improving access to safe drinking water and the gradual development of hydraulic infrastructure in rural areas. Despite these initiatives, the use of lake water remains a common practice among riparian communities. This situation highlights a gap between technical interventions designed to improve water access and the actual social practices observed in the field.

Consequently, several questions arise regarding the factors that explain the persistence of these practices. Why do local populations continue to use water from Lake Ahémé while other sources of supply exist? To what extent do social structures, cultural norms, and collective representations of water influence the practices associated with the use of this resource?

These questions lead to the following research question: How do social structures and cultural norms influence the practices of water use from Lake Ahémé among the riparian communities of the municipality of Kpomassè?

Based on this central question, this article aims to analyze the social and cultural determinants that shape water-use practices related to Lake Ahémé. More specifically, the objective of this research is to understand how local social structures, cultural norms, and collective representations of water contribute to shaping the ways in which this resource is used by the riparian communities of Kpomassè.

By shedding light on these sociocultural dynamics, this study seeks to contribute to a better understanding of the interactions between local societies and water resources, while highlighting the importance of integrating social and cultural dimensions into public water management policies.

The article is structured into three main sections. The first presents the theoretical framework used to analyze social practices related to water use. The second outlines the research methodology. The third analyzes the findings concerning social structures, cultural norms, and water-use practices related to Lake Ahémé within the riparian communities of Kpomassè.

2. Theoretical Framework

The analysis of water-use practices among riparian communities is grounded in a sociological perspective that views human behavior as the product of interactions between social structures, cultural norms, and collective representations. From this perspective, water cannot be understood solely as a natural resource or a material good intended to satisfy

biological needs. It also appears as a social object whose uses are shaped by systems of values, social practices, and cultural meanings.

Several theoretical approaches help to understand these dynamics. The sociology of social practices, social representation theory, and perspectives from environmental sociology provide relevant analytical frameworks for examining the social logics that guide people's behaviors in their relationship with water resources.

2.1. Social Practices and Social Structures

The sociology of social practices provides a central analytical framework for understanding individuals' everyday behaviors in relation to natural resources. Social practices are generally understood as routinized behaviors embedded within social structures and systems of collective norms (A. Giddens, 1984).

From this perspective, P. Bourdieu (1977) argues that social practices are largely shaped by habitus, defined as a system of durable and transposable dispositions that individuals acquire through processes of socialization. These dispositions guide individuals' perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors within their social environment. Practices related to water use can therefore be understood as the product of socially constructed habits that are reproduced within communities.

This approach also resonates with classical sociological analyses that emphasize the role of social structures in organizing collective behavior. For E. Durkheim (1895), social facts impose themselves on individuals as socially constructed ways of acting and thinking. Practices related to the use of natural resources can thus be understood as social facts embedded in systems of collective norms and rules.

Furthermore, M. Weber (1922) emphasizes that social actions are oriented by the meanings individuals attribute to their behavior. The use of a particular water source may therefore be influenced by the cultural and social meanings that communities attach to that resource.

Within the riparian communities of Lake Ahémé, these theoretical perspectives make it possible to interpret water-use practices as socially constructed practices embedded in systems of social relations, local traditions, and community logics.

2.2. Social Representations and Perceptions of Water

Beyond social structures, water-use practices are also influenced by the social representations that populations construct around this resource. Social representation theory, developed by S. Moscovici (1961), highlights how social groups produce shared systems of knowledge that shape individuals' perceptions and behaviors.

Social representations constitute forms of collective knowledge that allow individuals to interpret their environment and guide their actions. In the context of water use, these representations may concern perceptions of water quality, health risks associated with certain sources, or the cultural meanings attached to water use in everyday life.

The work of M. Douglas (1966) also demonstrates that perceptions of purity and impurity associated with natural elements are largely shaped by social and cultural constructions. Judgments about the quality of a water source may therefore be influenced by belief systems, social norms, or symbolic classifications specific to each society.

In many rural African contexts, local knowledge and collective experience also play an important role in shaping representations of water. As highlighted by M. Mauss (1925), social practices are often embedded within broader cultural systems that structure the relationships between individuals and their environment.

These social representations therefore contribute to shaping water-use practices and structuring the choices made by populations regarding sources of water supply.

2.3. Water as a Social and Environmental Resource

Contemporary approaches in environmental sociology encourage us to view natural resources as socially constructed objects whose uses are shaped by social, political, and cultural dynamics (B. Latour, 1999; E. Swyngedouw, 2004; J. Linton, 2010).

From this perspective, J. Linton (2010) introduced the concept of the hydrosocial cycle, which highlights the interdependence between the natural and social dimensions of water. According to this approach, relationships

between human societies and water resources must be understood as socio-natural processes in which social practices, institutions, and infrastructures play a central role.

In addition, E. Ostrom's (1990) work on the governance of common-pool resources demonstrates that the use of natural resources by local communities is often embedded in systems of informal rules and collective norms that regulate actors' behaviors.

In lacustrine and riparian contexts, water also constitutes a structuring element of local livelihoods and socio-economic systems. As T. Ingold (2000) suggests, relationships between human societies and their environment should be understood as processes of continuous interaction in which everyday practices contribute to shaping social and ecological landscapes.

In the case of Lake Ahémé, water thus appears as a resource that is simultaneously environmental, social, and cultural. The ways in which this resource is used by riparian communities are embedded within a complex set of social logics, cultural norms, and collective representations that structure people's behaviors.

3. Methodology

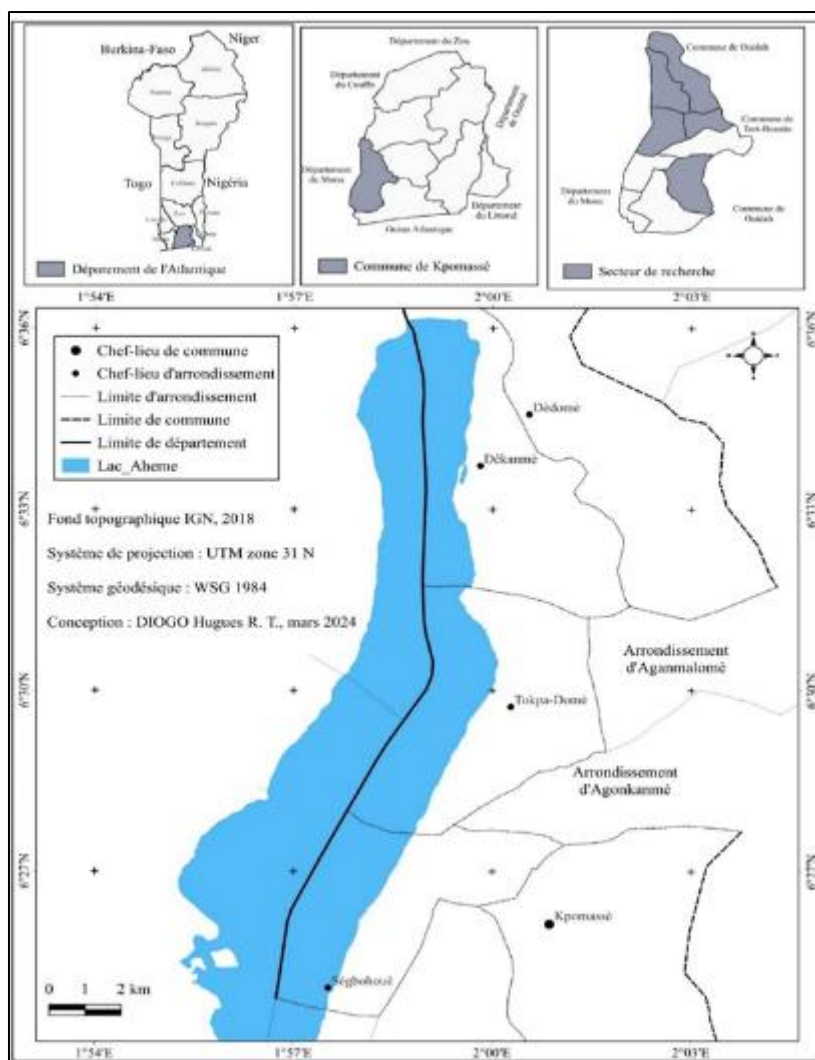
This research is based on a qualitative approach inspired by the socio-anthropology of development and environmental sociology, which is particularly suited to analyzing social practices, cultural norms, and collective representations associated with water use. Such an approach makes it possible to understand the social logics that shape people's behaviors in their relationship with natural resources, with particular emphasis on the meanings that actors attribute to their practices (M. Weber, 1922; J-P. Olivier de Sardan, 2008).

The study was conducted in the municipality of Kpomassè, located in the Atlantique Department in southwestern Benin and crossed by Lake Ahémé, one of the main lacustrine ecosystems in the region. This lake constitutes an important resource for riparian communities, which use it both for economic activities particularly fishing and for various domestic purposes.

The figure below presents the geographical location of the section of Lake Ahémé that crosses the municipality of Kpomassè.

Empirical data were collected using several complementary qualitative techniques, including semi-structured interviews conducted with different categories of actors (household heads, women responsible for domestic water-related activities, fishers, and community leaders), direct observations of everyday water-use practices, and the analysis of documents related to water management in the study area. These different techniques made it possible to gather information on water-use practices, community perceptions, and the social norms that structure these behaviors.

Participants were selected through purposive sampling in order to capture the diversity of actors involved in the use of water from Lake Ahémé. The collected data were subsequently subjected to thematic analysis aimed at identifying the main analytical categories related to social structures, cultural norms, and water-use practices within the riparian communities of Kpomassè.



Source : Field data, H. Diogo, March 2024

Figure 1 Map showing the geographical location of the crossing of Lake Ahémé through the municipality of Kpomassè

4. Social and Cultural Logics of Water Use from Lake Ahémé in Kpomassè

4.1. Sociocultural Profiles of Communities Using Water from Lake Ahémé

The analysis of the collected data reveals a significant sociocultural diversity among the communities living along the shores of Lake Ahémé in the municipality of Kpomassè. However, the results show a marked predominance of the Xwla community, which constitutes the majority of the surveyed population. This community is followed by the Houéda, Tofin, Fon, and Péda groups, which coexist within the social and cultural space surrounding the lake.

This sociocultural configuration contributes to shaping water-use practices, as dominant social norms and collective habits are largely influenced by the majority groups. In many rural African societies, dominant sociocultural groups often play a key role in organizing collective practices and defining the social rules that regulate access to natural resources (S. F. Nadel, 1942).

In the case of Lake Ahémé, this influence is reflected in the diffusion of water-use practices that are deeply rooted in local traditions and in the lifestyles of riparian communities. The use of lake water thus appears as a socially constructed practice that is reproduced across generations and integrated into the daily routines of households.

Field observations reveal that water-related activities occupy an important place in the daily organization of households. Residents regularly go to the lakeshore to carry out various domestic activities such as laundry, dishwashing, bathing, and the collection of water for household needs.

Figure 2 illustrates a typical scene of domestic activities carried out along the shores of Lake Ahémé, where several women can be observed washing clothes and performing household tasks. This scene reflects the integration of the lake into everyday practices and into the social organization of riparian communities.



Source : Photograph taken in Diogo, June 2023

Figure 2 The burden of water: a responsibility of the female gender

The analysis of the data also reveals that water-use practices vary according to the socioeconomic conditions of households. Populations belonging to lower socioeconomic groups appear to be the main users of lake water. For these households, lake water constitutes a readily accessible resource that does not require direct financial expenditure. In contrast, households with greater economic resources tend to rely more on modern water supply infrastructure, such as boreholes or piped water supply systems.

This social differentiation in access to water sources confirms the findings of K. Bakker and C. Cook (2011), who argue that access to water resources is often structured by economic and social inequalities.

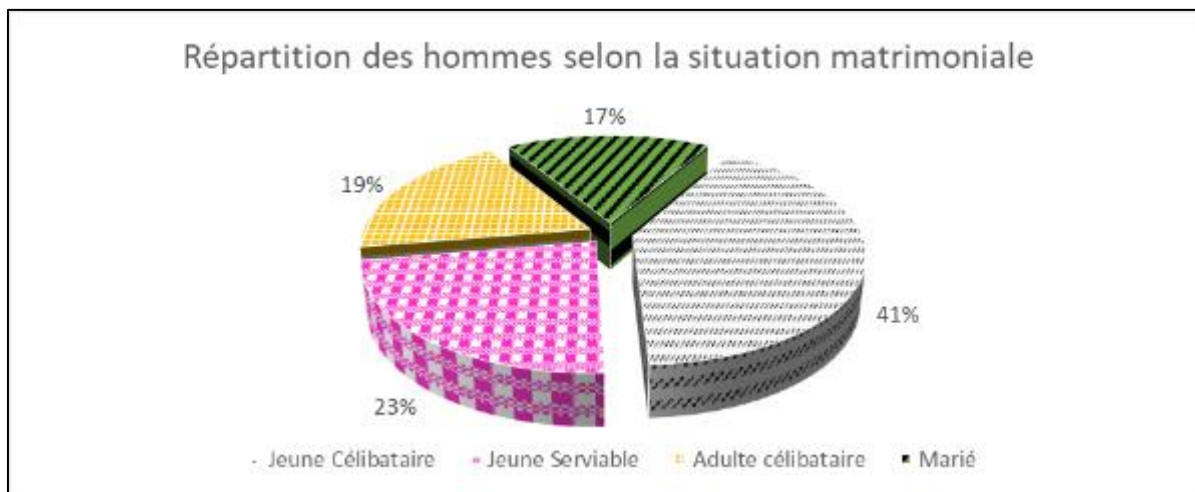
The results also highlight a strong gender dimension in the organization of water supply practices. Women appear to be primarily responsible for water collection for domestic needs. In most of the surveyed households, they manage daily water-related activities, including laundry, dishwashing, and meal preparation. Figure 3 illustrates water collection along the lakeshore, highlighting the central role of women in this everyday activity.



Source : Photograph taken in Diogo, June 2023

Figure 3 Intergenerational involvement of women in water management

However, the analysis of the data also shows that men participate in certain activities related to water collection, particularly in specific contexts associated with family organization and marital status. The figure below highlights men's participation in water-fetching tasks according to their marital status.



Source: Field data, H. Diogo, June 2023

Figure 4 Distribution of men according to marital status

The reading of this figure shows that young single men constitute the largest category (41%) among men involved in water-related activities. Young helpers or young assistants represent the second most significant group (23%), followed by adult single men (19%) and married men (17%).

These results suggest that young single men play a central role in carrying out the physical tasks associated with water use. This situation can be explained by their social position within households and rural communities, where practical responsibilities are often assigned to younger members.

The Figure presented above illustrates this active participation of men in water collection. It shows five men bending over while drawing water from a water body using yellow containers, in a natural setting characterized by relatively dense vegetation in the background.



Source : Photograph taken in Diogo, June 2023

Figure 5 Men actively participating in water collection

This image highlights the physical and manual nature of water collection in rural areas where access to safe drinking water remains limited. It also illustrates the role that different members of the household may play in this daily activity, depending on their social position and family situation.

The predominance of young single men in the practical management of water reflects a social reality in which marital status strongly influences the distribution of roles within households. The ECOWAS regional water resources management policy also emphasizes that “the management of water resources is influenced by social and family structures, where marital status plays a key role in decisions related to access to and management of water” (ECOWAS, 2020).

This observation is confirmed by statements collected from local actors. A security guard interviewed in Dédomé explained:

« The use of water in our community is mainly the responsibility of single men and young assistants. We married men are often busy with other family and strategic responsibilities. It is therefore the single men who take care of the daily use of water, such as watering and collecting it. » — A. S., security guard, 52 years old, Dédomé

This testimony highlights a functional division of responsibilities related to water, in which married men tend to occupy positions of supervision or decision-making, while young single men are responsible for carrying out the practical tasks.

A married teacher interviewed in Kpomassè-Center confirms this social organization:

« The role of married men is not to handle water directly, but rather to manage and allocate this resource within our households. It is the young single men, often under our direction, who physically take care of its use. » — R. N., married teacher, 41 years old, Kpomassè-Center

These verbatim statements reveal a social hierarchy in which authority and decision-making are associated with marital status, while the physical tasks are carried out by young single men. This organization reflects the social norms that structure intergenerational relations and the distribution of responsibilities within rural households.

4.2. Social Structures, Cultural Norms, and Community Regulation of Water Use

The results of the study show that water-use practices related to Lake Ahémé are not based solely on practical or material considerations. They are also shaped by a set of social norms, cultural rules, and community regulatory mechanisms that guide people’s behavior in their relationship with water resources.

In several of the communities surveyed, residents reported following specific practices when collecting water. These practices include the order in which users access the lake, the gestures to be respected during water collection, and certain attitudes considered appropriate within this space.

These informal rules constitute mechanisms of social regulation that help organize access to a shared resource and prevent conflicts among users. As E. Ostrom (1990) has shown, local communities often develop governance systems based on collective rules in order to manage shared resources sustainably.

In the case of the riparian communities of Lake Ahémé, these rules are largely transmitted through tradition and through mechanisms of community socialization. They therefore contribute to the reproduction of water-use practices and to the maintenance of a certain social order around this resource.

The results also highlight the existence of social and cultural prohibitions associated with the use of lake water. Certain behaviors are considered inappropriate or likely to disturb the spiritual balance of the lake. These prohibitions may concern specific periods of access to the lake, behaviors considered polluting, or certain personal conditions viewed as incompatible with the use of the water.

In some localities, for example, communities believe that certain practices may “offend” the spirits of the lake or bring negative consequences to the community. A fisherman interviewed in the locality of Dédomé explains:

« The lake is not just water. It is a place that has its own rules. You cannot come here any way you want and do whatever you like. The elders have taught us that certain attitudes can anger the spirits of the lake. » — P. A., fisherman, 47 years old, Dédomé

This testimony illustrates how beliefs and symbolic representations contribute to framing social practices related to water use. As M. Douglas (1966) demonstrated, symbolic classifications associated with purity and impurity play a central role in organizing social practices in many societies.

The data collected also reveal that violating these prohibitions may lead to social or spiritual sanctions. These sanctions may take the form of community reproach, social stigmatization, or may be interpreted as the expression of supernatural forces. A neighborhood chief interviewed in the municipality of Kpomassè stated:

« When someone does not respect the rules of the lake, the elders can call them to order. But there are also things that cannot be explained. Sometimes people say that the lake itself punishes those who do not respect the prohibitions. » — K. G., neighborhood chief, 63 years old, Kpomassè-Center

These regulatory mechanisms contribute to maintaining social cohesion and ensuring a relatively orderly use of the water resource. They also highlight the importance of local knowledge and customary norms in the governance of natural resources.

Furthermore, the results show that access to lake water may be structured by specific social temporalities. Certain times of the day or particular days may be considered more appropriate for specific water-related activities, such as laundry or domestic water collection.

These temporal patterns often reflect local knowledge systems related to the management of natural resources. F. Berkes (2012) emphasizes that traditional ecological knowledge frequently incorporates temporal rules aimed at preserving ecosystem balance and organizing human practices.

Finally, the results reveal that Lake Ahémé is associated with several divinities and spiritual entities, notably “Tohossou” and “Dan”, which occupy an important place in local belief systems.

These spiritual representations contribute to shaping a symbolic relationship with the environment in which natural elements are perceived as living entities endowed with power and intention. As C. Lévi-Strauss (1962) showed, such symbolic systems play a fundamental role in the way human societies organize their relationships with nature.

Thus, water-use practices related to Lake Ahémé appear to result from a complex articulation between social norms, cultural beliefs, and community regulatory mechanisms.

4.3. Social Representations of Water and Choice of Water Supply Sources

The analysis of the results shows that riparian communities in Kpomassè have access to several sources of water supply. These include Lake Ahémé, traditional wells, boreholes, piped drinking water systems, and rainwater.

However, the use of these different sources varies significantly depending on local contexts, the socioeconomic conditions of households, and the social representations associated with each type of water resource.

In some riparian communities, the lake remains the primary source of water supply due to its proximity and accessibility. Residents can therefore reach it easily to meet their daily domestic needs. A resident of the locality of Sègbohoulè explains:

« The lake is right next to us. When we need water, we can easily go there. Even if we have a borehole in the village, sometimes we still prefer to use the lake water for certain activities. » — A. K., farmer, 38 years old, Sègbohoulè

This geographical proximity contributes to maintaining the use of lake water for certain domestic activities, particularly laundry, dishwashing, and bathing.

However, the results also reveal a gradual evolution in water supply practices, with an increasing use of modern water infrastructure such as boreholes and piped drinking water systems.

The coexistence of these different water sources reflects a process of hybridization of water supply systems, in which traditional practices coexist with modern technical solutions.

Perceptions associated with different water sources also play a significant role in shaping people's choices. Lake water is often perceived as an accessible, free, and culturally embedded resource within the daily routines of local communities.

In some cases, it is also associated with symbolic or spiritual meanings. A woman interviewed in Kpomassè-Center explains:

« We have been using the lake water for a long time. Our parents used it before us. For certain activities like washing clothes or dishes, we prefer the lake water. » — M. S., trader, 45 years old, Kpomassè-Center

In contrast, modern water sources are generally perceived as safer from a sanitary perspective. However, their use may be limited by economic constraints or difficulties in access. Another resident points out:

« Water from the borehole is good for drinking, but sometimes you have to pay or wait a long time when there are many people. The lake is always available. » — H. D., fisherman, 42 years old, Tokpa-Domè

These observations confirm the analyses of Douglas (1966), according to which social perceptions of purity and danger strongly influence behaviors related to water use.

Thus, water-use practices in the municipality of Kpomassè appear to result from a plural rationality, combining economic, practical, social, and symbolic logics.

Consequently, decisions regarding water supply sources are not based solely on technical efficiency. Rather, they are embedded within complex systems of social representations and cultural norms that structure the relationships between communities and their hydrological environment.

5. Conclusion

This article aimed to analyze the social and cultural logics that structure water-use practices related to Lake Ahémé among the riparian communities of the municipality of Kpomassè. Based on a socio-anthropological approach combining field observations, interviews, and the analysis of everyday practices, the study made it possible to identify the social and cultural determinants that influence people's behavior in their relationship with this water resource.

The findings show that the use of water from Lake Ahémé cannot be explained solely by technical or environmental factors. Rather, it is embedded within a complex set of social structures, cultural norms, and collective representations that shape the practices of riparian communities.

The analysis of the sociocultural profiles of water users reveals that lake-use practices are strongly influenced by the sociocultural composition of riparian populations, particularly by the predominance of the Xwla group. These sociocultural dynamics contribute to shaping the social norms and collective habits associated with water use.

Furthermore, the study highlights the existence of social and cultural regulatory mechanisms that frame the use of lake water. Customary rules, cultural prohibitions, and spiritual beliefs associated with the lake contribute to the construction of a local governance system for water resources. These mechanisms reflect the importance of local knowledge and social norms in organizing water-related practices.

The findings also show that water-use practices are characterized by an important social and family dimension, particularly with regard to the distribution of tasks related to water collection. Women appear as the primary actors responsible for domestic water-related activities, while young single men play a significant role in carrying out the physical tasks associated with its use. This social organization reflects the cultural norms that structure the division of labor within rural households.

The study also highlights the coexistence of multiple water supply sources within riparian communities, including Lake Ahémé, traditional wells, boreholes, and piped drinking water systems. However, the choice among these different sources is not based solely on technical or sanitary criteria. It is also influenced by social representations of water, economic constraints, and the cultural habits of local populations.

These findings confirm that water-use practices in the municipality of Kpomassè are based on a plural rationality, combining economic, practical, social, and symbolic logics. From this perspective, water appears not only as a material resource but also as a social and cultural object embedded in the value systems and belief structures of riparian communities.

The insights from this research highlight the importance of integrating social and cultural dimensions into water management policies and programs aimed at improving access to safe drinking water. Public interventions promoting the use of improved water sources would therefore benefit from taking into account local practices, social representations of water, and the normative systems that shape people's behaviors.

Finally, this study opens avenues for future research on the interactions between local societies and water resources in African lacustrine contexts. A deeper understanding of these sociocultural dynamics appears essential for designing more inclusive water management policies that are better adapted to the social realities of local communities.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

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