

CONCLUSION

Confluences and Tributaries in Delta Life

Franz Krause and Mark Harris

Towards a deltaic lens

Life in river deltas has become a matter of global concern. Threatened by rising sea levels and subsiding surfaces, starved of sediments and susceptible to extreme weather events, trapped in disadvantageous economies and governed by unaccountable, often postcolonial administrations, deltas and their inhabitants are known to be in crisis (Jensen and Morita 2020; Nicholls et al. 2020). Propounding insights into the lives of delta inhabitants around the world, this book has shown that these people are indeed struggling on various fronts, yet significantly, these fronts do not easily align with the dimensions of the global delta crisis. Instead, the ethnographies have foregrounded how the delta itself is not a given in people's lives, but is made by their activities and the currents they interact with: flows into, out of and through delta people's homes and livelihoods.

This book has treated the delta as a question, and has proposed some answers. Using the entry points of hydrosociality, volatility and multi-scalar rhythms, the contributors have found, first and foremost, that there is no single and stable answer to the questions of what a delta is, what challenges it poses, or what characteristics its population possesses. Nevertheless, the volume has clearly shown that attention to life in river deltas yields analytical insights into the dynamism of more-than-human sociality, which may prove useful in other settings too. In this sense, deltas can be seen as laboratories of variability and temporality, where sociocultural and material volatilities provoke certain phenomena in particularly salient ways. These phenomena are likely to occur elsewhere, too, but it is through a deltaic lens that we have been able to discern them lucidly and with distinction. It is this lens that we also offer to colleagues working in

other settings where uncertainty, transformation and more-than-human relations matter.

Ethnographies of delta life

We call this deltaic lens ‘confluences and distributaries’, pointing to its open-ended, non-linear and process-oriented sensibilities. Tanya Richardson describes how the Danube Delta only became known as a delta, and even then only in particular circles, through a long process of nation-building, mapping, development and conservation. The inhabitants, in contrast, have long referred to their surroundings as the ‘reed beds’, foregrounding the landscape they encounter rather than the geomorphological abstraction mapped by state and commercial agencies. Lukas Ley documents how frequent flooding in coastal Semarang, Indonesia, is not only due to infrastructural neglect, but is also a necessary by-product of the logic of the modern city. Systematically excluded from the prospects of prosperity, people find themselves literally at the downstream margins of the ‘Stinky River’ that beautifies the city by draining its wastewater into their neighbourhoods. Alejandro Camargo illustrates how flows converge and stagnate in the Colombian La Mojana, where they provoke multiple, mostly negative consequences for the area’s inhabitants. As sediment, fish and mercury are trapped in the delta, it becomes a focal point for activities and processes originating in a much wider region and taking place over a much longer history, from artisanal gold mining to land conflicts. Franz Krause traces how economic shifts intersect with identity politics and hydrological volatilities to create an ever-transforming Mackenzie Delta in Canada. Its inhabitants excel at continually reinventing livelihoods, traditions and relations with the landscape.

Nora Horisberger details how a fishing village in the Brazilian Parnaíba Delta grows and shrinks according to the tides that promise valuable shrimps. Rather than a mechanical process, this resonance emerges through the skilful and work-intensive attunement of the fishers to deltaic processes, an attunement that is constantly vulnerable to being led astray and falling out of sync. Sandro Simon discusses how mollusc-gleaning rhythms in the Senegalese Sine-Saloum Delta emerge in a historical conjuncture of ecological, economic and cultural trajectories. Each gleaning period is preceded by an interval of waiting that stands in a productive tension with the conditions and opportunities of the mollusc economy. Caterina Scaramelli narrates how a farming family’s making ends meet in the Turkish Kızılırmak Delta brings the delta into being at various scales. Delta inhabitants are not victims of the political and material tides that

wash through the delta, but agents who actively appropriate and negotiate opportunities and setbacks. And Benoit Ivars shows how inhabitants of the Ayeyarwady Delta in Myanmar attempt to secure their access to land in a context where not only is the land itself highly mobile but the political and institutional framework also keeps shifting. People develop various strategies for anchoring their land rights to material and semiotic points that promise relative stability in a volatile world.

Redescribing deltas from the inside out

All these stories are specific to their respective deltas of origin. Yet it is conceivable that similar stories also unfold in places that are not river deltas in a geomorphological sense. A deltaic lens may be applicable beyond deltas. This becomes more evident when, rather than merely considering the individual contributions to this collection, we also highlight their mutual confluences and distributaries. For example, one key confluence concerns the move to redescribe deltas from the inside out. Instead of taking a geographic unit for granted, many contributors discuss how a delta becomes – or does not become – a relevant category and scale for its inhabitants and other people. Richardson makes this point most elaborately, displacing ‘delta’ as the sole and primary way of referring to the area between the Danube and the Black Sea. She indicates that resisting naturalisms is a perpetual task for anthropologists, for whom it can be too easy to uncritically adopt dominant framings of a place that originate elsewhere. Simon makes a similar move when contrasting the ‘waterwork’ of mollusc gleaning with the waterworks of infrastructure and governance. Moving out from the skilled and situated practice of gleaning and the networks of mollusc trade creates a different field of relations than starting from large-scale irrigation and shipping infrastructures. This ‘waterwork’ field is not only different in spatial extent, but also much more dynamic and people-centred than that of ‘waterworks’.

Following daily lives on a Turkish farm, Scaramelli finds that the people she accompanied there had different and shifting notions of what and where the Kızılırmak Delta was. She notes that the delta-level water management infrastructure, which reinforces the conventional delta scale in both agricultural production and nature conservation practices, has paradoxically resulted in a demise of the geomorphological delta through its manipulation of sediments and erosion. Scaramelli adds that for the anthropologist, too, recourse to the delta scale can have analytical purchase, for instance to avoid other taken-for-granted categories like municipalities or provinces, and to foreground the histories and dynamics of water and

sediment flows, infrastructures and policies as they mesh with people's lives.

In Scaramelli's contribution, the deltaic space comes into being through historically contingent more-than-human relations, many of them with places and people outside the delta. As Richardson reminds us, this space does not have to be a delta at all. In fact, Horisberger emphasizes that the people in the area between the Parnaíba River and the Atlantic inhabit 'floating' islands that appear and disappear like sandbanks, rather than a delta. And Ley argues that the flood-prone districts of coastal Semarang are best understood as a heterotopia, a space set apart from the rest of the world, yet intimately mirroring it. Moreover, the relations that participate in making a delta may include contributors like plants, which the Parnaíba Delta inhabitants call 'living beings as we are', capable of guidance and exchange, but also of cheating and lying. Similarly, older people in the Sine-Saloum Delta know that mollusc abundance depends, among other things, on the benevolence of ancestral spirits who must be appeased with offerings at the shell middens, as Simon explains.

Amphibious multidimensionality

Water is one of the key more-than-human participants in the making of delta life. However, as Ivars makes clear in his discussion of the delicate land tenure in the Ayeyarwady Delta, waterflows and associated sedimentation and erosion come to matter in conjunction with political processes and institutional arrangements. Camargo elaborates how the temporal heterogeneity of waterflows entangles with social relations in La Mojana to intensify problems with well-being, land distribution and livelihood security. He points out that stagnation is not the opposite of flowing water, but part of its rhythmic movement; slowing down and speeding up characterize the hydrosocial relations of delta life. Similarly, Scaramelli emphasizes that the fluidity of these relations experienced by Kızıllırmak Delta farmers is not due to an essentially watery materiality, but is shaped by people's practices in a transforming, more-than-human environment. Only as these farmers experience and narrate waterflows in relation to biographies, economic shifts and political histories does water movement gain significance for them.

If life in river deltas is a particular configuration 'at the confluence of land and water', as Gagné and Borg Rasmussen (2016) have called water-related sociality, or in the words of Da Cunha (2019), a field that consists of wetness everywhere before it is separated into water and land somewhere, this life is necessarily amphibious, both in the sense of its po-

sition in-between (see Ingold 2015: 147) land and water, and in the sense of the futility of attempts to pin it down. It is therefore no surprise that many delta inhabitants do not call their home landscape a delta, but refer to it as floating islands, as is the case in Brazil, or as reed beds in the Ukraine. As Richardson argues, it is highly problematic to assign a specific ontology to delta life, as this would imply a detached and ordered view from above, backgrounding the more unruly social and material processes that make up delta life. In particular, the terrestrial undertones of the 'delta' designation – foregrounding its agricultural potential, the ecological significance of wetlands, or perils for urban development – run the risk of omitting the amphibious and volatile processes of delta life, as is evident in various discussions provided by Camargo, Ivars, Ley and Richardson.

Thus, the pressures and challenges of delta life cannot be reduced to any one field or driver. Camargo, for example, highlights how fishing, mining and farming in La Mojana are intimately linked and affect each other though their confluence and stagnation in the delta. The mercury from mining accumulates in fish, more of which, in turn, are caught because inhabitants are crowded out of farming by powerful ranchers who appropriate newly emerging land, which, in turn, displaces fish habitats. The La Mojana inhabitants' crisis as a whole is an amphibious, multidimensional phenomenon. In the same spirit, Krause argues for an intersectional understanding of the volatilities that characterize life in the Mackenzie Delta. Colonial, climatic and commercial developments, to name three significant ones, must be considered alongside each other to begin to appreciate the dynamism of delta life; addressing these processes separately and then adding them together does not amount to the same analytical insight.

Deltaic political economy

Several contributions emphasize the political nature of deltaic relations. Delta life is not by default marginal, downstream, dispossessed and precarious, but often systematically marginalized, downstreamed, dispossessed and rendered precarious. Ley, for example, elaborates how the predicaments of inhabiting coastal Semarang are due, in large part, to the political-economic forces that confine people to spaces of increasing wetness, excluding them from protected and prosperous elsewhere and hindering their mobility in spite of a highly fluid and mobile landscape. Flooding then becomes a problem of confinement and 'quarantine', rather than of rhythmic waters. Coastal dwellers are quarantined not only in space, but also by the state narratives that consider flooding a breach of law and order, an attack on state sovereignty, and by the capitalist

logics of exclusion and dispossession. In this situation, there can be no unified strategy against flooding, but residents attune their own resilience measures both to meteorological events like storm surges and to political and infrastructural processes like the sudden repairing or installing of flood-defence schemes. Delta inhabitants' confinement to the downstream, receiving end of water pollution and political hierarchies is also evident in La Mojana, where Camargo illustrates how political and economic forces limit people to toxic livelihoods at the confluence of mercury, overfishing and land grabs. This resonates with Ivars' observations among Ayeyarwady Delta farmers, whose access to land is jeopardized not only by manifold institutional and political dynamics, but also by the fact that floods may annihilate the physical markers in the landscape and cyclones may destroy their land-title documents.

This political context often contributes to the making of deltas into resources for national development and international markets. Examples of this process include the state development strategies for the Ayeyarwady Delta identified by Ivars, aiming to boost rice production through large-scale land reclamation efforts, which triggered many of the existing land grabs, uncertainties and conflicts. It equally echoes through the biographies of Kızılırmak Delta inhabitants, brought to the region as part of a civilizing mission of agricultural development and nation-building, who found the promises of prosperity broken in the often problematic agricultural conditions of the delta, as chronicled by Scaramelli. The economic history of the Mackenzie Delta, characterized by the boom-and-bust extractions of furs, whalebone and hydrocarbons, speaks to the imperial and colonial use of river deltas and their inhabitants as resources to be exploited at any cost.

Inhabiting volatile landscapes

A further confluence in this volume concerns the conspicuousness of the ever-shifting delta landscape. Again, mobile landscapes are not limited to river deltas, but their salience for delta life is striking across all contributions. Among other examples, this includes the increased sedimentation and associated rise in floods in La Mojana; the interlocking volatilities in the freezing and thawing Mackenzie Delta; the pronounced movements of people, animals and sands in the Parnaíba Delta, where 'movement is indeed probably the only form of permanence' (Horisberger, this volume, p. 128); and the uncertain temporality of alluvial land availability in the Ayeyarwady Delta. In fact, contributors here propose understanding delta life as volatile, characterized by uncertain and often rapid transformations that go beyond the polar opposition of stability and change. Ley, for ex-

ample, juxtaposes this volatile approach to the solid structures of the city, both physically and in terms of social stratification and spatial fragmentation. The volatility of coastal Semarang has no place in the city proper; the delta is too fluid even for stabilization plans ever to solidify.

While deltaic volatilities are frequently striking, they also imply periods of often anxious waiting, anticipating events and developments; people are never quite certain how they will turn out. This anticipatory suspense is brought out most clearly in Horisberger's analysis of shrimp fishing in the Parnaíba Delta, where fishers eagerly observe and prepare all possible indicators of a coming fishing opportunity, but can never be confident how the fishing will develop. With the same clarity, Simon explains the importance of the phases in between mollusc-gleaning periods in the Sine-Saloum Delta, which come into being in a productive tension with people's active participation in the mollusc economy. These anticipative and productive forms of waiting in a volatile world starkly contrast with the quarantined waiting that Ley finds in coastal Semarang, where the inhabitants' attention and skills are sidelined by an unresponsive administration perpetuating a colonial logic of urban development that sacrifices its coastal periphery to the city's functioning. Here, waiting is unproductive, even detrimental, and goes hand in hand with the depoliticization and victimization of delta inhabitants in the context of humanitarian interventions.

Both kinds of deltaic waiting are imbued with uncertainty, although the quarantine kind leaves much less space for delta dwellers' agency than the anticipatory kind. Camargo refers to the uncertainty brought about by the ongoing accumulation of matter in the delta, which currently galvanizes various conflicts and illnesses, but – because it is continually increasing – may influence a variety of further social and political arrangements in the future. Horisberger, in turn, details how deltaic uncertainty pertains to people's limited trust in tides, animals, plants and fellow human beings: all of them can provide crucial cues but may also – just as easily – deceive delta inhabitants. Where anticipation is key, deceiving and tricking are part and parcel of an uncertain world-in-formation. Equally important are attempts by delta dwellers to forge relative steadiness in such a volatile world. Examples of the latter include the way women in the Sine-Saloum Delta relate to molluscs as a constant and reliable security to fall back on when other options fail, and as a leveller relative to more uncertain sources of livelihood. For the Ayeyarwady Delta, in turn, Ivars develops the notion of 'anchoring' to account for the farmers' efforts to link up, in a fundamentally volatile context, with relatively stable entities – including documents, places, institutions or particular persons – in order to secure their access to land. Even though the farmers consider none of these entities to be permanent solutions, their relative reliability provides hope and leverage.

Rhythms and resonances

As we have elaborated in the introduction to this collection, an insightful entry point into delta life is to approach it in terms of its multi-scalar rhythms. Many contributions have given substance to this claim, also illustrating that rhythms are not a romantic term highlighting social-ecological harmony, but that rhythmic correspondence is a tense and often conflictual process (cf. Ingold 2018). Krause suggests using the rhythmic dynamics of many deltaic processes as an opportunity to consider things together – as different rhythms entrain and are entrained by each other – rather than separately. In tracing some of the processes that have shaped life in the Mackenzie Delta, he proposes an approach based on rhythms as an entry point that is not only familiar to the delta dwellers' perspective, but also capable of describing delta life beyond the conventional opposition between stability and change. Rhythms and a rhythm-based approach also feature prominently in other chapters in this book. They include Horisberger's attention to the always-becoming, ever-uncertain dynamics of shrimp fishing in an extremely mobile environment; Simon's illustration of the emergence of the mollusc-gleaning rhythm, not only organized around tides, daylight and closed seasons, but also responsive to the disappearance of alternative livelihoods and ultimately affecting many other temporal dynamics like credit and trade; and Scaramelli's elaborations on the malleable correspondences between watery and economic rhythms with the life cycles of delta inhabitants, who are not defined by waterflows but make choices in relation to the dynamic affordances of a wider world that includes, but is not limited to, water and the market.

As confluences and distributaries, these observations underline our argument that delta life is necessarily emergent and more-than-human. While all arguments in this book are developed in close correspondence with the authors' insights into specific lives in particular deltas, none of them claims that deltas are fundamentally unlike any other place in the world, or that delta life features unique aspects unknown to other forms of social life. Nevertheless, it is clear that all of them gained critical insights into social life by engaging with delta inhabitants, so much so that we have called deltas real-life 'laboratories' for learning about hydro-sociality, volatility, multi-scalar rhythms and other important issues. A delta-inspired perspective, as summarized in this conclusion, can serve as a constructive lens to approach other research settings, too, as they relate to water, transformation and more-than-human sociality. Taken together, the close ethnographic accounts and critical theoretical elaborations in this book suggest two steps in the anthropological project of coming to grips with an always-becoming world. First, they share what the authors have

learned about life in specific river deltas as more-than-human sociality in an ever-transforming world that participates in bringing about what a delta is. And second, they elaborate a deltaic approach to studying social and material transformations more broadly.

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