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Valerie Hänsch

Abstract

Work, life and movement along the Nile in rural northern Sudan are related to the cycle of seasons and the rhythm of the river. With the construction of the Merowe Dam, the river Nile was impounded, and thousands of peasants were flooded out of their homes without warning. The inundation of agricultural fields and inhabited villages not only caused existential uncertainty and the loss of work, but also disrupted socio-material entanglements and habitual patterns of sensory experiences. Flooded desert paths and routes—as well as changing characteristics of river waters, winds and waves—required a readjustment of the senses when navigating newly emerging waterscapes. Following the flooding, new visions of the changing environment demanded attention as they forced themselves onto people's awareness. In this multimodal contribution, I explore the aesthetics of the unfamiliar, or what I call 'troubled senses', that is, the disturbance of attention. By focusing on local attempts of wayfinding and the creation of new routes for boat transport on the ever-growing reservoir, this contribution investigates the work of infrastructuring and sensing the unfamiliar as a way of re-inhabiting radically changing environments through movement. Emerging rhythms of movement are linked to the readjustment of the senses and thus contribute to the aesthetic formation of the environment.

Damming the Nile, disruption and changing life-worlds



Figure 1: Film still, Jabal Musa before the damming of the Nile, 2006.



2: Film still, Jabal Musa after the damming of the Nile, 2009.

Figure

I took these two images from exactly the same position during my research in 2006 and 2008/2009. Located close to the Nile, in the adjacent desert, the mountain Jabal Musa offers an overview over some parts of the Fourth Nile Cataract, a remote area in Northern Sudan. When I took the image in 2006, the Merowe Dam project, located about 50 kilometers downstream, had been under construction since 2003. Together with villagers and community leaders, I produced a short documentary on the threat of future displacement posed by the dam construction project (Hänsch, 2006).

Presenting the large hydropower project as a dazzling modernization project, the recently ousted government of president Omar al-Bashir had originally planned to transfer the people affected by the dam project to state-run resettlement schemes. However, during the highly dynamic political process of negotiating their future lives, the majority of the Manasir community, a group numbering approximately 50,000 people, developed an alternative vision of resettlement—namely, to stay in their homeland in new settlements on the shores of the future reservoir. Yet, before agreements on compensation modalities had been reached and before resettlement had taken place, the damming of the Nile started without warning in the summer of 2008 (Hänsch, 2012).

When I took the image in early 2009, most villages, agricultural fields, date trees and roads had already been submerged in the dammed waters of the Nile. The inundation of the dam's reservoir lasted for about ten months, from July 2008 until April 2009. During this period, the water levels rose enormously several times. The flood affected the villages to varying degrees, depending on their distance from the dam. The village where I lived was inundated within a mere seven days. My interlocutor Osman and his family tried to rescue their belongings, dragging them to higher ground in the adjacent desert, where the men of the village started to build improvised shelters from wood and palm leaves. Large refugee camps built by the displaced peasants formed along the fringes of the emerging reservoir. After one month, the water levels started to rise again, and Osman's family had to dismantle their shelters and move again to higher ground. In total, they had to flee from the rising waters three times. At that time, however, there was no official information available on the workings of the dam. Nobody knew for how long and how far the Nile would rise or when it would fall again. Thus, the beginning and course of the damming of the Nile was unpredictable for my research partners and myself.

Work, life and movement along the Nile in rural Northern Sudan are characterized by multiple interwoven rhythms. Everyday activities such as cultivating the fields resonate with the cycle of the seasons and the annual rise and fall of the river Nile. Elsewhere, I have described how the inundation of agricultural fields and inhabited villages not only caused the loss of work but also disrupted socio-material entanglements, movement, and everyday temporality (Hänsch, 2019). Routines and habitual knowledge lost their validity to the extent that the taken for granted and existential experience of a familiar everyday world was fundamentally shaken. This created the experience of a crisis, a deep feeling of uncertainty and alienation when a world is falling apart. This falling apart also affected the people's sensory world. The environment through which one usually moves in a routinized way was transformed radically by the flooding, disrupting the familiar patterns of sensory perception. The altered landscape and the characteristics of the new yet unknown river regime, its rhythm, waters and waves required the creation of new routes and, above all, a readjustment of the senses.

This multimodal contribution explores practices of wayfinding and the formation of new routes along the dammed river Nile. Just as aquatic and terrestrial infrastructures are certainly interconnected, so is movement on land and water. Here I focus primarily on waterways and river transport during the time of the flooding. Drawing on in-depth ethnographic research among Manasir peasants, this contribution investigates the work of infrastructuring and sensing the unfamiliar as a way of re-inhabiting radically changing environments through movement. Emerging rhythms of movement are linked to the readjustment of the senses and thus contribute to the aesthetic formation of the environment.

Troubled senses and the work of infrastructuring

The dammed river Nile largely disrupted the existing network of roads and tracks through the desert. The usual footpaths and the roads connecting the villages were flooded, and the valleys, now filled with water, could only be crossed by boat. However, the expanding reservoir also allowed for the formation of new infrastructural connections that enabled transportation and movement. The waters of the Fourth Nile Cataract, with its former currents and notorious rapids, made river transport a dangerous undertaking in the past. A low water level during the annual drop of the Nile or high-water levels at the time of the annual Nile flood made the passage of river vessels and boat transport partly impossible. The inhabitants used rowing and motorboats mainly for short distances, e.g. to cross the Nile and cultivate fields on the opposite river bank, or to take the children to school on the other side of the river or to catch the bus there. Apart from the use of donkeys and walking, the main means of transport and travel were the pick-up and the lorry, especially for long-distance travel on the roads along the riverbanks.

With the damming of the Nile, a new river regime emerged and the flow of water changed its characteristics: the river, with its rapids and many narrow watercourses between islands, turned into a large lake, with waters flowing slowly and ponderously. Thus, the new river regime precluded certain routines and practices of movement but also offered new opportunities for waterborne mobility and connectivity. While boat transport in the past was limited to short distances as a feeder service to road transport, motorboats, propelled by outboard engines, became the main means of transporting people and goods over long distances. This was by no means only due to the flooded roads or the now great distances between the river banks. With its new characteristics, the Nile, as a constitutive element of river navigation, now also offered the possibility of intensifying river transport and travel. Local workshops quickly expanded their boat-building activities, which began to flourish. Those families who could afford it ordered rowboats, fishing boats and motorboats.

The pre-existing infrastructural elements of motorboat transportation, such as boat building, engine repair and sales, and the skills of experienced boatmen, facilitated the rapid establishment of the motorboat as a means of transportation that now also served long distances. However, this alone does not account for the emergence of new waterways, the intensification of waterborne mobility and travel over long distances on the reservoir. Fundamental to the formation of new waterways as infrastructure is the ability to navigate the lake.

Usually, infrastructures only receive subsidiary attention as they are largely taken for granted and usually run smoothly in the background of everyday life. Only when infrastructures break down do they demand full attention and challenge associated practices (Star, 1999). The changing landscape and the breakdown of infrastructures through the flooding disrupted

habitual sensory perceptions and people's skills of navigating the river. What had once been a familiar world became a strange world. Polanyi (1958) argues that only when the habitual pattern of sensory perception is disturbed is 'focal attention' shifted to things of which one had previously been only partially aware in their subsidiary role.

Following the flooding, the new visions of the changing environment demanded attention as they forced themselves onto people's awareness. This is what I call 'troubled senses', that is, the disturbance of attention. People's perceptions of the situation did not fit well with their embodied knowledges. Hence there was a gap between the familiar world of meaning and the actual perception. The work of infrastructuring, I contend, requires, above all, new habitual patterns of sensing and perceiving the changing environment. These new sensory patterns of perception emerge through movement, through establishing a repetitious, rhythmic practice of traveling on the river, e.g. to the weekly market.

Moving along and the intensification of motorboat transport meant that people had to explore and devise new waterways across the expanding reservoir. When I was traveling by boat with my interlocutor Osman, we often lost our way. Once, when we were heading for our refugee camp at sunset, we could not find the entrance to the valley where the camp was located because of the changing light conditions. And sometimes, while driving the motorboat, the hull would suddenly scrape the summit of a stony hill, now hidden from view under water. Navigating the ever-changing environment required full focal attention.

Fishermen who started to fish in the flooded valleys with rowing boats not only had to explore new routes but also the places where the fish used to gather. When rowing, the whole body is in motion and provides the rhythmisation of the activity. Through the oar, the fishermen feel the water in a much more tactile way than when steering a motorboat. The beat and sound of the one-stroke outboard engine provide a rather monotonous rhythmicity to motorboat travel. What makes up the audible beat of the outboard engine while driving the motorboat represents the movement of the oars in the rowboat.

Take a short boat trip with Osman through his inundated home region on the dammed river Nile. I shot these scenes after the first 'wave' of the flood. The disrupted roads, half-flooded palm trees and houses soon disappeared into the water. Watch the video here:

Please see HTML version for accompanying video

<https://vimeo.com/748280311>

Figure 3: Infrastructuring and Sensing Changing Environments: Navigating Dammed River Nile Waters in Northern Sudan, Video [3m]

While driving the motorboat, Osman tried to identify familiar places and distinctive features of the environment. He related his actual perception of the environment to his 'old', biographical and embodied knowledge. With each trip, he generated new knowledge of possible waterways. After one month, the water levels rose once more. The environment changed continuously. Half-flooded palm groves and mountains, which previously served as a reference point for Osman, disappeared into the water. Again, Osman identified places and new waterways while moving along with the motorboat. Again and again, my interlocutors had to re-orient their vision and learn to see the environment anew.

While moving through the waterscapes, Osman gradually created ties to his new environment. By engaging with this changing world, he slowly recalibrated his vision and developed a ‘skilled vision’ in Grasseni’s terms (2009). In other words, through the perceptual appropriation of this strange world, Osman formed a new habitualized vision. As Merleau-Ponty (1962, p. 153) points out, it is only through ‘perceptual habit’ that we ‘come into possession of a world’ and thus can establish reality.

Travelling on the emerging reservoir generated new topographical knowledge but also knowledge about new waterways and their potential dangers. For example, strong winds created big waves on the reservoir and posed great risks for boat transportation. Thus, Osman had to carefully observe the weather conditions before starting a boat trip. The unfolding habitualized perception also involved a shift in perspective: from the land to the river/lake. Before the flooding, most people did not travel on the river but used to walk or travel by pick-ups along the river banks.

Place, the everyday, and familiarity are closely connected. What Haapala (2005) calls the ‘aesthetics of the everyday’ often produces feelings of being at home and of familiarity. MacDougall (2006) uses a similar term, ‘social aesthetics’, to refer to patterned sensory experiences. Based on each previous trip, Osman developed an increasing familiarity with the changing environment. That is, he internalized the new places and waterway through movement and repetitious travels. Each new waterway became associated with particular circumstances (e.g. difficult weather conditions), activities (e.g. traveling to the market), or events that were continuously linked to new stories he experienced along the way. A dense social landscape emerged in which knowledge about waterways, places, and the navigability of the lake was linked to events, activities, and social relationships.

The flooding and the expanding reservoir disrupted habitual patterns of sensory perception. This, in turn, shifted subsidiary attention of the environment to focal attention. Thus, the work of infrastructuring involves the development of new perceptual habits through repetitious movement on the river, which, in turn, create meaning and familiarity in the process of re-inhabiting a radical altered environment. The generation of habitual patterns of perception in which one lives is the prerequisite for infrastructuring, namely releasing technologies from the grip of focused, conscious awareness. Over the months, my interlocutors developed new skills and perceptual habits to navigate the new river regime and its rhythm. The ability to navigate the reservoir and the creation of new waterways for travel and transport supported the re-establishment of everyday life and its rhythms on the shores of the reservoir. On a larger scale, knowledge of the new river regime and enabling river transport contributed to the political project of staying in the homeland and resisting displacement to state-run resettlement schemes.

Over the years, the annual rise and fall of the Nile, which is regulated by the operation of the dam, has stabilised. People are now able to predict when the water level will drop again, which areas will be cleared of water at that time of year, and when and how far the reservoir will rise again. Possible waterways and routes during and after these fluctuations are known. Through the rhythms of movement, the aesthetics of the environment have been embodied—they provide familiarity and thus control of mobility. These practices of waterborne mobility resonate with the new rhythm of the Nile.

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Author bio

Valerie Hänsch is a postdoctoral researcher at the Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology, LMU Munich, Germany. She holds a PhD from the Bayreuth International Graduate School of African Studies (BIGSAS). In her work, she explores technologies, large infrastructures, uncertainty, socio-environmental transformations and displacement in the Sudan. Her latest research investigates the links between activism, aesthetic practices and affects in the Sudanese revolutionary process. As a visual anthropologist, she has produced several collaborative ethnographic films. Her films deal with dam-induced displacements, the modification of the Bedford lorry and rituals during Ramadan. Her film *Sifinja – The Iron Bride* (2009) has been awarded several prizes.

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