



Beyond the Blue: Interdisciplinary Explorations of Water in Africa

Thinking with water provides several new orientations for regional studies, including those focusing on the African continent and its global connections. Centering waterscapes surfaces connections, networks, and concerns that open up new thematic orientations and bring a wide range of urgent matters to the fore, ranging from climate change adaptation to endangered cultural narratives. The volatility of climate change is making the presence and absence of water increasingly problematic, leading to floods and droughts, increasing challenges of water management and its politics. Water ecologies are of crucial importance to human life, livelihoods and landscapes, making it critical to bring together different modes of engaging with new (and old) challenges. This calls for a fresh look at water in connection to Africa.

Oceans and waterways have long facilitated contact and exchange, aiding in the spread of language, culture, and religion, but also made possible colonial conquest and formations of empire. Fields like the Black Atlantic or Indian Ocean histories draw on such oceanic connections to contribute to decolonial histories. Recent disruptions of shipping routes, due to the pandemic, environmental changes and spreading conflicts, reveal the importance of marine spaces and security for the maintenance of current economic and political architecture, and its potential for ruptures and re-imaginings. Furthermore, a focus that centers oceans and rivers not only as infrastructures for exchange, but also as lively spaces with their own rhythms and qualities, invites the study of diverse industries and modes of being that involve more-than-human dependencies or extractive activities, such as fisheries or offshore drilling, as well as practices geared towards fostering ocean management, coastal resilience and care for riverine systems. This conference seeks to pay attention to the diverse meanings of water in African societies, cultures, and environments, ranging from rainmaking rituals to riverine trade routes and (oral) poetry related to waterbodies.

The emerging field of 'blue humanities' bring together different disciplines (anthropology, literary studies, linguistics, history, political science) to attend to sea and freshwater narratives, which are increasingly under pressure in the context of the Anthropocene. Beyond the humanities, water connects a wide range of disciplines in the sciences, from irrigation and engineering to ecology and marine sciences. To bring a wide range of fields together, we invite contributions that explore water from interdisciplinary perspectives, or that can translate disciplinary insights to a diverse audience. Contributions that deal with water in relation to the following themes are particularly encouraged:

- Agriculture, food security, and livelihoods
- Climate change

- Forecasts and futures
- Gender
- Youth and demography
- Popular culture
- Cities and urban-rural relations
- Conflict and security
- Technology and infrastructure
- Water, health (human, animal, ecosystems), sanitation, and hygiene
- Multispecies studies

Please send in an abstract of max. 250 words to nvasconf@asc.leidenuniv.nl by 30 January 2026. If you have an idea for a panel with multiple contributions, or for other forms (such as photo exhibitions, artistic performances, poster presentations, book launch, please reach out to the conference organisers directly via nvasconf@asc.leidenuniv.nl. Successful contributions will be informed before 27 February 2026.

This conference is organized by the NVAS (Nederlandse Vereniging voor Afrika Studies) in partnership with IHE Delft Institute for Water Education, and will take place in Delft from 11-12 September 2026, with further details to be announced in January 2026.