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Exploring Spirituality in Water Diplomacy

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ABSTRACT: In the academic literature, the assessment of water diplomacy processes has generally focused on rational factors; some studies, however, have shown that these are not the only driving force in transboundary water negotiations. The role of the affective aspects of transboundary water negotiations is often undervalued and overlooked. Such aspects include emotions, trust, religion, the relationship between body and mind, and the connection with nature. The research presented here explores if and how the spiritual beliefs and practices of individuals engaged in water diplomacy play a role. It builds on a review of the literature on spirituality and engages in qualitative interviews with water diplomats. The conceptualisation of spirituality and water diplomacy is applied to the lived experiences of water diplomacy practitioners in order to assess the role of spiritual beliefs and practices in transboundary negotiations. Fifteen professionals were interviewed about their personal, self-defined spiritual beliefs and practices and the role they perceived them to play in water diplomacy processes. The spiritual practices they identified included meditation, prayers, reading sacred texts, and emotional intelligence practices such as managing emotions (self-management), active listening, effective communication, and self-awareness. The research mainly found that spiritual beliefs and practices can play a role in the preparation of meetings on a personal level, for example through prayers, meditation, and self-centring. During the negotiation process itself, spiritual practices are more implicit and internal. Spiritual practices can provide an alternative to, or can complement, classical approaches to water negotiations. Negotiators' internal spiritual practice may manifest itself in more positive and/or less reactive negotiation processes. Creating more room for spirituality in the negotiation setting gives negotiators with a spiritual background more opportunity to bring in their spiritual beliefs and practices. This can unlock new ways of negotiating, which can potentially lead to more equity in the allocation of water resources.

KEYWORDS: Spirituality, water diplomacy, water negotiations, spiritual practices, spiritual beliefs

INTRODUCTION

Spirituality is the recognition of a deep interconnectedness between all of creation. I think that the idea that we, individuals, are separate from each other and the world around us is a construct. Spirituality is the connection that I have with a greater force, a greater being, a greater energy that exists in the Universe and on this Earth. And my spirituality manifests in how I behave with other people, other plants, rocks, water, and trees, with the land, with the wind. Spirituality provides a platform for interaction (Interview 13).

Sharing rivers and groundwater aquifers among riparian states can lead to conflict situations or they can lead to bilateral or multilateral basin agreements. Water diplomacy is a recognised tool for reaching international agreements and can serve as a guide for riparian states in their communication and collaboration (Keskinen et al., 2021; Klimes et al., 2019). Water diplomacy refers to the political processes and practices of preventing, mitigating and resolving disputes over transboundary water resources and developing joint water governance arrangements. The literature on water diplomacy pays attention to its embeddedness in specific political, economic and sociocultural processes. Due to its affinity with conflict resolution literature, it focuses more attention on the agency of the involved actors (both governmental and non-governmental at different levels) than do many classical international relations (IR) approaches (Keskinen et al., 2021; Sehring et al., 2022; Klimes et al., 2019). Nevertheless, water diplomacy approaches usually (and implicitly) take over from mainstream, Eurocentric IR approaches. Within water diplomacy, communication protocols have already been established and can facilitate communication among riparian states in the development of joint water management programmes (Keskinen et al., 2021; Klimes et al., 2019).

Spirituality and religion are usually not explicitly considered in water diplomacy processes unless they are part of a political project. Spiritual and religious practices are seen as private, and in opposition to politics and science which are considered to occupy the public sphere. The sharp separation of religion from other spheres is seen as 'modern' (Devare, 2020). The spiritual relationship to water and the different knowledge systems of nature have been disregarded by the modern belief that nature can be fully understood scientifically and controlled technically; this is exemplified in the 'hydraulic mission' that has for a long time dominated water policies (Allan, 2005). In the paper, we challenge this separation of the private and professional, instead seeing spirituality as transcending these categories. We focus less on explicit beliefs and more on the spiritual practices that are embedded in daily life and routines.

In this paper, we explore if and how spiritual beliefs and practices play a role in water diplomacy processes. We also discuss whether personal beliefs impact water diplomacy practitioners' behaviour in negotiations and if those practitioners consider themselves to be 'spiritual'. We investigate if and how the experts consciously incorporate spirituality into their work or if they instead consider spirituality to be a personal affair. Textbooks and toolboxes generally do not cover these aspects of water diplomacy, but we are interested in understanding them better. Our work is a first attempt to introduce the role of spirituality into transboundary water negotiations.

We engage with individuals who are involved in water negotiations and in other forms of dialogue among riparian countries; we refer to them as 'water diplomacy practitioners'. They are a key element of water diplomacy, which is defined as,

the deliberative political processes and practices of preventing, mitigating, and resolving disputes over transboundary water resources and developing joint water governance arrangements by applying foreign policy means, embedded in bi- and/or multilateral relations beyond the water sector and taking place at different tracks and levels (Sehring et al., 2022: 212).

While Wolf (2017) described how spiritual frameworks and tools may be useful in dialogue writ large, this work asks specifically about the individual spiritual beliefs and practices of water diplomacy practitioners. Within water diplomacy, dialogue is conducted through different tracks, namely Track 1 (governmental interaction), Track 1.5 (unofficial interaction involving state and non-state actors), Track 2 (interaction among non-governmental stakeholders), and Track 3 (people-to-people diplomacy) (Barua and Vij, 2018; Sehring et al., 2022). For the purposes of this research, the focus is on Tracks 1, 1.5 and 2.

This is an explorative qualitative study. Our data is drawn from semi-structured interviews conducted by the first author with professionals involved in transboundary water negotiations. Fifteen interviews were conducted with water diplomacy practitioners; they performed different roles including as government representatives, scientific experts, experts on behalf of international organisations, representatives of NGOs, and mediators and facilitators on behalf of third-party actors. The selection of

interviewees was conducted first on the basis of their expertise in water negotiations and second on their geographic location. The aim was to include water diplomats from different regions, religions, cultures and backgrounds. Collectively, the identified experts had worked in most parts of the world including Europe, the Americas, Asia, Africa, and the Middle East.

Our definition of spirituality is in line with the one in the opening quote and is much broader than the often-encountered common use of the term. In daily language, many people (especially in the Global North) associate, or even equate, spirituality with religion or esoterism. In contrast, we understand spirituality to be a sense of being and the connection that humans have with themselves, their fellow humans, other species and their environment. For this research, we follow the definition of Pargament (1999), which understands spirituality as the human search for connection with the sacred. 'Sacred' in this context is associated not only with God; it is also understood as the deep connection with the non-living physical world and with nature and, through these, with the 'divine'¹.

We might thus identify certain practices as spiritual, even while those engaged in them do not consider themselves to be spiritual. We therefore asked all our interviewees for their own definition of spirituality and about their perception of themselves as spiritual (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Categorization of interviewees as (non-)spiritual by authors' definition of spirituality and as self-perceived.

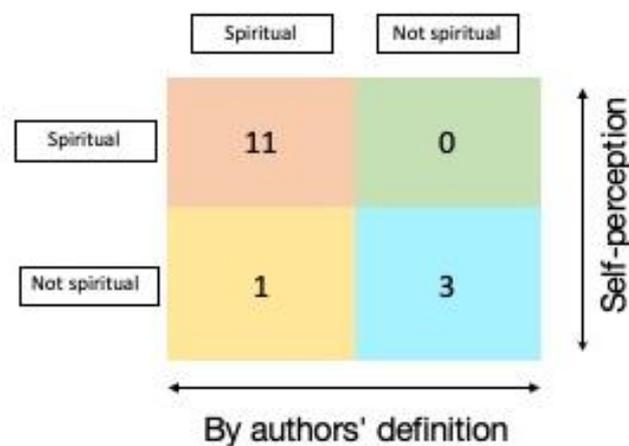


Figure 1 shows that most of the interviewees both perceive themselves as spiritual and are spiritual by our definition. One interviewee identified as non-spiritual but fell under our definition of being spiritual. Three interviewees were not spiritual by either their own perception or our definition. It is likely that more of our interviewees are open to spirituality than is common in the water diplomacy community. This disproportionate representation, however, served our aim, which was not to convey a representative picture of spiritual practices in water diplomacy, but rather to explore the actual nature of such practices. The spiritual beliefs of our self-described 'religious' interviewees were tied to the religion that they currently practiced and/or were raised with. According to these interviewees, their beliefs shaped their personal and professional adult reasoning and behaviour. Interviewees who were not currently religious and had not been raised with religious practices described themselves as 'spiritual' in other ways such as through their connection with water and the natural world. Still other interviewees did not consider themselves to be spiritual at all. As mentioned by one the interviewees, "I have the

¹ Divine: Godlike, heavenly. Characteristic of or befitting a deity.

inclination to keep these things out of what I do. I'm very aware that it matters to others but because I don't bring it myself, I might be able to see what it makes or what it does to the others" (Interview 4).

Informed by the interviews, our exploration is based on a conceptualisation of spirituality within the realms of religion, emotional intelligence, connection with nature, it also considers spirituality as it is manifested in Indigenous beliefs and practices, which will be introduced in the next chapter. Below, we apply a conceptualisation of the connection between spirituality and water diplomacy to the lived experiences of water diplomacy practitioners. We assess the role of spiritual beliefs and practices in transboundary negotiation settings, in negotiation preparations, and in negotiation trainings; in the process, we explore the perceived impact of spirituality on negotiation outcomes.

THE MANY FACETS OF SPIRITUALITY

Spirituality has been discussed by scholars, experts, and professionals with various definitions and understandings (Ernstmeyer and Christman, 2020; Watkins et al., 2013). Often it is related to a quest for possibilities to explore the benefits of interconnecting mind, body and soul, rather than tackling daily professional life only in a rational way (Prest et al., 1999). The word 'spiritual' is derived from the Latin word *spiritus* that primarily meant 'breath' (Delgado, 2005). Scholars also argue that there is a connection between humans as spiritual beings and their connection with nature (Naor and Mayseless, 2020). Having said this, Marcoen (1994) states that spirituality is connected to the transcendent bond with something that goes beyond the self. Scholars also argue that there is a connection between humans as spiritual beings and their connection with nature (Naor and Mayseless, 2020). Another way of understanding spirituality is to have a more universal "feeling of connectedness to the sacred" (Worthington et al., 2011). Views of something being sacred for one person are different from what another person experiences as sacred, mostly influenced by one's social environment.

In our research, and our understanding of spirituality, we differentiate between spiritual beliefs and spiritual practices. Although in reality both are continuously intertwined, the distinction helps us to better grasp the different ways how spirituality comes to play in water diplomacy.

With *spiritual beliefs* we refer to the association of humans with a higher entity such as God, the Universe, mother nature, or *Pachamama*² (Pacari, 2009). Even so, persons with spiritual beliefs refer to ontological questions about life and death (Watkins et al., 2013).

With *spiritual practices* we understand routine activities one performs to act upon one's belief or faith. A spiritual practice is thence related to belief and is meant to strengthen the bond of one's spiritual belief (Ernstmeyer and Christman, 2020; Watkins et al., 2013). Such practices include, for example, praying or meditation.

For this research spirituality means the interconnection between both spiritual beliefs and practices. Expression of spirituality can be done through different practices such as prayers, yoga, meditation, mindfulness, mastering breath exercises, community work, spiritual baths, but also connecting with nature and the social environment. For a spiritual person these are all practices to connect the body, mind and soul and have a relationship with one's emotions and how to deal with them.

In the following, we will describe four different approaches to spirituality that show the different ways it can be experienced and expressed: religion, connection with nature, indigenous knowledge, and emotional intelligence.

Religion and spirituality

Religion and spirituality are closely connected. They are not the same, though. A clear distinction between both is necessary because not every person experiences spirituality through religion. We

² Pachamama: A deity revered by the indigenous peoples of the Andes, sometimes described as an "earth Goddess."

distinguish between spirituality and religion: 'spirituality' can be defined loosely as involving the recognition of some universal connection, however that may be understood, occasionally glimpsed through moments (or longer) of transcendence, however that may be experienced. 'Religion', on the other hand, can be defined as a systemisation of faith and worship (Schwarz, 2000), as faithfulness to traditional, agreed-upon belief systems and practices (Worthington et al., 2011), and as a codification of how spiritual practices are to be performed (Dyson, Cobb, and Forman, 1997). However, many people who consider themselves spiritual do not per se follow a certain religion. This means spiritual beliefs are not necessarily confined to faith in a superior 'Being' or 'God' (Holland et al., 1998; Worthington Jr et al., 2011). Some find their spirituality deeply connected with their religious beliefs whereas others seek their connection through other ways such as art, nature, and body movement (yoga) (Chan, Akanmori, and Parker, 2019).

Spirituality in nature

In our definition of spirituality we also refer to connections with a spiritual nature (Pargament, 1999). As Wolf (2008) and Ashley (2007) argue, philosophers of the 18th century the European movement now known as 'the Enlightenment' urged the separation of the rational, measurable world from the ephemeral, spiritual world and adopted a more rational way of reasoning in terms of economic benefit and growth. For this reason, many Europeans shifted their connection with the natural environment, including water, to a more utilitarian one. Certain animistic and shamanistic faith systems, however, have retained their spiritual connection to nature. Central to these are respectful engagement and the preservation of balance (Delgado, 2005). Kamitsis and Francis (2013) observe that humans who respectfully engage with the natural world and whose spiritual practice includes a relationship with nature experience a sense of connectedness that positively influences their well-being. Animistic faith systems involve beliefs that recognize divinity of natural appearances such as trees, rivers, astronomical objects (Bird-David, 1999). Shamanistic belief systems involve shamans as being specialists in making the connection between humans and spirits within a community (Walter and Fridman, 2004). These faith systems are often connected with indigenous and tribal communities and have a deep connection with nature and therefore also with water bodies such as rivers and lakes.

Indigenous knowledge and spirituality

Indigenous knowledge has been with humankind for the longest time, but with the 'Westernization' of the world these local practices and forms of knowledge have been replaced or overshadowed with rational thinking. Spirituality can be related to indigenous forms of knowledge and to spiritual beliefs and practices that are performed by indigenous peoples (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2016). While there are many different forms of indigenous knowledge and spirituality, there are a few common threads: Indigenous communities have collective ancestral ties to their environment and its natural resources. As a matter of fact, they are also very dependent on ecosystems and natural resources for their sustainable livelihood (Kirmayer et al., 2011). For many indigenous communities, water is essential to life and therefore life starts with water (Bradford et al., 2017). Indigenous animistic spirituality includes finding transcendence through objects in the natural environment such as rivers, rocks, mountains and trees (Fleming and Ledogar, 2008; Khayat and Jara, 2021). It is also visible in the fact that many indigenous peoples do not separate themselves from other forms of life such as animals and trees but rather see a profound connection between both human life and the other types of life. Within indigenous spirituality, the natural environment is celebrated in various ways, through ceremonies, rituals, dance, and songs. This interrelation is evidence for the strong relationship and respect that many indigenous peoples give to nature through their beliefs and practices, a powerful sense of belonging between both their spirituality and nature (Waller et al., 2017).

An important aspect to consider is that reaching a level of spirituality requires elevating our state of consciousness. In some cultures, in particular indigenous communities, spiritual people reach this state

during ceremonies through deep meditation and consumption of psychedelic plants. It is essential to mention that some indigenous peoples have guides that help to connect with the divine or 'great spirit', 'Pachamama' and nature. These transcendental experiences might help negotiators to recognize the value of nature and all its elements: rivers, trees, mountains, stones, wind, and animals. At this point a person reflects on its interconnectedness with everything surrounding him or her, acknowledging that we are part of everything (the universe) and that we are only a material manifestation of transcendent entities that have always existed, and will exist. Glaciers, rivers, mangroves, trees, wind, and animals are a material manifestation of the 'great spirit', 'Pachamama' and nature. In this sense, the value of water is our own value as part of everything. Some indigenous communities describe this process of returning to the Pachamama as a healing process; considering water not only as commodity but also as a non-monetary value, which can shift the focus from the 'I' approach to an 'us' approach in negotiations. This could be described as a deeper understanding of nature, people, and transcendence.

Emotions, emotional intelligence, and spirituality

Spiritual practices help spiritual human beings to develop positive emotions, and emotional intelligence serves as a tool to transform negative emotions into positive emotions.

Emotional intelligence is related to the capability to experience and develop emotions, to understand emotions and effectively handle these emotions in order to positively convert them into a source of human energy. Emotional intelligence is the ability to manage one's emotions and fathom those of others and purposely and adequately act upon them in a constructive manner (Chin et al., 2011). Spirituality and emotional intelligence are connected in the sense that both spiritual beliefs and practises and emotional intelligence can enhance management of one's own emotions and self-control in the face of the emotional outbursts of others. Spiritual practices being routine activities reinforce spiritual beliefs within oneself and an external higher power (e.g., God, Divine, Universe) increasing a sense of connectedness which in turn improves social behaviour in one's personal but also professional life. The sense of connectedness may improve the understanding of oneself and others expanding the ability to convert negative emotions into positive emotions (Arbabisarjou et al., 2016). The importance of emotion management in water diplomacy processes can be found in the way people are connected to water bodies rather than solely emphasizing on the rational/technical aspect of water diplomacy. As mentioned by Seide and Fantini (2023), the negotiations regarding the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) have shown us how the deeper layers of emotions are related to the operationalisation of the GERD.

SPIRITUAL PRACTICES IN WATER NEGOTIATIONS

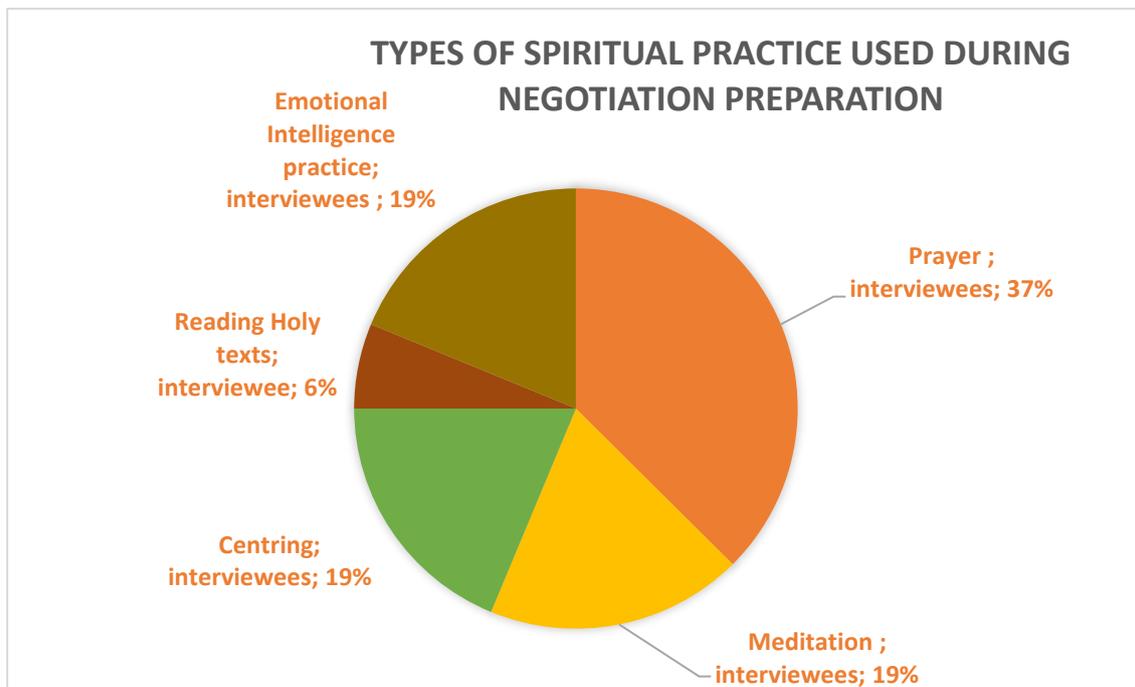
When trying to trace spiritual practices related to water negotiations, we could identify their role in two stages: the preparation of negotiations and the conducting of negotiations.

Spiritual practices in preparing for water negotiations

In our interviews, we identified two relevant aspects of negotiation preparation: first, the *preparation for the process itself* and second, the *preparation on a personal level*. Starting with the preparation for the negotiation process itself, interviewees described their preparation through collecting information on the issues, the involved persons, and familiarizing themselves with all meeting documents. For people in the role of mediator, facilitator, or independent expert, this means to get as many different perspectives as possible and to try not to formulate an opinion on the case yet, because understanding these various perspectives is critical to stay impartial when going into the first round of negotiations. Representatives of governments and national delegations, on the other hand, need to prepare in a way that they can best defend their country's interests.

The second aspect is preparation on a personal level. Many of the interviewed water diplomacy practitioners stated to use one or more spiritual practices when preparing for negotiations. The mentioned spiritual practices are *meditation, prayers, centring, emotional intelligence practices* and *reading Holy texts*. One interviewee, who is an international organization expert, stated: "Meditation helps to calm my mind and centre myself spiritually to be in control of my own emotions as much as possible during the negotiation meeting" (interview 6). Another negotiator adds "I ask the Universe for the meeting to go well. I meditate..." (interview 15). Furthermore, others would start the day of the meeting with morning prayers to give themselves a moment of silence to focus and think about their negotiation behaviour during the negotiations. "I start the day with a prayer, centre myself in the room before everyone else is in the room and I try to energetically connect with the room before the start of the meeting. Prayers are part of my routine as I do that every day. What I also do is read Holy texts to motivate me" (interview 12). Another interviewee, who is an NGO representative, notes "the thought of putting myself in other people's shoes makes it possible for me to understand where they are coming from. Moving from my own internal process to a more inclusive approach of all actors. Moving beyond myself as an individual" (Interview 10).

Figure 2. Spiritual practices during negotiation preparation as mentioned by the interviewees.



As we can see in figure 2, the spiritual practice mentioned most often by our interviewees were prayers. However, also emotional intelligence practices, meditation, and centring – which do not necessarily have a religious connotation – are used. The spiritual practices of emotional intelligence, meditation and centring are also used by the interviewees who do not consider themselves spiritual. The basis of these practices for these interviewees are found in the positive effects these practices have on their mind and overall functioning but would not necessarily associate these effects to spirituality.

Spiritual beliefs and practices in water negotiations

Meeting preparation takes place individually and thus provides space for personal routines. The use of spiritual beliefs and practices of people who consider themselves spiritual during personal preparations might seem logical and acceptable. But how is it with the negotiations itself?

Globally, the rational approach to negotiations is widely accepted and predominates. As a matter of fact, track 1 water negotiations are usually, as all diplomatic interactions, highly formalized and follow a strict protocol. Agenda and rules of interaction are set in advance. However, also in such a formalized setting, there are instances where spiritual practices are officially used.

In some river basins, religion, national law, and procedures are so intertwined that they are interchangeably used and even overlap. In other basins, indigenous communities play an important role in managing shared rivers and bring their knowledge and beliefs to the negotiation table. Therefore, in some basins religious beliefs and practices are used much more in decision-making processes than commonly assumed. This can be a religious prayer or a prayer in line with the local community's spirituality at the start of the meeting. This example was mentioned for the SADC region in southern Africa as well as for several basins in Latin America such as the Pantanal River basin and Lake Titicaca. In these basins, negotiations with indigenous groups would start referring to the local water resource and calling upon the spirits for permission, protection or ask for a fruitful negotiation process (interview 11, 14, 15).

Several of our interviewees noted the positive effect this can have:

I appreciate when the negotiation meeting starts with a prayer or call upon the river spirits for protection, this happened when the international organization I work for hosted sessions on water sources where indigenous groups live. What happened is that there was instant centring of everyone's mind into one direction and that is of mutual benefit for both humans and nature since the indigenous groups not only used the water source for drinking water purposes but also prayers and recreation. On a more personal level I try to align myself with the basin before the start of the meeting (interview 14).

Two interviewees coming from countries where religion is an important part of daily life stated that when negotiations are held in their countries, the meeting starts with a prayer reminding everybody where they come from, who guides the discussion, and what the objectives are in a religious sense.

A prayer at the start of the meeting from my own experience helps to sort of centre everyone before the start of the real negotiations. It just creates a good atmosphere in the room at the start because it brings some spirituality to the room. Whereas if you would start the meeting Western style and start immediately with the agenda points and the objectives then everybody is sort of stuck with their own emotions. So, when someone is already angry and tensed in the room and you don't centre the person then that sets the atmosphere for the discussion in the room. So basically, centring the whole room into one mindset before the start of the meeting helps to have fruitful discussions instead of angry people disagreeing with each other constantly (interview 8).

Another interviewee who is an NGO representative that guides country representatives during negotiations and helps them prepare for negotiations stated that "bringing in faith leaders to start helps to bring people's mind from the personal mindset to the collective mindset" (interview 10).

In contrast to the open and 'official' use of spiritual practices in water negotiations, many interviewees mentioned that they do not explicitly present their beliefs in front of others. There is hence also a much subtler presence and possible influence of spiritual beliefs and practises that we felt interviews might have to some extent reveal. All interviewees who consider themselves spiritual stated that they carry their beliefs with them everywhere they go, as such also in their professional work. An interviewee in the role of negotiator and mediator knew many professionals being on a spiritual path but not bringing it into their water diplomacy practice explicitly. However, implicitly they would bring in their spirituality as "one cannot just leave spirituality at the door" (interview 2). Spiritual practices that were mentioned to be

used during negotiations are silent prayers, deep breathing to control one's emotional state (especially during disagreements), transforming negative emotions into positive emotions and emotional detachment from the negotiation meeting in order to emotionally calm down before engaging in the discussion again.

Spiritual beliefs shape the personal values of the people present in the room, but these beliefs are not necessarily obvious during the meetings. One interviewee mentioned that in some regions, culture and religion (which are strongly interconnected) shape the way people interact with each other in general, how they talk to each other, both formally and informally. Similarly, indigenous communities across the globe share a close and often spiritual relation with nature. For example, indigenous communities living in the Andes consider rivers and lakes sacred entities and elements of one single community constituted by humans, nature and the divine. This cosmovision is reflected in ancestral practices used for agriculture, medicine and spiritual ceremonies. Indigenous peoples often promote eco-centric approaches to protect nature including the rights of nature and this is also shaping negotiations.

For the interviewees who do not consider themselves spiritual, respect for nature and water dominates their reasoning, which also influences their rationale during the negotiations. An example for an emotional intelligence practice mentioned by one of the interviewees of a track 1.5/2 meeting:

I've witnessed where a mediator, whom I know has a deep spiritual path of their own, stopped a meeting because there was a group of people that were stopped at several checking points while traveling. So, when they started the meeting, they were already agitated and at some point, ready to leave the meeting. So, this mediator went around the room and asked everybody 'Can you find something nice to say about somebody else in the room' and that just spun the energy and changed the energy positively in the room. And of course, that was about to happen, when you hear people on opposite sides saying nice things about each other (interview 2).

Many spoken and unspoken dynamics affect negotiations. The examples above suggest that spiritual beliefs can play both an official and a subtle role in negotiations; it is a matter of speculation as to which of these has a greater influence or is used more often.

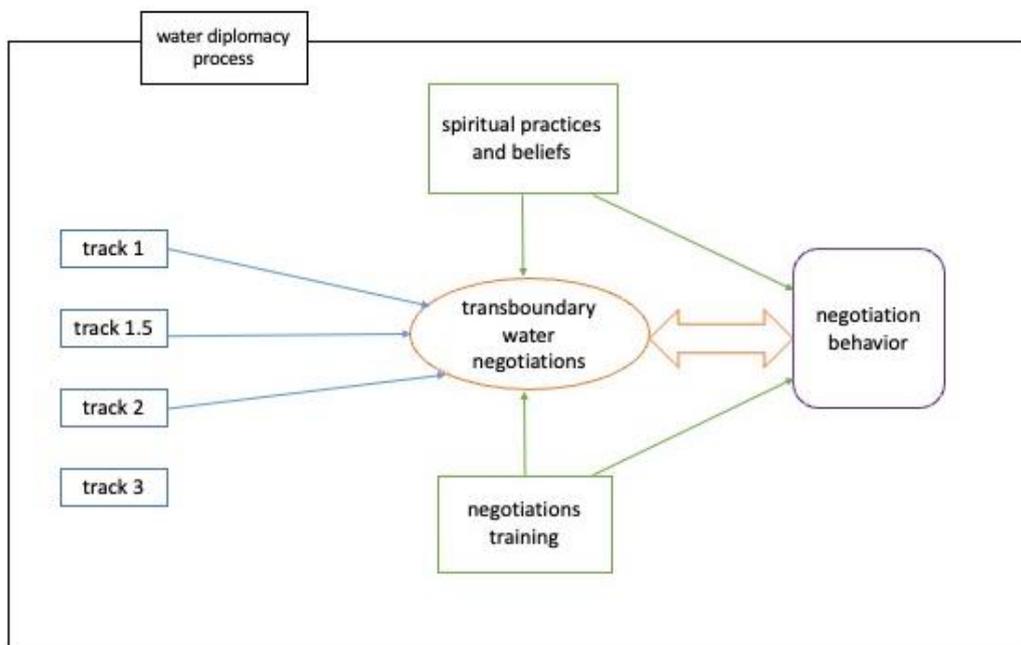
DISCUSSION

Transboundary water negotiations are a core part of water diplomacy. While they formally take place at track 1 diplomacy, they are supported by and embedded in dialogue in other diplomacy tracks. Our aim is to further deepen the understanding of water diplomacy by exploring whether spiritual beliefs and practises shape transboundary water negotiations. Figure 3 maps out the interrelations between the spiritual beliefs and practises, the transboundary water negotiations, and negotiation behaviour. We understand both the concrete negotiation situation as well as the negotiation behaviour as being influenced by both deliberate and unconscious choices of the involved actor on the strategies and behaviour they use. Above results have shown that – at least for people who consider themselves spiritual – spirituality is one of these factors that have an impact on their negotiation behaviour. Another important factor is the *negotiation training* (education) in transboundary water negotiations. The training water diplomacy practitioners receive, co-shapes the setting of water negotiations and determines the starting point of these people based on their gained knowledge during the training. For this reason, spiritual practises and beliefs together with the negotiation training influence *negotiation behaviour* of the people involved in transboundary water negotiations and vice versa, negotiation behaviour influences the process of water negotiations as well.

Water diplomats' level of education and negotiation training affects the knowledge and tools they bring to the negotiating table. All interviewees mentioned that they had a traditional negotiation education in terms of the negotiation setting, the procedures to follow, the *modus operandi*. They are trained in understanding the different stages and aspects of the negotiation process itself, how to set up

a negotiations meeting, both the process and the physical components, identify mutually acceptable results, look at the process to define the benefits and the more and the less tangible ones; how to pursue interest-based negotiations instead of position-based negotiations, win-win oriented instead of win-lose oriented; etc. Another aspect of negotiation training is usually how to use the details about their own delegation’s position, how to try to think about the position of the counterpart and what could possibly matter to them, and importantly how to find common ground in negotiations. An interesting finding of this research is that approximately two third of the interviewees said that spiritual aspects were not considered in their negotiation education. At the time of the negotiation education spiritual practises and beliefs were not seen as a part of the modus operandi in water diplomacy processes. As the interviewees who consider themselves spiritual, grew in their career as water diplomacy practitioners, spirituality became an important part of them as individuals. Since spirituality is usually regarded as an individual, personal affair separated from the professional sphere and rational decision-making, negotiators are traditionally not taught how to be reflective about it and its impacts. Even less are they taught if and how to make use of their spiritual beliefs and practices, an approach that requires to see them as tool that may enhance the negotiation process and not as a burden or a blockage to reach mutual agreement beneficial to all parties. Many interviewees mentioned that their realization of alternative ways to approach water negotiations has been growing with experience.

Figure 3. The role of spiritual beliefs and practices in water diplomacy.



Our research has shown that there is spirituality in water diplomacy, even so the study is too explorative to assess the extent. And if it is there, the next question arises: what is its impact? Does or could we expect it to play a positive role in water diplomacy? This was not the main aim of our study, but we want to reflect here on some indications. Our interviewees who accept the concept of spirituality – hence that this exists for some people even if not for them, claim to move beyond rational factors when dealing with the differences of people to have a fruitful negotiation. Moreover, they are of the opinion that spiritual people have some kind of connection with something/someone bigger than themselves which influences how they respect water since water is part of most (if not all) faith traditions. Besides, they argue that spirituality matters especially when one party raises something that might agitate the other party as it helps to de-escalate the situation to see calm people in the room, because witnessing people trying to

have a constructive approach towards the issue is contagious in a positive sense. An important statement was made by arguing that when someone's spiritual, cultural, or religious background is used well, it helps in keeping the peace during the meeting and helps to increase patience in the room (interview 6). One interviewee also felt that the presence of faith within the background of people and actually celebrating each other's faith traditions helps in the process (interview 10). Interviewees involved in negotiations where representatives of indigenous communities take part, have observed that spiritual practices such as giving thanks to Mother Earth at the start of the meeting influence the course of negotiations and dialogue. They explain their impact with ensuring that both water as a resource and as a crucial element of indigenous spirituality is considered in negotiations and dialogue. Another interviewee suggests that when people get together and celebrate with each other, the connection between them becomes stronger. Faith traditions are there, and they are very diverse, so the more we become familiar with each other's traditions and values the more it helps in how people understand each other within negotiations. Most interviewees cited the benefits of bringing a spiritual practice or approach into situations where there are disagreements or conflicts, as this reminds participants that what they have in common outweighs what divides them. Mediators and facilitators can bring in spiritual practices consciously in track 1.5 dialogues as they have a more leading role and more freedom there. Interestingly, many of these insights on the positive effects of including spiritual practices were only shared by the interviewees that have been exposed to negotiations and dialogue with indigenous communities or representatives. This makes it clear that spirituality related to indigenous communities is often unknown to negotiators that are not involved in these types of negotiations. For many, therefore, not much is known about the reality of indigenous spiritual beliefs and practices and how much they influence negotiations and dialogue in some parts of the world (interview 14,15). Decolonizing water diplomacy and bringing in other perspectives and voices is therefore an important step towards a better and non-Western-dominated understanding of water negotiations and development of new negotiation training curricula.

This positive impact of spirituality on negotiations mentioned by the interviews would be worth to be further explored in future research. There were also interviewees who mentioned the downside of spirituality. They stated that sometimes culture, religion or spirituality is used by negotiators as a justification for an outcome not to happen. The question arises whether these people really believe it or if it just makes a good argument. Lastly, in some cases the history between countries plays a bigger role which affects trust between country delegations leaving less room for spirituality to enhance the negotiation process.

Our explorative research indicates that it is beyond question whether spirituality is present in water negotiations or not. The short answer is yes. Yes, but it is often only subtly present because of the perception that the dominant rational approach in transboundary water negotiations does not leave much space for people to include their personal beliefs and practices. Nevertheless, water diplomacy practitioners carry their spirituality, if they have such beliefs and practices, wherever they go. This means that there is often no visible use of spiritual practices in water negotiations, but they may be apparent in the way spiritual people treat others, the way they connect with others as spiritual beings, listening with their whole body, always treating others with respect, even when they are not always being respected themselves. Water diplomats do explicitly bring their spirituality into negotiations where Indigenous people have a recognised role or in countries where religion plays a formal role. This is overlooked by much of the literature and not considered in usual negotiation trainings. Spiritual practices can occur at different stages of a negotiation process: prior to a negotiation, where negotiators might start a meeting with an offering or a prayer, during the negotiation itself where a facilitator might invite participants to take pauses, to breathe or to reflect on specific values, and finally after the negotiation where delegates might express gratitude for the agreements reached quoting sacred books.

CONCLUSION

This paper asked if and how spiritual beliefs and practices play a role in water diplomacy processes, a field usually portrayed as highly formalized and depending on strategic interests and rational negotiations, separated from personal emotions, worldviews, and beliefs. We conducted 15 qualitative interviews with water diplomacy practitioners in different roles taking part in track 1, track 1.5 and track 2 water diplomacy processes. The results show that indeed spirituality plays a role in the water diplomacy setting: This is the case during the preparation phase on a personal level, where different types of spiritual practices were used by some of our interviewees – and interestingly by those who define themselves as spiritual as well as not. These practices include prayers, meditation, self-centring and emotional intelligence practises such as active listening, self-awareness and emotion management. During the negotiation process itself, spiritual practices are more implicit and used internally: This was the case for interviewees who mentioned detachment from the room in order to transform negative emotions into positive emotions before making themselves part of the discussion again. The interviewees with a spiritual background stated that they had less contribution to creating conflict situations during these negotiations and try to convert negative emotions into more positive emotions reminding themselves of the win-win result at the end of the negotiation. There are also settings where spiritual practices are deliberately included in the negotiation agenda, e.g.; with opening prayers.

While our interview results are not representative, they show that spiritual practices do supplement more commonly described, 'rational' approaches to water negotiations, such as optimizing benefits or interest-based bargaining, even if it might be only at a relatively small scale. However, spiritual knowledge has been here since ancient times and still plays a role especially in the countries of the Global South. They can help us to develop water diplomacy approaches that balance individualism vis-à-vis community in the sense that understanding the collective needs is considered more important compared to one's own (Wolf, 2008). This might help humankind to move beyond the 'I' aspect and move closer to the 'we' aspect of resources distribution. For water diplomacy practitioners, the idea that humankind and nature are closely (and spiritually) interlinked could help finding alternative solutions to many current environmental challenges.

Spiritual practices are not simple tools that can be applied without the necessary contexts and randomly; more importantly, spiritual beliefs can be instrumentalized for political purposes. Nevertheless, in our view, water negotiation processes – where the wellbeing of people and nature are at stake – could considerably benefit from a better understanding of both the open and subtle spiritual practices that can be part of them. While our research only has been based on 15 interviews, further research could give more insights on possible positive (and negative) aspects of spirituality in water diplomacy processes, as well as how and which spiritual practices could be integrated in specific processes and settings to expand our approaches for conflict resolution in water diplomacy. This paper has been a first attempt to show the presence of spirituality in water diplomacy processes. Thus far, based on the foregoing discussion using interview data regarding the use of spiritual practices in the preparation of negotiation meetings and during the negotiations; we can draw a few lessons that we think may bolster effective negotiations: (1) Negotiators' internal spiritual practices may allow for less negative reactions during negotiation processes but more active listening and 'win-win' negotiations; (2) as the experience of parts of the world where indigenous communities/representatives take part in negotiations or dialogue and bring in their indigenous knowledge shows, there are other ways to facilitate negotiations than the Western way only, and openness towards other approaches can expand the usual negotiation/mediation 'toolbox'. Creating more room for spirituality in the negotiation setting could give negotiators with a spiritual background more space to have their spiritual beliefs and practices respected. This can unlock new ways of negotiating in the hope of creating more equity in the allocation of water resources. With the number of conflicts and disasters we see every day, this approach gives us hope for a better future.

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