

# Celebrating the INTANGIBLE VALUE OF WATER

A compendium of unique practices





A word cloud of country names on a dark blue background. The words are arranged in a roughly triangular shape, with 'Japan' at the top and 'China' at the bottom. The colors of the words vary, including shades of green, yellow, orange, and cyan. The font is a clean, sans-serif typeface.

Japan  
Malian  
India  
New Zealand  
Cambodia  
Australia  
China  
Netherlands  
Armenia  
Thailand



Damnoen Saduak Floating Market – Bangkok  
Image credit: Bangkok tourism



“

The earth, the air, the land and the water are not an inheritance from our forefathers but on loan from our children. So, we have to hand over to them at least as it was handed over to us.

”

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi



Songkran – New Year festival in Thailand, Image credit: Encyclopedia Britannica



## **Title**

Celebrating the Intangible Value of Water - A compendium of unique examples

## **Publisher**

National Institute of Urban Affairs (NIUA), Ministry of Housing & Urban Affairs, GoI  
National Mission for Clean Ganga (NMCG), Ministry of Jal Shakti, GoI

## **Acknowledgements**

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## **Graphics, Illustrations and Images**

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Cover Image - pixahive

## **Year of Publication**

2022

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Perhaps no other natural resource is as significant as water in the path to sustainable development. Achieving water security is, therefore, a top priority for governments across the world, through various policies, plans, and projects. It is important that such initiatives acknowledge and leverage on the intangible value of water as a means to enhance the overall water security of the region.

The intangible value of water is found in almost every country through unique cultures, traditions, festivals, and rituals. This underscores the intrinsic place of water in society, far beyond merely being a source of meeting basic human needs. As the adage goes, what we cherish, we value, and what we value, we protect. Leveraging on the intangible value of water can, therefore, serve as a sound strategy to ensure its judicious use.

This compendium highlights unique examples from different corners of the world where the intangible value of water is celebrated through customs, traditions, festivals, and beliefs.

All data, information, and pictures are from secondary sources, and have been cited appropriately wherever required.



# Celebrating the arrival of floods The water festival in Cambodia

Image credit: tripsavy.com

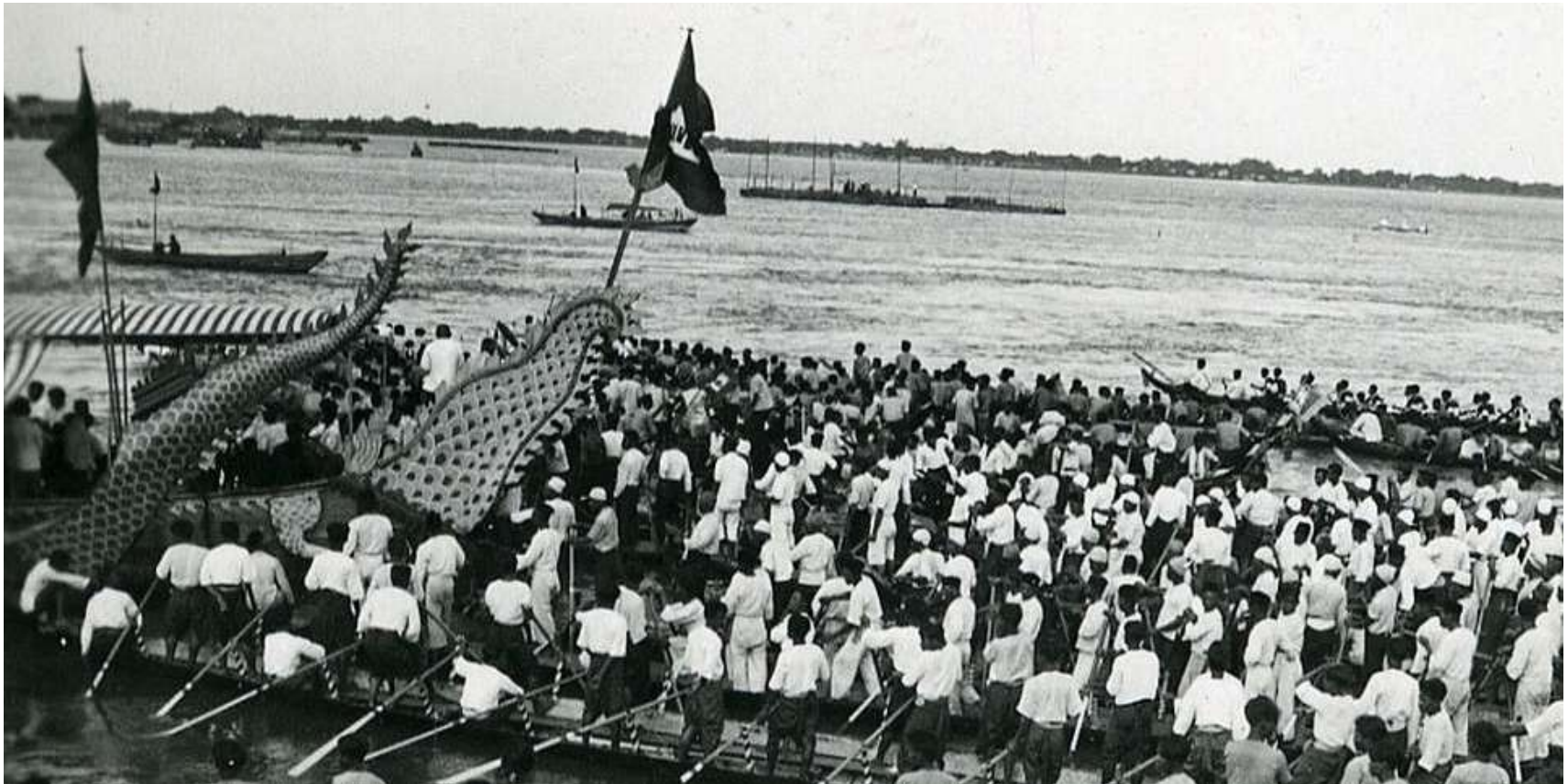
The Cambodian Water Festival (Bon Om Touk) is celebrated with great enthusiasm and gusto on the full moon of the Buddhist month of Kadeuk. This is to mark a major natural occurrence where there is reversing of flow between the Tonle Sap Lake and the Mekong River.

The water from the Tonle Sap Lake flows into the Mekong River for most part of the year. However, when the rainy season arrives in June, the Mekong rises and the flow is reversed. Between June and November (while the rainy season lasts), the river flows into the lake, increasing its size by almost ten times. After November, the Mekong drops once more, and the water from the Lake flows back into the River.



Tonle Sap is a very significant and important lake in Cambodia. It is a source of livelihood for a large number of fishermen and farmers alike. It has a large and diverse stock of fish, and the silt deposits left by the floods fertilize the fields. The Bon Om Touk Water Festival is celebrated in November to thank the Mekong for revitalizing the Lake.

The festival was first celebrated in the 12th century during the reign of Angkorian King Jayavarman VII to officially kick off the Cambodian fishing season. The locals believe that the festivities keep the river Gods happy, ensuring a bountiful harvest of rice and fish for the year to come.



The festival is celebrated over three full days, and is attended by people from across the country. Foreign tourists also find this a good time to visit the country. All schools and offices are closed during this period, allowing people to celebrate whole heartedly. It is estimated that more than a million Cambodians gather at the river banks to celebrate. Those who cannot find hotel rooms often just camp out along the streets.

In Siem Reap and Phnom Penh, the primary attractions of the festival are the colourful racing boats brightly painted, often with eyes drawn on the prow to protect against evil. For the first two days, races are run with two boats each, with the big race happening on the last day, when all the boats take to the river to compete.



A special cake called Dal Om Bok, a traditional Cambodian rice dish consisting of rice fried in its husk, then pounded with a pestle and mixed with banana and coconut is only made at this time of year. People assemble at the pagodas just before midnight to eat this.

In the evenings, the festivities continue with carnival rides, traditional music performances, and dances.







Activities during 'Bon Om Touk' festival, Image credit: Khmer times



# Elevating a river to a God-like status

## The Holy River Ganges in India



Image credit: PixaHive

In India, the Ganges is much more than a river. It is worshiped as Goddess. According to the 'Vishnu Purana,' the River was created from the sweat of Lord Vishnu's feet. Hence, it is also called Vishmupadi—the one flowing from the foot of Lord Vishnu.

The Ganges flows 2,525 kilometers from its origin in the Himalaya mountains to the Bay of Bengal where it empties out. The Ganges Basin spans over a million square kilometers. It has the highest population of any river basin in the world, home to more than 400 million people.

The mouth of river forms the world's largest delta, better known as the Sunderbans, which was declared a World Heritage Site by UNESCO in 1997. It covers more than 105,000 square kilometers.



The Ganges - winding 1,560 miles across northern India, from the Himalaya Mountains to the Indian Ocean, the Ganges River is not a sacred place: it is a sacred entity. Known as Ganga Ma—Mother Ganges—the river is revered as a goddess whose purity cleanses the sins of the faithful and aids the dead on their path towards heaven.

In a country where practically everything in nature is venerated, the Ganges is most holy. Considering the magnitude of her life-sustaining force, it's no wonder: her mighty course from the mountains to the sea creates a river basin 200 to 400 miles wide that supports nearly half a billion people.



Along the Ganges and its tributaries lie several archaeological sites, national heritage sites, and world heritage sites such as Nanda Devi Wildlife Sanctuary, Valley of Flowers National Park and the Taj Mahal, one of the seven wonders of the world.

On the banks of the Ganges are some of the world's greatest pilgrimage sites like Rishikesh, Haridwar, Varanasi, and Prayagraj, which are visited by millions of people from every corner of the world as part of their cultural and spiritual beliefs.

The river, along with two other sites, is the venue for the extraordinary Kumbh Mela festival and ritual, since at least the 7th century CE. Held every three years, pilgrims of all social status take a dip in the river with the belief to purify the body and soul, wash away karma, and bring good fortune. The event has a footfall of almost 100 million people, and grows bigger each time. It is widely considered to be the largest human gathering in history.



Sadhu offering prayer to holy river Ganga, Image credit: Butterfield.com



The story behind the Kumbh Mela is found in several of the Hindu texts. As per the story, one day the Gods decided to churn the primordial ocean of milk in order to procure a pot (the kumbha) of the nectar of immortality which lay at the bottom. They enlisted the help of the demons for this task, promising them a share of the nectar.

Together they churned the ocean for one thousand years. When the pot began to surface, the demons conspired to steal the pot and not share any of the nectar with the Gods. The Gods and demons fought for the pot for twelve days and twelve nights.

After the pot of nectar emerged from the sea, Jayant, the son of Indra, ran away with the pot in order to prevent the demons from stealing it. As he ran, he stopped to rest four times. In each place, drops of the nectar fell to the earth, landing in four locations: Haridwar, Ujjain, Nashik and Allahabad. These are the venues for the Kumbh Mela. The main event of the Kumbh Mela is bathing in the river Ganga which is believed to contain these drops of the nectar of immortality.



People taking a dip during Kumbh at Prayagraj, Image credit: mahakumbhfestival.com/

There is a dedicated festival organized every year to celebrate and revere the Ganges River. It is called the Ganga Mahotsav, or Ganga Megafestival.

It is celebrated for a period of five days to acknowledge and hail the various facets of Ganga. The city of Varanasi hosts this festival, which is attended by tourists and pilgrims from world-over. A number of activities are organized as part of the festivities, which include a crafts fair, traditional sports competitions, classical and folk dance performances, among others.

A major highlight of the festival is the Ganga Aarti that takes place in the evenings at Dashashwamedh Ghat. In the mornings, tourists and pilgrims do Surya namaskars on the ghats and take dips in the Holy River to sanctify their body, mind and soul.









Activities in River Ganga at Varanasi, Image credit: Butterfield.com

# Interfacing tradition and modernity

## The Niger River Festival in Mali



Image credit: Culturetrip

Mali is one of the largest countries in Africa, but has a relatively small population that is largely settled along the Niger River.

The River is the lifeline for large parts of the country. Each year it floods the Inner Niger Delta in Mali, thereby providing fisheries and water for agriculture and household use, on which almost 1.5 Million people and millions of migratory waterbirds depend.

The river and its micro climate houses a variety of flora-fauna providing a healthy biodiversity and livelihood opportunity for the communities. Fishing is an important activity along the length of the river system, especially during the dry season when the deep-sea and coastal fish catch is smallest.

The settlement and communities at the bank of Niger river also benefit from the fantastic agricultural opportunities the basin provides.



The communities along the bank of River Niger from various cultures including Bozo and Bamana troops from the Markala region, gather every year for their annual festival. The local craft and its traditional fixture like masks and puppets, Tinde Tuaregs are also showcased. Locals pay their tribute to the river and celebrate its kinship with them through this festival.

The festival witnesses a mix of religious and cultural events, mythological rituals and modern musical dramas. Also gathering along the river's edge for this popular festival are Mali's top musicians, artists, craftsmen, traditional dance and puppet troops from across the country, to celebrate Mali's diverse cultures in the ancient Bambara capital and offer their reverence to the river for taking care of its people.





A tribal women participating in Niger fest with her family, Image credit: [transitionsabroad.com](https://www.transitionsabroad.com)

# Fighting for a personhood status for a river The Whanganui River in New Zealand



For the first time in Human history – in New Zealand, the country's lawmakers have granted a river the legal rights of a human. The legislation marks a monumental victory for the local Māori people, who view the river as "an indivisible and living whole". For Whanganui tribe it has been a long, hard battle, to earn legal recognition of the river, which is known by the Māori as Te Awa Tupua.

The Whanganui River acts as the cultural epicentre of New Zealand.

"The great River flows from the mountains to the sea. I am the River, the River is me". With these words, the Maori tribes of Whanganui, New Zealand, declare their inseverable connection to their ancestral river.

Legislation in New Zealand dictates that the Whanganui River is a living entity and a legal person. In March 2017, the Whanganui River became the first river in the world to be given the same legal rights as a human being.



Whanganui River, New Zealand Image credit: , Image credit: Newzealandtourism

The path to attaining personhood status for the river took almost 160 years to achieve. In 1840, fourteen Maori chiefs along the Whanganui River signed the Treaty of Waitangi with the government. This treaty guaranteed the Maoris the possession and control of their lands, estates, forests, river and fisheries. However, the government breached the Treaty and the tribes lost the legal and actual control over their river, its navigation and use of river-based resources. The government initiated activities such as river bed works to improve navigability, gravel extraction, and the diversion of waters for a hydro-electric power scheme. The Whanganui Maori objected to these for many years.

Over the next 100 years, many activities that were detrimental to the river were carried out. Whanganui tribes fought the changes and petitioned parliament.

In 1988, the Whanganui River Maori Trust Board was established to negotiate the settlement of Whanganui tribes Treaty claims over the Whanganui River. In 1990, a claim was lodged with the Waitangi Tribunal on behalf of all Whanganui tribes.

The Whanganui River Claims Settlement Bill was passed on the 16th of March 2017. This paved the way for the river to be granted a person status, and provided full and final settlement of claims of Whanganui tribes in relation to the Whanganui River.



Local communities participating in events at Whanganui River, New Zealand , Image credit: Newzealandtourism





Local celebrating the river , Image credit: Newzealandtourism



Becoming one with the ocean  
The Torres Strait Islanders of Australia

Image credit: Culturetrip

The Torres Strait is a strait between Australia and the Melanesian island of New Guinea. Torres Strait Islander people are predominantly Melanesians, culturally most alike to the coastal peoples of Papua New Guinea. Thus they are regarded as being distinct from Aboriginal peoples of Australia. There are also two Torres Strait Islander communities on the nearby coast of the mainland, Bamaga and Seisia.

Water is core to life for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Protecting and managing water is a custodial and intergenerational responsibility.





Torres Strait islanders describe themselves as “saltwater people”. The personal and cultural identity of people are dependent on the sea. The islanders regard the inland waters, rivers, wetlands, sea, islands, reefs, sandbars and sea grass beds as an inseparable part of their estates. Torres Strait islanders do not consider land and sea as separate spheres, or define the sea to purely economic resources.

To most what may appear as undifferentiated patches of coral and salt water are the Islanders’ exclusive untapped marine domains. These are vast intricate timeless assets, an integral part of the Islanders often depicted in spiritual books, writings, language, song lines, stories, sacred places.

The sea is intrinsically linked to the Torres Strait Melanesian culture. A large part of the cultural values, social ideologies, birth and death is associated with the mythology and marine life related to the sea.







# Case 6



Bringing water at the centre of a vibrant public life  
The Amsterdam Canals, Netherlands

Image credit: Amsterdam.nl

Water has always been a prominent feature in Amsterdam's landscape. More than a quarter of the surface area of the city is water and it plays a big part of culture in the city.

Living on the water has been an image associated with Dutch cities since decades. The country is not only located in low lying areas but also historically associated with sea trade. Thus, water has always influenced the housing typology, lifestyle, traditions and growth of the Dutch cities.

The current Dutch landscape which is marked by waterside living, floating houses, active waterfronts alongside integration of water management into spatial planning, highlights the confluence of innovation and experiments with traditions.





Amsterdam's historic canal belt was named a UNESCO World Heritage site in 2010 and provides a perfect setting for large city wide festivals and bringing people together.

Canals in the city are seen as very active spaces and host large number of events around/in them. One of these is the Amsterdam City Swim, which is held yearly to raise money for ALS research.

The canals are the city's focal point for city celebrations, from the orange-clad madness of King's Day to Amsterdam Gay Pride which is the world's only waterborne gay pride festival. Additionally, the Grachten festival (Classical music canal festival) and the Amsterdam Light Festival with dazzling projections and installations reflecting in the rippling waters, highlight the incredible value these canals provide to the city and its citizens.



Festivals celebrated along the Canal, Image credit: National Geographic





Active use of Canals as integral part of all festivals, Image Credit: Pixabay



# Welcoming the new year with water fights The Songkran Festival in Thailand

Image credit: Culturetrip

Songkran Festival is Thailand's most famous festival, celebrated across the country to mark the beginning of the New Year. The celebration lasts between 3 to 10 days, depending on the area where it is celebrated. The name Songkran comes from a Sanskrit word meaning 'passing' or 'moving on'.

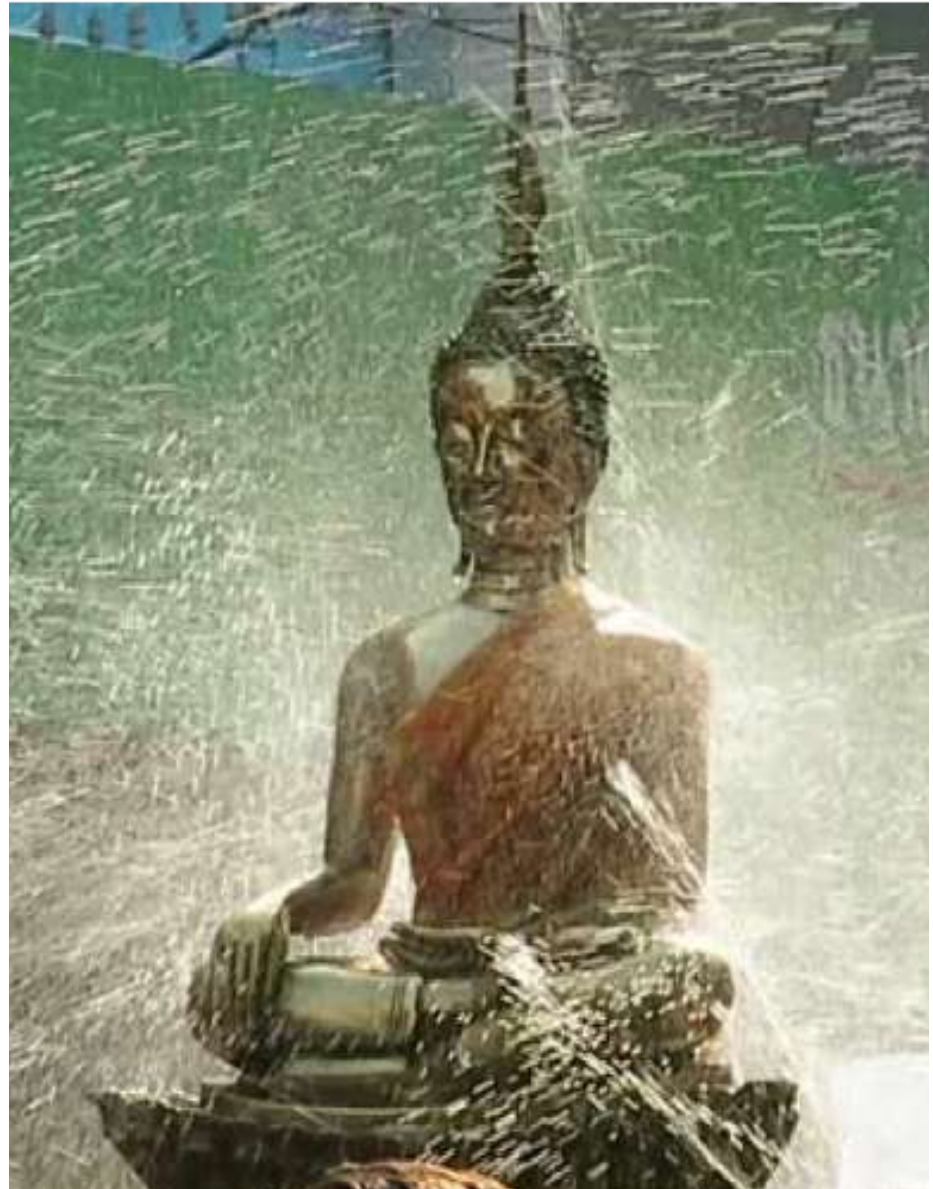
It is a celebration that embraces goodwill, love, compassion, and thankfulness, using water as the primary means of expression.

The festival embodies three major values of the Thai life. These are:

Value of family: It is the time for family members to come together to show appreciation, love and respect to each others, as well as pay homage to their ancestors.

Value of society: Community celebration is intrinsic to the festival. People are encouraged to forgive and forget their grievances and grudges with each other in order to enhance goodwill and unity in the society.

Value of religion: It is the time when people reiterate their commitment to their religion, and carry out a number of religious activities and rituals.





A number of activities and rituals are carried out to celebrate Songkran, differing from place to place.

People clean their houses and public places such as temples, schools, offices to welcome the New Year with cleanliness and a fresh start.

Releasing birds and fish back to their natural habitats is a common practice during Songkran. This act of giving freedom is a form of merry making

Water is poured on the images of Lord Buddha as an auspicious act of reverence and worship.

Water is also sprinkled on elders and monks as an act of gratitude, devotion, and respect. Such practices reflect the value water has in the traditions and culture of the country.



Water sprinkled on the hands of elders as a mark of respect, Source: Tevaprapas

Perhaps the most popular aspect of the festival is the water fights. Songkran is often referred to as the biggest water fight in the world. Traditionally, Thais would politely pour a bowl of water on members of the family, their close friends and neighbours. As Songkran has taken a more festive note, a bowl has become a bucket, garden hose and water guns, and the spirit of holiday merriment is shared among all town residents and tourists.

In several places, elephants are seen splashing water on the people, making the celebration even more memorable.

The water fight breaks all sorts of economical, age and gender barriers by bringing all people to the streets for celebrations.



Water fight on streets during the Festival, Image credit: Wanderlust Magazine





Festivities on streets with water centric celebration, Image credit: Reuters



Celebrating the Goddess of Water  
The Vardavar Festival in Armenia

Image credit: iheartradio.ca



Similar to the Songkran Festival in Thailand, Vardavar is a festival in Armenia where people celebrate with water by pouring and drenching each other with it. This ancient festival was traditionally associated with Pagan Mythology and was later adapted by the church such that its date each summer comes 98 days—14 weeks—after Easter.

The ancient festival is traditionally associated with the deity Astghik, who was the goddess of water, beauty, love, and fertility. It is said that the people who end the day having been splashed with water, are cleansed of dirt and corruption.

Most recently, it's been promoted as a unique public holiday in Armenia, a day mostly about nature, so it's always celebrated in nature. People go out for picnics to celebrate on the grass, in the nature, in the forest, near the spring water and play with water.







Spreading love by pouring water, Image credit: udreamstime



# Case 9

Honoring a river with paper art  
The world class intangible heritage of Ningxia  
papercut in China



Image credit: Britannica

The Yellow River is the root and soul of Chinese traditional culture. The Chinese do not consider it just a river but believe it to be a symbol of humanity and spirituality, bearing burdens (its sedimentation), adaptation (its course changes), and perseverance (its continual flow).

It is one of the most important water resource for the dry north of China, playing an irreplaceable role in economic development and agriculture.

The River not only supports the livelihoods of the people that depend on it but also nurtures the local tradition, and influences many special cultures along its course.

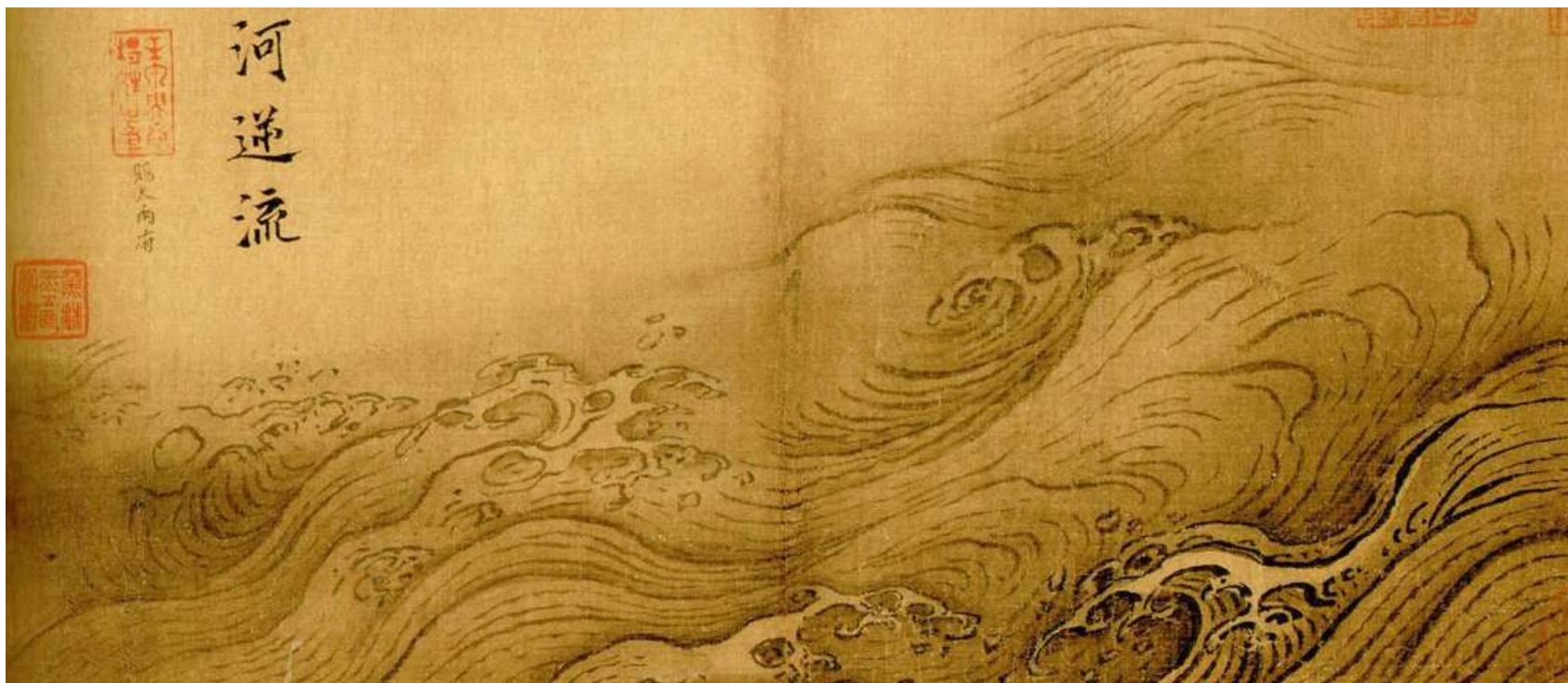


The Yellow River and its harsh geographic terrain, Image credit: Britanica

The River runs through Ningxia province and has great influence on its culture. For thousands of years, the Yellow River has been admired by great poets, artists, and common folk in the province. Most of the cultural and spiritual works that have emerged from the province vividly reflects the nature and daily life around the river.

One such art form that has been influenced by the river is the Ningxia papercut, which has its own value in terms of representing regional culture. China's paper-cutting was listed as a world class intangible cultural heritage in 2009.

The design and pattern reflect the popular farmers culture in the Yellow River basin. Subjects of the patterns often originate from plants and vegetables in life, twelve zodiac animals, red double happiness letters (Shuang xi), tamed birds, beast, fish, flowers, etc. , all of which are found in the Yellow River Basin.



The papercuts have traditionally been categorized under five themes. These include folk stories, rural life in the new era, red culture, literature, and desert culture.

Contemporary themes use the art form to focus on core values for the country that include prosperity, democracy, civilization, harmony, freedom, justice, patriotism, integrity, and kindness.









Different paper cut forms depicting daily life in Yellow River, Image Credit: Chinahao



# Case 10



A river procession fit for the Gods  
The Tenjin Matsuri in Japan

Image credit: [allabout-japan.com](http://allabout-japan.com)

The Tenjin Matsuri (Festival) of Osaka is among Japan's top three festivals, along with the Gion Matsuri of Kyoto and the Kanda Matsuri of Tokyo.

The Tenjin Matsuri, which literally means “Festival of the Gods”. is held at the famous Tenmangu Shrine in Osaka and honors the deity Sugawara Michizane, the God of Learning.

The festival begins by ceremoniously inviting the deity out of the shrine and parading him through the city, carrying out various exuberant festivities to entertain him, before taking him back to the shrine.

The Tenjin Matsuri is special in the it celebrates water and the city together. The festival culminates into a river procession, which is among the highlights of the event. The purpose is to convey gratitude to the Osaka River in the form of two mikoshi (portable shrines, which are loaded onto boats as the procession moves onto the water.



The river procession starts around 6 pm in the evening, when the participants climb on to the boats that are paraded up and down the river.

In addition to the procession boats, there are some "stage boats" on which traditional dance performances are conducted for the benefit of the audience on the shores of the river. Seemingly endless rows of festival food stalls along the river contribute to the joyful mood.

The river procession continues until about 7:30 pm, after which there is a fireworks show until 9 p.m. While this may not be among the most outstanding firework displays in Japan, the fireworks of the Tenjin Matsuri, combined with the illuminated boats and their reflections off the river, make for a truly unique spectacle.











Saryu Ghat at Ayodhya, Image credit: uptourism







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