Part Two

Differing Cultural Approaches to Property Rights in Natural Resources
Chapter 9

Elusive Forms: Materiality and Cultural Diversity in the Ownership of Water

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With the aim of contributing to anthropological debates about ownership and appropriation, this chapter proposes several related ideas. Building on the precept that human-environmental engagements are mutually constitutive, it suggests that it would be fruitful to pay closer attention to the relationship between notions of ownership and the material qualities of the things that people attempt to own. In doing so, it draws on a wider set of theories about the dialectical nature of human-environmental interactions¹ and the imaginative use of the material characteristics of the world in formulating metaphors, conceptual schemes, and categories.² In relation to concepts of property, it extends these ideas to observe that the fluidity of water enables – indeed necessitates – commensurately fluid notions and processes of owning.

A more phenomenological approach to ownership highlights the artificial fixity of legal notions of property, placing “ways of owning” in spatial and temporal flows of production and consumption, social and economic exchanges, and environmental change. It brings to the fore alternate claims of ownership, not based on legal property rights but processually formed through the acquisition of knowledge, through creative processes of identity construction, through the accumulation of aesthetic and emotional attachments to place, and through imaginative and physical engagements with material environments. Drawing on the anthropological canon, and on recent ethnographic research,³ this chapter

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