

## Editorial

# Anthropological Perspectives on Covid-19

This thematic volume of *Issues in Ethnology and Anthropology* originated from a panel entitled “Anthropological Perspectives on the COVID Pandemic: Impacts on Society, Culture, Public Policy and Governance, and Lessons for the Future”, which was part of the 2021 IUAES Yucatan Congress, held in Mexico.

The Congress, on the theme of “Heritages, Global Interconnections in a Possible World”, was held online from 9 to 13 November 2021. It was jointly organized by the International Union of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences (IUAES) and the World Anthropological Union (WAU), and hosted by the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM).

The Congress witnessed the participation of 993 anthropologists from 69 countries across all continents (with Mexico, Brazil, USA, India, and Argentina being the most represented countries). The event featured 97 thematic panels, 798 papers, 18 roundtables, as well as 21 film and 19 book presentations.

The open panel on which this special issue is based (Panel 45) was entitled “Anthropological Perspectives on the COVID Pandemic: Impacts on Society, Culture, Public Policy and Governance, and Lessons for the Future”, and was co-organized by Thomas Reuter, Soumendra M. Patnaik, Fadwa El Guindi, Vesna Vučinić Nešković, and Carmen Rial. The panel was sponsored by the World Anthropological Union (WAU), the IUAES Commission on Anthropology, Public Policy and Development Practice, and the WCAA Global Cultural Policies Task Force.

The Covid-19 pandemic has been a highly disruptive global crisis, touching nearly all aspects of human existence and changing many policy assumptions in transnational perspectives. Anthropologists witnessed these impacts first hand across many countries, while mainstream media reports focused primarily on the spread of the disease, public health measures and the impact on economic life in western countries. Other dimensions of the pandemic such as the emergence of new socialities and inequalities, social disarticulation, the changing role of family and kinship and the transformed domestic and professional spaces mediated through technology, especially in developing countries, were largely ignored. The panel critically reflected on the experiences of people in multiple locations and from diverse anthropological perspectives to extract lessons for future crises. Participants examined the impacts the pandemic had and the structural injustices that were revealed by it. They looked at ways it transformed the family, community, social and cultural lives of those affected, as well as their perceptions of the

sustainability crisis, climate change, food security, education, politics and public policy. The studies aimed to inform more balanced policies and public debate on how to meet this and other potential crises, bringing anthropological insights to bear on the challenges humanity is set to encounter in the future.

The panel was comprised of eleven papers presented in three sessions on November 11 by scholars from Australia, Brazil, Canada, India, Mexico, Spain, and the USA. The first session included four papers. Thomas Reuter (The University of Melbourne) discussed social and environmental justice as the most effective disaster impact mitigation. Gordon Mathews (The Chinese University of Hong Kong) explored why facemasks have been worn more often in East Asia and less in the West, looking beyond the degree of exposure to recent epidemics and the labeling of societies as more “collectivistic” or “individualistic”. Nilika Mehrotra (Jawaharlal Nehru University) examined the role of the state in addressing the food security needs of the disabled, arguing that Covid-19 exacerbated socio-economic and health inequalities in India’s food systems. Rachel S. Mathew (Indian Anthropological Association) revealed how, in the Indian Diaspora in Dubai, a new social matrix emerged in household dynamics, family and social relationships, educational systems, and government policies regarding travel and the stay of expatriates as well as their eligibility for work.

The second session started with the presentation by Aribam Bijayasundari Devi (Harisingh Gour Vishwavidyalaya) on social stigma and discrimination surrounding the Covid-19 in India, with focus on how racial and religious minorities, frontline health workers, and infected individuals were affected. Soumendra M. Patnaik (University of Delhi) explored management and governance strategies during the pandemic in the state of Odisha, analyzing its response to the Indian central government programs. Cristina Larrea Killinger (University of Barcelona) investigated food supply practices of the elderly in Spain’s autonomous communities of Catalonia, Valencia and Andalusia, examining their food purchasing and storage habits, shopping patterns, and the support they received from family, informal networks and institutions. Carmen Rial (Federal University of Santa Catarina) turned her attention to the use of the pandemic as a biopower weapon and its role in perpetuating inequality in Brazil. She highlighted the vulnerability of marginalized groups, such as Amazonian Indians, slum dwellers and black domestic workers who contracted the disease from upper social strata employers.

In the third session, Susanna Barnes (University of Saskatchewan) presented her paper exploring beliefs and attitudes towards infectious diseases in Timor-Leste. She argued that understanding the cultural dimension of infectious diseases is crucial for developing effective public health policies during such critical situations. Fadwa El Guindi (University of California, Los Angeles) discussed the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on globalization processes, em-

phasizing the importance of public health, human well-being, political power shifts, environmental challenges, educational concerns, and a renewed focus on science. Finally, Lourdes Arizpe (Universidad Nacional Autonoma de Mexico) explained the initial reactions of members from various social groups in Tepoztlan, Mexico, and analyzed uncertainties, challenges, and policy reform needs associated with the epidemic.

The originality of the papers and the lively discussions during the panel inspired a collaborative publication. The co-editors of this thematic issue took the lead and invited all panel participants to contribute to this collective effort, which was supported by the editors of the journal *Issues in Ethnology and Anthropology*.

This volume includes six of the studies presented in the aforementioned panel. Among other five studies, some were being published elsewhere or their authors lacked time to undertake revisions. The texts published here are revised versions of the original panel presentations, incorporating feedback from blind peer-reviewers and the editors of this thematic volume.

The opening text contextualizes the pandemic within broader anthropological frameworks of inequality, highlighting its moral and human security implications. The subsequent four ethnographic studies provide critical analyses of the importance of cultural dimensions in public health policies, and the pandemic's impact on specific societies. Finally, the volume concludes with a comprehensive examination of the impact of the pandemic on globalization, emphasizing the crucial role of science in effectively managing such crises.

In his text *Why Social Justice is the Most Effective Disaster Impact Mitigation: Lessons from the Pandemic*, Thomas Reuter offers an analysis that is based on the hypothesis that the degree of impact of a crisis is largely dependent on two factors, namely the level of economic inequality and the degree of environmental degradation in a society, and sees these two factors as mutually reinforcing. He argues that policy changes addressing inequality and policy supportive of small farmers and their rural communities, which acted as a major safety net for the poor during lockdowns, is the best pathway to mitigate future crisis and their impact on food security in many parts of the world.

In *A Cross-Cultural Study of Mask-Wearing During the Covid-19 Pandemic: Comparing China, Japan and the USA*, Gordon Mathews examines mask-wearing behavior in these three countries. Based on ethnographic interviews, participant observation and mass media analysis, he concludes that while social pressure drives mask-wearing in Japan, state pressure is dominant in China. Due to the absence of social pressure beyond one's sub-group and the contested nature of state pressure, in the USA it becomes a politically-based individual choice. Mathews emphasizes the importance of anthropological analysis in understanding contemporary social phenomena, and how it complements insights from other disciplines, such as social psychology.

In the text *Learning from Rituals: Covid-19 Public Health Measures and Messaging in Timor-Leste*, Susanna Barnes argues that the understanding of the cultural dimensions of infectious disease is critical for creating public health policies for such crises. The rituals directed towards Covid-19 demonstrate a specific local understanding of the nature of infection, contamination, disease, models of causality and fears around infection. The levels of participation observed in Covid-19 rituals online and support for these initiatives on social media suggest that health authorities should engage with local communities in a two-way dialogue to engage with beliefs and existing prevention strategies that can assist and support public health objectives and measures.

Lourdes Arizpe in her text *Perceptions of the Impact of Covid-19 in Tepoztlán, Mexico: A Focused Ethnographic Study*, examines how the pandemic affected an iconic rural community in Mexico. Based on data collected from a statistical survey undertaken in 2020 and subsequent interviews and participant observation, the study reveals the impact on residents' perceptions of their lives, future prospects and employment opportunities. It also shows how women played a key role in closing the town to outside visitors, and how the town eventually opened again through negotiations and community decisions. Additionally, the study highlights the dilemma faced by anthropologists in managing the risk of inadvertently providing information to powerful and illicit groups who seized the opportunity for investment in post-pandemic tourism.

Soumendra M. Patnaik's text *Managing the Disaster of Covid-19: An Analysis of Public Policy in Odisha on India's East Coast* critically studies the management of the pandemic, focusing on the policy and governance practices employed by the Government of Odisha. Using an ethnographic approach, it examines how policies were operationalized on the ground, despite the great diversity of race, language, ethnicity, class, caste, and culture, posing significant challenges for the policy makers and administrators. The author argues that the government's policies reflect a form of affirmative biopolitics, in which power is exercised to direct human life and ensure a secure future for citizens.

In her text, *The World Upside Down: The Pandemic Redefines Globalization*, Fadwa El Guindi explores the impact of Covid-19 on society, culture, and business globally. The article discusses the devastating effect of the pandemic on human life and the global market. Highlighting lessons learned from the crisis, El Guindi argues that the pandemic has demonstrated how cognitive capacity unique to humans can counter the innate transmissibility of nature with the intrinsic flexibility of culture. The article emphasizes the increased focus on science as a result of the pandemic, which has led to a re-aligning of parameters and a shift away from vague notions of human security, global governance and multilateralism.

In conclusion, this thematic issue provides a range of perspectives and insights into the diverse impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on different societies

and cultures globally. They underscore the importance of taking into account social, cultural, economic, and political factors in understanding the management of disasters, and provide a valuable comparative perspective on how different communities and governments have coped with the pandemic. The texts also highlight the significance of interdisciplinary approaches that integrate insights from anthropology, social psychology, and public policy analysis in formulating effective strategies for disaster management. In particular, they underscore the need for policies that address economic inequality, cultural beliefs, and local community participation in disaster management. Overall, these studies suggest that managing disasters requires a holistic and nuanced approach that takes into account the diverse needs and perspectives of different communities and individuals, and that collaboration across disciplines and cultures is crucial to building effective and resilient disaster response systems. The pandemic has been a wake-up call for the world, and these studies offer valuable lessons on how we can build a more just, equitable, and sustainable future in the aftermath of this crisis.

As co-editors of this thematic issue, we express our gratitude to all the participants in the panel “Anthropological Perspectives on the COVID Pandemic: Impacts on Society, Culture, Public Policy and Governance, and Lessons for the Future” held at the 2021 IUAES Yucatan Congress in Mexico. We extend our special thanks to the authors who submitted their papers for publication, investing significant effort in their research. Collaboration with them throughout the submission, review, and revision process was seamless and fruitful. We also thank the Editor-in-Chief of *Issues in Ethnology and Anthropology*, Dragana Antonijević, and Co-Editor Ivan Kovačević, for inviting us to contribute to the journal with this thematic issue, having faith in the positive outcome of this project. Their support and guidance have been crucial in realizing this issue.

#### Guest Editors

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Chair of the WCAA Global Cultural Policies Task Force, and  
Past Chair of World Council of Anthropological Associations (WCAA)

**Thomas Reuter** (University of Melbourne),  
Deputy Chair of the IUAES Commission on Anthropology,  
Public Policy and Development Practice, Past Chair of WCAA, and  
Past Senior Vice-President of IUAES

**Soumendra Mohan Patnaik** (University of Delhi),  
Chair of the IUAES Commission on Anthropology,  
Public Policy and Development Practice, and  
Vice-President (ex officio) of IUAES

In Belgrade, March 23, 2023.