

# Medicine and Culture in Global Context: The Medical Anthropology Research Unit at the Freie Universität Berlin

by Angelika Wolf and Hansjörg Dilger

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## Abstract

### ARBEITSSTELLE MEDICAL ANTHROPOLOGY

Am Institut für Ethnologie der Freien Universität Berlin wurde unter der Leitung von Prof. Dr. Hansjörg Dilger die Arbeitsstelle Medical Anthropology eingerichtet. Die Mitarbeiter der Arbeitsstelle untersuchen aus ethnologischer Perspektive Phänomene, die mit Krankheit, Gesundheit und Heilung weltweit verknüpft sind. Die Forschungsschwerpunkte gliedern sich in sechs Themenbereiche: Gesundheit und Migration; reproduktive Gesundheit und demographischer Wandel; soziale Sicherung und Zugang zu Gesundheitsversorgung; Biomedizin im Kontext, Pflanzenökonomien; Gender, AIDS und antiretrovirale Therapie.

Die Stärke der Ethnologie im Vergleich zu anderen Kultur- und Sozialwissenschaften ist, dass sie dank ihrer Methoden detaillierte Einblicke in andere Lebenswelten ermöglicht und diese erklären kann. Teilnehmende Beobachtung, Erlernen der lokalen Sprache, biographische Interviews und Leitfadeninterviews verhelfen zu neuen Herangehensweisen bei der Lösung gegenwärtiger Probleme. Während in der klassischen Ethnologie vor allem »traditionelle« außereuropäische Kulturen untersucht wurden, beschäftigt sich die moderne Ethnologie verstärkt mit aktuellen kulturellen, gesellschaftlichen und politischen Zusammenhängen – und dies in einem globalen Kontext.

In den USA und Großbritannien zählt die „Medical Anthropology“ zu den stärksten Forschungsrichtungen innerhalb der Sozial- und Kulturanthropologie. Im deutschsprachigen Raum hingegen hat sie sich erst in den vergangenen Jahren als eigenständige Subdisziplin etabliert. Eine spezielle, global ausgerichtete Arbeitsstelle mit einem kritisch-interpretativen Ansatz innerhalb eines ethnologischen Instituts ist an deutschen Hochschulen bislang einzigartig.

Für weitere Informationen besuchen Sie bitte unsere Website:  
[www.polsoz.fu-berlin.de/ethnologie/arbeitsstellen/  
medical\\_anthropology/index.html](http://www.polsoz.fu-berlin.de/ethnologie/arbeitsstellen/medical_anthropology/index.html)

How do people in Africa pay for their healthcare if they do not have health insurance? How do people living with HIV/AIDS access antiretroviral treatment in Tanzania? What does it mean to be ill for so-called »undocumented migrants« in Germany? These are all questions studied by Medical Anthropologists. The Research Unit for Medical Anthropology was recently created at the Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology at the Freie Universität, Berlin in Germany which investigates projects on these and other themes.

The members of the Medical Anthropology Research Unit examine issues related to illness, health and healing worldwide from an anthropological perspective. They research for example, why certain HIV/AIDS prevention measures in African societies do not work or what is the background knowledge required by health care personnel in order to ease the stay of pregnant Chinese women in maternity wards in Germany. In terms of applicability, the research group's results can serve as a type of cultural guide and provide decisive shortcuts for medical solutions.

In the U.S. and Britain, Medical Anthropology is one of the most important research areas within Social and Cultural Anthropology. In contrast, in the German-speaking milieu it has only recently become established as an independent sub-discipline. A specific, globally-oriented working group at an anthropology institute at a German university is one of a kind.

### CRITICAL-INTERPRETATIVE APPROACH OF MEDICAL ANTHROPOLOGY

The strengths of anthropology in comparison to other cultural and social sciences is that detailed perspectives and explanations of other worlds can be gained thanks to the methodologies employed: participatory observations, learning the local language, biographical interviews and semi-structured interviews ideally enable new approaches to the solution of contemporary problems.

While classical anthropology investigated »traditional« non-European cultures, contemporary anthropology is increasingly concerned with current cultural, societal and political conditions, ideas and interactions – in a global context. Some areas of research in Medical Anthropology include the anthropology of epidemic disease, urban health, migration and health, connections between economies and medicine as well as the worldwide dissemination of medical technologies.

As early as 1848, Rudolf Virchow pointed out the social origins of illness when he proclaimed that »Medicine is a social science, and politics nothing but medicine on a grand scale.« Virchow postulated that socio-political interventions are often more effective in dealing with epidemics than medical action. He demonstrated this through the example of a typhus outbreak in Upper Silesia, which he was able to ascribe primarily to poverty, hunger, lack of education and political oppression.

#### RESEARCH ON CONTEMPORARY SOCIAL ISSUES IN MEDICAL ANTHROPOLOGY

The members of the Research Unit in Berlin concentrate on six subject areas: 1) Social security and access to healthcare, 2) Reproductive health and demographic change, 3) Plant economies, 4) Health and migration, 5) Biomedicine in context and 6) Gender, AIDS and treatment. The following paragraphs describe eight ongoing projects from research areas 3 to 6.

#### PLANT ECONOMIES

##### *Transformations of Medical Knowledge: The Medicinal Plant Artemisia annua in Tanzania* (Caroline Meier zu Biesen)

This research project examines the introduction of the Asian medicinal plant *Artemisia annua* in Tanzania. The anti-malarial effects of the substance have been known in China for centuries and are of major significance for the African continent: traditionally consumed as a tea, it is now pharmaceutically produced – with considerable social, cultural and economic consequences. The innovation processes triggered by the introduction of the medicinal plant are examined and specifically which discourses, strategies and conflicts accompany these processes on a local, national and international level. The focus is on the transformation of the plant to a pharmacopoeia and the question whether and how (global) market mechanisms influence and transform the evolution of the potential of *Artemisia*.

##### *Bioprospection in South Africa.*

##### *From Muthi to Intellectual Property Right* (Britta Rutert)

The demand for herbal medicine in Europe and North America as well as epidemics such as malaria and HIV/AIDS have created a market for »traditional« medicine. The aim of this research project is to analyze the discourse on intellectual property rights and »Access and Benefit-Sharing« in South Africa with regard to specific medicinal plants. The transformation of *Muthi* (a mixture of plants used by traditional healers) to analysed chemical compounds and finally to marketable medical products is a process, in which the most diverse knowledge and moral concepts interact, and sometimes clash. Bioprospection denotes thereby the scientific and economic exploitation of plant resources.

#### HEALTH AND MIGRATION

##### *Pregnancy Experiences of Chinese Women in Berlin* (Gudrun Kotte)

The project is concerned with the sensitivities of Chinese women, who experience pregnancy, birth and the postnatal period in Berlin. For instance, the state of being during pregnancy is strongly influenced by the concept of »fetal education«. The idea that a child's appearance, intelligence, character and health are directly affected by the feelings, words and behaviors of pregnant women, signifies that



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they have to devote considerably more attention to their actions than those who are not pregnant. The practice of »fetal education« is dependent upon the nature of the network of family and friends, language skills and the number of children; educational background or economic conditions, in contrast, have little effect. The women interviewed maintain close contact to their families abroad, who influence their behavior through transcultural networks.

##### *Illness and Irregular Migration. Undocumented Latin American Migrants in Berlin* (Susann Huschke)

Based on international and national law, undocumented migrants are eligible to access basic health care in Germany. In practice, however, access to health care is rendered difficult, if not impossible, by contradictory legislation. This study focuses on the experiences of undocumented Latino migrants in Berlin in the context of these adverse structures of inadequate health care. The lives of many undocumented migrants are shaped by insecurity, economic pressure and dependency on social networks. Illness constitutes a crisis that unsettles the fragile stability undocumented migrants aim to achieve. This study tackles the meaning of illness for individual migrants and follows their paths to overcome suffering and restore physical and emotional well-being.

#### BIOMEDICINE IN CONTEXT

##### *The Making of Doctors in Egypt: Students' Experiences in Learning Biomedicine* (Mustafa Abdalla)

Recently, the medicalisation of Egyptian society has significantly intensified while the population has been actively searching for alternatives to medicine. This is a paradox, which is explained through the increasing number of cases of malpractice leading to lack of trust in doctors and medicine. This research reveals that medical students enter medical school with enthusiasm and a strong desire to learn medicine. However, their idealism gradually diminishes given the difficulties they experience in the study of medicine. In order to make up for these shortcomings, students resort to private tutoring that trains them on how to pass exams, while others rely on their contacts to facilitate and assure their success.

**Refusal of Blood Transfusions: Religious Identity and Modern Medical Authority** (*Małgorzata Rajtar, guest researcher at FU Berlin*)

The aim of this research project is to examine objections to standard medical treatment resulting from the refusal of blood transfusions by the Jehovah's Witnesses from a comparative perspective (Germany and the U.S.). Although the Jehovah's Witnesses, a millenarian movement established in the U.S. in the 1870s, expressed little initial interest in health and sickness, they have become probably the best known religious proponents of »no blood transfusion« policy in the last decades when they denounced the movement of blood between bodies as »dishonouring God«. This challenges not only questions about the place of religion in medical structures but discourses that are based on secular technology and worldview as well.

**GENDER, AIDS AND TREATMENT****Antiretroviral Therapy in Tanzania. Global Power Structures and Local Decision-making** (*Dominik Mattes*)

The provision of antiretroviral medication offers millions of HIV-positive people in Africa the possibility to reintegrate into their social environments following periods of acute illness. This research project examines the social and cultural appropriation of antiretroviral treatment programs in Tanga, Tanzania. The structural conditions of access to medication are investigated as well as the effects the strict medical prescriptions have on daily life. Taking into consideration health personnel, patients and family members, representatives of traditional healing methods and political decision-makers, the project employs a multi-perspective approach to the complex issue.

**The »stronger sex«? Masculinity and AIDS in South Africa** (*Hanspeter Reihling*)

How do young men in urban South Africa view themselves? How do masculine self-images affect partnerships, sexuality and the transmission of HIV? When young men perceive themselves as socially excluded and unattractive to potential partners the effects are

often far-reaching. Criminal activities make it possible to obtain name brand clothing and consumer goods. This self-production determines success with young women. Not infrequently experiences of violence and criminality however lead to personal transformation processes: »Crooks« or »gangsters« become pastors, teachers and volunteers in the fight against HIV/AIDS, who desire to finally share with their families in the economic wealth of their country.

**OUTLOOK: RESEARCH CENTER AS A PLATFORM FOR EXPERTS AND THE PUBLIC**

In the coming years, the Research Unit aims to expand upon existing research topics and support the expert exchange between young researchers and established experts. Conferences and projects are planned which will create international networks, as well as the expansion of the field of Medical Anthropology into degree programs (BA, MA, PhD). The new institution will be a contact point and platform for experts and the broader public, including cross-disciplinary projects within the university as well as topic-specific cooperation with external institutions. ■

**LITERATUR**

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