

# Internationalizing Anthropology: A History of the World Council of Anthropological Associations (WCAA)

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## The Foundation of the WCAA

The WCAA was founded during a historic meeting of the presidents of fourteen anthropological associations in Recife, Brazil, in June 2004. The meeting was conceived by Gustavo Lins Ribeiro, after attending a small ad hoc meeting of association presidents at the AAA conference the previous year. Realising the potential value of holding such a meeting on a more global scale he sought and obtained funding from the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research. The presidents of the national associations for Australia, Brazil, Canada, France, India, Russia, South Africa, the United Kingdom and the United States were invited to attend the meeting. The Japanese society sent its director of international relations. The presidents of the following international associations were also present: the European Association of Social Anthropologists, the International Union of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences, the Latin American Association of Anthropology, and the Pan African Anthropological Association.

The declared aim of the meeting was to explore possibilities for greater collaboration between diverse national and regional anthropologies. Participants were asked to submit their ideas for collaboration in writing before coming to Recife. In his own statement, organiser and then ABA (Brazilian Association of Anthropology) president, Gustavo Lins Ribeiro, explained his objectives as follows:

"I was invited for a working breakfast in the 2002 [AAA] meeting in New Orleans. It was an interesting occasion to meet colleagues working in metropolitan anthropologies. But the issue is how to promote more diversified meetings. Furthermore, besides these much-needed informal opportunities to know of other associations' characteristics, I feel we need something more structured. Perhaps the creation of a committee of presidents of associations within the International Union of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences would provide for an instance where more concrete articulation could happen. [...] Another possibility could be the creation of a website financed by all associations and dedicated to the dissemination of international anthropological knowledge."

Attending as president of the Australian Anthropological Society, I voiced a more ambitious idea in my statement, proposing the formation of an "organizational structure on a global scale, such as a permanent council of national presidents." I also observed that:

"I would like to emphasize very strongly the power a global communication network in anthropology would have. Imagine being able to reach the presidents of all or most national organizations with a single email, and each of them being able to reach all of their members by forwarding that email. In combination with a global organizational

framework, such as a council of representatives wherein some matters of shared interest and common interest would be discussed and articulated, this kind of communication flow would have a major role in encouraging and facilitating the creation of global research networks [and...] other collaborative projects.”

Other delegates in their statements made more specific proposals for collaboration. Canadian Anthropology Society (CASCA) president, James Waldram, suggested, for example, that:

“... associations [should] consider multilateral agreements that offer reduced membership and conference rates to paid-up members of other national associations. [...] Information exchange could also be facilitated by the establishment of a global ‘virtual’ anthropology association which could act as a clearing house for information on the national associations and [...] this organization could be funded on an on-going basis by structured contributions from member associations on behalf of their members. Access to the global association then would be a benefit of membership in the national associations, an important value-added benefit of membership.”

These quotes show that the WCAA was an idea whose time had come given the lack of a global umbrella organization wherein national and regional anthropology associations could share their concerns and engage in joint activities. In a rapidly globalizing world, the discipline of anthropology was lagging behind in its own internationalization, notwithstanding the fact that anthropology is essentially a global endeavour to study all human cultures in their dynamic development and mutual interaction.

Gustavo Lins Ribeiro and I met before the meeting and spent several hours in discussion over my tentative proposal to create a worldwide council of association presidents. There was some doubt whether such an ambitious goal could be achieved because national associations might fear a global alliance could compromise their sovereignty. In the course of the meeting it became evident, however, that these concerns were misplaced. There was enthusiastic support from the whole group of delegates.

Delegates managed not only to agree on the creation of a council, but also drafted and signed a founding agreement, essentially the first WCAA constitution. Gustavo Lins Ribeiro was elected the first chair (2004–5). The following communiqué (on the new WCAA website) summed up the aims and goals of the new network:

“After discussing several possible mechanisms and initiatives to increase international cooperation in anthropology, participants of the conference wholeheartedly decided to create the World Council of Anthropological Associations. This network is open to new members and has as its primary objectives to promote (a) the discipline of anthropology in an international context; (b) cooperation and the sharing of information among world anthropologists; (c) jointly organized events of scientific debate and cooperation in research activities and dissemination of anthropological knowledge. Besides the fact that anthropologists are always prone to acknowledge the value of diversity, there are other reasons why WCAA is an idea that quickly became a reality. It is based on a democratic vision of how anthropologies should intercommunicate and cooperate in a global era. WCAA represents the recognition that now is the time to start new, more horizontal modes of exchange and dissemination of knowledge among world anthropologies. Hopefully, the 2004 Recife conference was just the first in several events designed to implement new institutional policies with a

view to promoting greater visibility for diversity in anthropological production worldwide. It undoubtedly initiated a process bound to deepen international cooperation in anthropology in a more cosmopolitan vein. By bringing the leaders of anthropological associations together for a dialogue on the construction of democratic and heteroglossic communication across national boundaries, WCAA seeks to bring about the internationalization of the profession in such a way so as to deal with the challenges of a transnational world."

The new World Council has met on a regular basis since that time, holding interim meetings with partial attendance at major anthropology conferences in cities around the world, including the AAA in San Francisco 2008, IUAES in Kunming 2009, AAA in New Orleans 2010, AAS & IUAES in Perth 2011, AAA in San Francisco 2012, IUAES in Manchester 2013, AAA in Chicago 2013, and IUAES & JASCA in Chiba City 2014. Major meetings with full attendance were held every two years. Delegates from developing countries or small associations were subsidized to attend these biennial meetings and associated academic symposia (Bristol 2006, Osaka 2008, Maynooth 2010, New Delhi 2012, and Taipei 2014), drawing on support from the Wenner-Gren Foundation, voluntary contributions from fellow associations, and generous support from the hosting organisations. A sense of community evolved among association delegates and intensified in the course of these regular meetings, despite the constant turnover of office holders within the associations. Most past delegates have joined the WCAA Advisory Board after the end of their term.

Interim meetings are now held at every opportunity. For example, for the year 2015, such meetings were held at the Anthropology Association of Ireland (AAI) meeting in Cork (March), the IUAES inter-congress in Bangkok (June), the International Society for Ethnology and Folklore (SIEF) meeting in Zagreb (July), the AAA in Denver (November), and the meeting of Mercosur Anthropology (RAM) in Montevideo (December). As a sample of activities at these meetings, WCAA sponsored panel topics from the year 2014 include: 1) at the IUAES 2014 Inter-congress in Chiba City, Japan: *Urban Futures; Situating Statelessness: Anthropological Perspectives; The Past and Future of the World Council of Anthropological Associations*; 2) at the ASA Decennial Meeting in Edinburgh, UK: *Postcolonial Perspective on the Enlightenment and Ethics*; 3) at the joint conference with the Taiwan Society for Anthropology and Ethnology in Taipei, Taiwan: *Environmental Anthropology: Rethinking Environmental Constraint and Construction in the Human Condition; The State of/and Anthropology in Asia; Relating Regional Anthropologies to World Anthropologies; Making Sense of Contemporary Capitalism: Off Centre Perspectives; WCAA Anniversary Panel: World Anthropologies and the World of Anthropology*; 4) at the Czech Association for Social Anthropology Conference, Prague, Czech Republic: *'Us' and 'Them' in Post-socialism* (keynote by chair M. Buchowski); and 5) at the 113th AAA Meeting in Washington, USA: *Spaces of Security: Global, National and Local*.

The founding chair (initially referred to as 'facilitator') of WCAA, Gustavo Lins Ribeiro, was succeeded by former Japanese Association (JASCA) president, Junji Koizumi (2005–8), and myself (then former Australian Anthropological Society president, 2008–12), Polish Ethnology Association president, Michal Buchowski (2012–14), International Association for Southeast European Anthropology president, Vesna Vucinic-Neskovic (2014–16) and Irish Anthropology Association president Chandana Mathur (2014–18). Chairs and all other

members of the 'organising committee' (executive) are democratically elected by the members of the council. All member associations, large or small, have equal rights, and membership has been free of charge.

The council grew slowly over the first few years, and then expanded rather rapidly. Twelve years after its foundation the membership of WCAA had risen to include about fifty national and international associations. The council thus came to include the elected representatives of the vast majority of the world's professional associations, who democratically represent tens of thousands of individual anthropologists. Many countries still lack an association, however, and the WCAA has assisted with the formation of national associations in some cases, in keeping with its aim of facilitating worldwide inclusiveness within the discipline.

Significant constitutional amendments were added in later meetings. New governance procedures were necessitated by the growth of the council to protect and permanently enshrine principles of egalitarianism and participatory democracy. The activities of the council also became more diverse and extensive, some of them managed by designated task forces. For example, the WCAA Advocacy and Outreach Activities Task Force has initiated the formation of *Antropólogos Sem Fronteiras* (ASF, 'Anthropologists Without Borders') leading up to its incorporation as an independent organization in 2014. The WCAA Ethics Task Force, established in 2012, aims to review ethics guidelines worldwide to explore potential for a universal set of guidelines while also pointing out main issues that emerge and how they may be productively negotiated. WCAA has also started the innovative, new journal, *Déjà Lu*, which aims to republish important scholarly works from journals published in languages other than English so as to showcase and make more accessible some of the diversity of voices within world anthropologies.

## Relationship with the IUAES and WAU

Delegates at the WCAA founding meeting in Recife did not regard the International Union of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences (IUAES) as a suitable platform to achieve their vision of a global association network, though the possibility was raised. For example, Indian Anthropological Society (IAS) president, Ajit Danda, observed in his statement that

"[the] International Union of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences with its contemporary preoccupations do[es] not seem to be adequately prepared to undertake the responsibility thus outlined. In fact, they seldom took the national anthropological societies or associations into much confidence."

The president of the IUAES, Louis Vargas, was also present at the meeting. He maintained that

"The Union itself consists of national and institutional organizations in more than 50 countries in all parts of the world, together with some hundreds of individual members. Each country is represented by a delegation numbering not more than six individuals, chosen by the anthropologists of the country concerned, on the Permanent Council of the IUAES. The Permanent Council is the governing body of the Union, each national delegation having a single vote in its decisions. [...] Briefly, our Union can serve as a forum for anthropologists and anthropological societies from all countries"

This statement glossed over the evident structural weaknesses of the IUAES Permanent Council. The main issue was that country delegates on the Permanent Council were by no means the elected presidents of the national associations of those countries, but rather persons of diverse nationality selected from among individual members of the IUAES only. The Permanent Council delegates thus had no democratic mandate to represent the anthropological associations and communities of their respective countries and represented only the IUAES's own diverse membership. There was also no signal that the IUAES might welcome the creation of a council of association presidents as a way to recreate and reinvigorate the Permanent Council. To make matters worse, IUAES was without any funds and had no paid-up members due to a lack of appropriate procedures.

Most national representatives on the Permanent Council were unknown as such to their own compatriots outside IUAES, just as most people would not know the name of the person representing their country in the United Nations, in both cases because they never elected them. The new WCAA had more in common with the G20 meeting of heads of state, in the sense that its members are well recognized by their national communities.

The relationship between the two organizations was tense at first, but this began to change when a new IUAES executive was elected at its 2009 Kunming Congress. A new constitution was drafted by Andrew Spiegel and I, and after extensive consultation and revision, it ratified at the Manchester World Congress in 2013. The new constitution abolished the superseded institution of the Permanent Council and IUAES instead became a global community of individual anthropologists. Members (the General Assembly) obtained the sovereign power formerly held by the Permanent Council. As a global community of scholars, a rejuvenated IUAES was able to facilitate cooperation among the world's anthropologists, particularly within the thematic networks of 'scientific commissions.' This is important because membership in WCAA is not accessible to individual anthropologists. One could say that the WCAA model is one of representational internationalism, comprising an international council of elected national and regional representatives. The two organizations' structures thus have complemented one another from 2013 onward, and together the two organisations reflected the ambiguities of a wider world wherein Westphalian (nation state-based) and post-Westphalian (global) forms of association also coexisted. An internationalist model will remain important in anthropology given that diversity, not just among the local cultures we study but also between local anthropological traditions, is highly valued in the discipline. This value of diversity has been widely debated within WCAA, IUAES and beyond, and giving rise to what has come to be known as the 'world anthropologies' paradigm (below).

Given their different structural designs, the WCAA and IUAES henceforth fulfilled different and fully complementary roles vis-à-vis the needs of anthropology as a global and international discipline. Cooperation between the organisations steadily grew in subsequent years, ultimately leading to a merger into a single, bicameral organisation, the World Anthropology Union, which took place in Ottawa in 2017.

## The 'World Anthropologies' Agenda within WCAA

Post-colonial critiques of anthropology have rightly criticized the discipline's involvement in European and American colonial and imperialist ventures. This kind of critique has been beneficial because critical reflection on the history of our discipline has led to greater awareness and honesty. Such honesty gives us the freedom to change. Unfortunately, however, our entanglement in hegemonic projects did not end with the global de-colonisation drive of the post-World War 2 period or with the reflexive turn of the 1980s, and probably never will so long as hegemony continues to characterise world politics. What international anthropology can do, however, and what we alone are responsible for doing, is to eliminate or at least ameliorate inequality within the discipline itself. Recent debates, under the heading of 'world anthropologies', have highlighted that we have, until now, maintained a range of hegemonic structures of our own within the discipline. What are those internal hegemonic patterns, and how can they be overcome?

One persistent hegemony is the 20th century dominance of British-American culture, in anthropology and many other fields, and the pre-eminence of English as a universal language, which is in turn underpinned by the geopolitically dominant position of an alliance of Anglo-sphere nation states under US leadership. Anthropologists have little influence on geopolitics, but the latter does affect our practice and we are susceptible to major political changes. For example, if the unipolar political dominance of the Anglo-sphere were to come to an end in the course of the 21st century, as some international relations experts predict, associated cultural disparities within the discipline (and beyond) may eventually dissipate. Disparities would at least be reduced to a personal advantage of native speakers of English over speakers of English as a second or foreign language, assuming that the use of English as a global trade language will survive such a geopolitical shift. Such a reduced disparity would perhaps be a price worth paying in exchange for the benefit of having a universal medium for communication among world anthropologies, whether bilaterally or within a global community such as the IUAES. As anthropologists we are well aware, however, that the confinement of anthropology to a single language of analysis, no matter how universally it is spoken, will still constitute a cultural impoverishment, and that the discipline and the world will be the poorer for this loss of diversity. Our best option here is to promote equity between world anthropologies through translation, giving full credit to non-English language journals, and educating ourselves about the diversity and richness of world anthropologies, with a plural 's'. This need not contradict the, in other ways, attractive idea of a universally accessible world anthropology sphere. Perhaps the best possible scenario to aim for is a dynamic state of unity in diversity within anthropology, whereby unity and equality would prevail in the domain of political economy and diversity in the domains of culture, history and theoretical orientation.

A second hegemony in our discipline has to do with ownership of the technical means of knowledge production. It is based on domination over high quality print media by journal and book publishers predominantly based in affluent industrialised nations. Most of these major global publishing houses are now corporately owned rather than controlled by academics, and ownership concentration has risen steadily. This hegemony of print and online production is being reinforced systematically by a global trend toward the formal

quality ranking of publications by government agencies, and indeed the secondary performance ranking of individuals and whole universities on the basis of such publications ranking. This trend is destructive of the principle of equal participation because highly ranked journals tend to exclude authors from developing countries whose scholarship does not conform to these publishers' style, they are too expensive for libraries in the developing world, and their dominance further marginalizes journals that are small, critical or alternative in some other way.

A third form of hegemony persists in anthropology because there are vast historical disparities in the degree of visibility of different anthropological communities. The unique features of national and regional anthropologies need to be not only maintained, but also appreciated more. There has been an enormous lack of communication between different anthropologies across national, cultural and linguistic boundaries. A European anthropologist is very unlikely to know very much about Indonesian anthropology, for example, or Tunisian or Philippine anthropology. Those who research in countries with less-known national anthropologies thus have a special responsibility to promote it, to cite it, to publish within its national journals, and to collaborate with local colleagues as equal partners, wherever possible.

While these are some major obstacles to the realisation of the ideals of the world anthropologies paradigm, the WCAA and other international and global organisations in anthropology are now seriously engaged with these issues. A conscious effort is made to create a sense of worldwide anthropological community, based on diversity, equal democratic participation and active collaboration.

It has become much easier to work internationally since the WCAA was founded. Unique national anthropologies are now being showcased by WCAA at major conferences. In collaboration with IUAES, the WCAA is in a position to provide better access to knowledge, and also to the means of disseminating knowledge, by utilizing new media technology according to principles of open access. It is thus through a politically conscious international anthropology that we are at last obtaining the means to reform the discipline, by celebrating cultural diversity within the practice of anthropology itself. It also presents us with an opportunity to speak with one voice, and thus to make representations to other international bodies such as UNESCO, Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development and World Trade Organization, or to wayward governments and corporations. This is already happening, and for the first time it can happen, because there are fair and transparent democratic structures in place that give anthropologists the opportunity to speak with one voice.

Anthropology is thus catching up with globalization and no longer a spectator to this historic process. The challenge for the WCAA in the coming years, working together with IUAES, will be to provide a model of what globalization could be – at its very best; a model of how humanity can come to appreciate its unity, its need to speak in one language and its need also to speak in many tongues and to think in a wide array of different epistemological and cultural frames. Anthropologists certainly do have the training and the professional ethos to be exemplary in the pursuit of these ideals. This capacity is now being put into practice within WCAA, with the aim of opening anthropology to universal and equal participation. By

demonstrating a global consciousness, based on solidarity and equality in diversity, the discipline may help others to realise that peaceful global cooperation is achievable also for the world at large.

## Abstract

Anthropological studies have long provided testimony of the richness of cultural diversity across societies, while also highlighting the commonality we all share as human beings. The discipline has not been an undistorted mirror of this unity in diversity, however, because anthropologists from a few privileged nations have dominated the process of global knowledge construction until recently. The WCAA was founded to address this limitation by providing a global platform for free communication and democratic participation in the spirit of a new 'world anthropologies' paradigm.

## References

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Ribeiro, Gustavo Lins and Arturo Escobar 2006. *World Anthropologies: Disciplinary transformations within systems of power*. Oxford/New York: Berg Publishers.

## Suggested readings

Please refer to the WCAA website for more detailed information of past and present activities, panels and symposia, as well as reports on activities, public statements and a list of current members, at: <http://www.wcaanet.org>

Déjà lu website : <https://www.wcaanet.org/dejalu/>