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# Cosmological Visions, Multispecies Practices, and Planetary Health in Pandemic Times

**Judith Schlehe**

University of Freiburg, German
<*judith.schlehe@ethno.uni-freiburg.de*>

**Abstract**

*The cosmovisions of the so-called world religions are based on assumed divides between nature and culture, nonhuman and human, man and God, and these divisions have long been reproduced by the social sciences. Only recently, a radical interrelatedness has been thematized and acknowledged by certain scholars, and indeed, the current pandemic reminds us of zoonoses and the manifold relationships that humans have with other forms of life. At the same time, local or folk religions offer alternative ontologies including transgressions between humans and animals or spirits. Thus, they indicate that there is no "above" or "outside of" nature. Perhaps future multispecies practices will be shaped by a new awareness of such relatedness and symbiosis, as offered by the Planetary Health approach: a relational health concept that will prepare for future challenges by focusing on the interrelationships between human health, political, economic, and social contexts as well as the biodiversity of our planet.*

*Keywords: multispecies, planetary health, pandemic*

## Introduction

The current COVID-19 pandemic has revealed structural deficiencies in our world, such as the devastating effects of global capitalism and resource extraction that continues unabated despite its deleterious environmental impact; global social inequalities; top-down political governance; and cosmological systems that support a hierarchy between culture and nature or human and nonhuman. We humans used to believe that we were exceptional or even superior beings, and several

religions claim that humans represent God on earth. Many of us also believe in human-made technology and in the ability to determine the direction of development. However, the climate crisis as well as the current pandemic have taught us that we are less powerful than we thought. Thus arises the question: is it really time to start moving back to normalcy? There are severe doubts as to whether a new normal should restore the old state and the old certainties as quickly as possible. Perhaps the thoughts themselves, the ways of thinking, and the ways of being in the world should be revised and transformed. However, what could come instead? What can inspire ethical transformations? Or, following Clark and Szerszynski (2021: 152), how can we approach the task of reimagining subjectivities, identities, and cultural formations towards "decolonizing the mind" and, equally ambitious, providing alternatives to the current environmental destruction?

For sure, there is no single right answer. From an anthropological perspective, awareness of historical, socio "-political, and cultural differences and peculiarities is required. Ethics, as well as ecologies, are always dynamically enacted in specific times and places (cf. Großmann 2022: 6). Nevertheless, in a globally connected world – and the pandemic is once again proof of this – we can and should learn from each other. This holds true both for transnational intercultural exchange and for intrasocial dialogue, such as dialogue with marginalized people, groups, thoughts, and experiences. Perhaps we can even go further and also learn from other-than- human beings or at least different ways of relating to them. Without romanticizing or glorifying so-called 'local wisdom', this paper suggests that an innovative understanding of health and healing may be inspired by world-views that are often pejoratively referred to as 'outdated' or 'superstitious' or, at best, are seen as folklore and commodified as tourist attractions. By considering how such ideas could become meaningful for what is termed in this conference's title a "sustainable future", I aim to re-think what we can learn from myths, mystical beliefs, magical practices, spiritual or animistic cosmologies, as well as certain pop cultural tendencies. This is based on the wish "to embrace the full diversity of knowledge systems" (Clark and Szerszynski 2021: 151).

## Cosmologies and transgressions

The imagination of what it is to be human has been shaped by both religions and sciences. The cosmovisions or ontological models of the monotheistic, supra-local belief systems, the so-called world religions, are based on assumed divides between nature and culture, nonhuman and human, man and god. At the same time, ancient mythologies and local

beliefs offer alternative ontologies and other intimate ways of being, including transgressions between humans and animals or ancestors, spirits, and deities. Nature is animated and connected with the 'supernatural'. This is embedded in non-dichotomous conceptions of relations between human and non-human entities. The latter can be endowed with social attributes, with subjectivity attributed to all agents. Even beyond attributing agency to objects, subjects, spirits, and tools, bodily forms can also be exchanged. Plants can become founding ancestors, or animals such as tigers can be seen as incarnations of ancestral spirits (Wessing 1995); bodies can be half-human, half-animal, or humans can turn into spirits – and the other way round – or be 'possessed' by them while blurring body limits. They evoke emotions and can be benevolent or malicious or in-between: alluring as well as threatening. For instance, the Javanese spirit queen of the Southern ocean, Ratu Kidul (Nyai Roro Kidul), once was a human being who turned into the tutelary spirit. Nevertheless, she has sexual relations with the human rulers of Java and guarantees their power (Schlehe 1998). Or Nyi Blorong, another Javanese figure, has – similar to European mermaids – the upper body of a beautiful, seductive woman combined with a fish or snake tail. In contrast to Ratu Kidul, she is more like a demon – and is most often approached by men who search for pleasure and wealth. But it is not only the "spiritual waterscapes" of Southeast Asia that are gendered and sexualized (Watson Andaya 2016). Land, fertility, and crops are/were connected to female deities such as Dewi Sri, the rice goddess. Or, for a less famous example, the Javanese goddess Srenggi has the legs of a wild pig, clearly reflecting the sexual symbolism of hunting (Semedi 2012). Greek mythology knows the centaur, whose body is half human half horse. All over the world, we can find narratives of encounters and alliances, symbiotic attachments, intimate relationships, marriages, sexual or kinship bonds between human beings and animals (Sprenger 2014) or ghosts. Within relational ontologies (that have never been static, of course), spirits are parts of social and affective realms and subjectivity moves from body to body. Material things such as heirlooms (e.g. keris) are likewise endowed with life qualities. Spirits may also make use of modern technologies such as cellular phones as mediums – which is very popular in Indonesia. However, far from being limited to indigenous or non-Western peoples and ontologies, one finds similar more-than-human figures, ideas, experiences, and practices in the esoteric, spiritual, or neo-pagan movements in the West as well. Some people feel deeply connected with other-than-humans, such as plants, animals, and stones. At the same time,

contemporary cyborgs are part human and part machine, while artificial intelligence technology constructs machines that look like human beings. Last but not least, current pop culture provides many examples of magical symbiosis and transformation. Perhaps Harry Potter is the most popular figure, but the films of Miyazaki Hayao can also be seen in this context (Yoneyama 2021). Ideas of post- and transhumanism have been popularized by all kinds of mass media. All of these characters, figures, and ideas reflect the view that there are no sharp boundaries between life forms, but rather endless possibilities of blurring, transferring, and transgressing. They are locally different, dynamic, and hybrid, yet share an understanding of the basic relatedness and unity of life (at times also including artificially animated life forms). There is no "above" or "outside of" nature. Therefore, I borrow the idea of naturecultures from Haraway (2003) to describe the entanglement between nature and culture – in which, I suggest, the supernatural is integral.

However, we should beware of idealization and romanticization. Like all worldviews or cosmovisions, these natureculture-oriented ones have the potential to consolidate social hierarchies and legitimize the power relations in which they are embedded, as well as sexist social orders, ethnocentrism, or nationalism. It depends on the context and interests connected to them. What I find most important – and, in this respect, I disagree with recent 'ontological turn' (represented by Ingold, Latour, Descola, and Viveiros de Castro) or 'new animism' (Århem 2015) theories – is that these highly dynamic local beliefs and worldviews should not be analytically reserved for hunter-gatherers or indigenous people. We can find – and, in my view, should further explore – them in any kind and strata of society, including educated, modern elites in urban areas all over the world.

Multispecies ethnography

Only recently, and mainly due to the climate crisis and environmental destruction, have the humanities and social sciences begun to move beyond their conventional anthropocentrism, i.e. the focus on humans as isolated autonomous entities. Anthropos has become increasingly decentered, with emphasis instead going to relatedness, entanglement, the radical interrelatedness between nature and culture, humans and other-than-humans. Ecosystems are entangled, and there is interconnectedness within life and all things. Actor–network theory, new materialism, multispecies ethnography, the ontological turn, Anthropocene anthropology – all of these approaches seek to explore a pluriverse in which humans are not the sole agents but agents who are intrinsically connected with others.

Therefore, multispecies theorist

Donna Haraway (2016) substituted the notion of Anthropocene (that attributes so much – destructive – power to humans) with the term Chthulucene: an age in which humans think tentacularly and make kin with all kinds of slimy creatures. Later, it was not too much of a surprise that in 2020, as we became aware of the extent of COVID-19, Tobias Rees predicted a future Microbiocene – an age dominated by microbes, bacteria, fungi, and viruses that live in and on human and other living bodies. This reflects the shock and uncertainty caused by the invisible power of the coronavirus. What is a virus, and how can we grasp it? We know that it needs a host. We are aware of symbiosis, of how viruses spill over from one species to another, and of zoonoses - infectious diseases that jump from a non-human animal to humans. For coronaviruses, we humans are simply one of many multicellular organisms. As with bats, for instance, we are simply another habitat for their reproduction. Following this line of thought, we have become more aware of the biological relatedness and cohabitation in this world: the human body can be seen as a multi-species ecosystem, and microbes and viruses may be seen as social agents.

As a result, my discipline, anthropology, is extending its epistemology by including the agency – or at least the potency – of other-than-human entities. At the core of multispecies ethnography are not only human–animal studies and human–plant studies but also an approach that highlights the intersections between ecological relations, political economy, and cultural representations (Kirksey and Helmreich 2010). One crucial question underpins this approach: how do humans live with other animals, plants, and other living matter, within particular social and cultural worlds?

Obviously, there are remarkable methodological challenges in bringing these novel epistemological and theoretical paradigms together with practical methods and empirical data. How can we grasp the agency of organisms whose lives are entangled with human beings? What research methodologies can be developed for a multi-species ethnographic fieldwork? Wels (2020) proposes multi-sensory observations and an awareness of the shared sentience of human and non-human animals. He describes how and what he learned from tracing the methods of San in South Africa. Here, I wish to suggest also learning from myths and plural ontologies while simultaneously engaging with them critically.

## Planetary Health

Multi-species approaches correspond very well with the recent suggestion to replace the notion of global health (that is still human-centric) with the more integrated notions of

'one health' or 'planetary health'. The nascent planetary health approach examines the interrelationships between human health, political, economic, and sociocultural contexts as well as the natural systems of the planet (c.f. https://planetary- health-academy.de/en/). A relational health concept will prepare for future challenges by de-hierarchizing the human-animal-environment health triangle (Hanusch, Leggewie and Meyer 2021: 129) and focusing on the interdependencies between human health, structural contexts, and environmental issues. Or, to borrow the more poetic words of Dare and Fletcher (2021: 7), we are invited to "see ourselves anew in our entanglement: To see compassion, love, and care as centrepieces to our relationship with our planet." Thus, this approach strives to integrate human, animal, and plant health as well as climate, biodiversity, and related factors. It considers the health consequences of political change, globalized agriculture, deforestation, and inequalities – such as, for instance, the socioeconomic differences in COVID-19 infection risk and severity, or North–South vaccine inequities. Concerning this latter example, I would add that cultural and religious norms and values also play a crucial role in people's decisions to get vaccinated. In my view, the 'health' concept in planetary health approaches is still not broad enough, as it does hardly ever includes spiritual and religious ways of understanding nature and health. The Indonesian concept of alam (nature) or alam semesta (the universe) is just one example. It includes the supernatural realm (alam gaib) or alam arwah (the realm of the dead/the ancestors) as well as lingkungan alam (the natural environment). For many – not all – Indonesians health and healing are not only matters of biomedicine but also of medical pluralism. In addition to medical doctors, healers (ahli pengobatan, dukun, balian, or paranormal) are, at times, consulted by clients from all social strata and religious affilations. Their rituals and remedies are often based on relational ontologies in the sense that they connect their clients to other dimensions (the agency of spirits or numinous energies); as such, these healers professionally cross ontological boundaries.

## Conclusion

If we understand a planetary health approach to entail the recovery processes of all life on Earth, I would like to suggest that it should encompass not only all living beings but also include transcendent entities such as the above-mentioned spirits and mixed creatures as symbols of transgression and unity that can provide models for a new politics and way of thinking and living.

Religions are expected to offer protection and healing. In my view,

it is sound that most religious leaders emphasized during the pandemic that they saw no contradiction between religion and science. Not many of them interpreted the pandemic as a punishment for humanity's failure to conform to moral principles. Only in the beginning, around March 2020, did some Indonesian politicians say that the virus would be warded off by prayer and that the disease could be cured by positive thinking (Rasidi and Wijayanto 2021). The majority advised believers to follow scientists' recommendations, such as practicing social distancing and wearing masks. This contradicts the communal character of most religious rituals, be they Islamic, Christian, Hindu, or whatever (c.f. MacRae and Putra 2021). On the other hand, there have also been examples of (often low-level and fundamentalist) clergy who object to, for instance, vaccination. And there have been strong tendencies – enforced by social media – to instrumentalize the pandemic for old nationalist or religious animosities. Hindu-nationalists in India talked of a "Muslim Corona-Jihad"; people in Africa were suspicious that Europeans had brought the virus or toxic vaccines; and people in the United States and Europe blamed the Chinese for the pandemic. Thus, the well- known mechanism of othering and exclusion was applied once more. However, when we (students from Universitas Gadjah Mada, Universitas Indonesia, and the University of Freiburg, Germany, supervised by lecturers from all three universities) conducted a small comparative research project in Indonesia and Germany in 2020, we found that many pious people predominantly used the lockdown phase for self-reflection. They related that they experienced an intensification of individual practice and a strengthening of their faith during that period. However, at the same time, some people were disappointed by a lack of spiritual guidance and support from religious leaders and institutions.

What I wish to suggest with this paper is that the novel approach of planetary health could be further developed towards an understanding of health that encompasses a unity of living beings. It can find (symbolic) expression in mythical, mystical, transgressive figures "in between" polar opposites. Without giving up the critical analytical perspective of the social sciences, which strive to embed all phenomena within contexts and power structures, they can fruitfully inspire and remind us of the interrelatedness of nature and culture, human and other-than-human. If we both understand and feel this unity, and if we manage to create more livable social, political, ecological, and religious/ontological structures, a good life for all creatures becomes thinkable.

I hope that this will be understood not only as a philosophical intervention

but also as an invitation to reflect on the losses that arise when local beliefs and myths are suppressed in the context of repressive religious politics. Thus, coming to practical policy recommendations, I would suggest that instead of mainstreaming worldviews and religions, and instead of excluding, suppressing, or defaming local or indigenous beliefs and practices (as it is at times the case in Indonesia, esp. in the context of the so-called blasphemy law), governments should strive for openness and recognize a diversity of worldviews – not only in respect to the so-called world religions but also concerning non- institutionalized beliefs. In contrast to the philosopher Conty, who says "perhaps an animist ontology will become the new normal." (Conty 2021: 14), I hold that a future-oriented "new normal" would not seek to fix and determine any ontology, religion, worldview or ideology as "normal", but to open up discourse and society for constant learning, ongoing discussion, and negotiation between equals that provide space for true creativity, interspecies entanglement, and planetary health.[]

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