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# The Oriental Anthropologist

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## **Aims and Scope**

*The Oriental Anthropologist* is the official journal of the Oriental Institute of Cultural and Social Research (OICSR), Allahabad, and adheres to a *rigorous double-blind reviewing policy* in which the identity of both the reviewer and author are always concealed from both parties.

The journal publishes original and unpublished research articles in all major fields of the 'science of man', namely sociocultural anthropology, biological anthropology, archaeological anthropology and linguistic anthropology, with major emphasis on sociocultural and biological aspects.

Because 'Anthropology' is an interdisciplinary science that is concerned with all aspects of man of all time and space, articles relating to medical science and social science such as economics, political science, psychology, human geography and sociology are also considered for publication in this journal. Apart from original full-length research articles—both empirical and theoretical—the journal also publishes invited essays, review articles, commentaries, book reviews and memorials. Occasionally, special editions on specific themes with contemporary significance, written by eminent anthropologists as guest editors, also feature in this journal.

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**Special Issue:** Eco-cosmologies and the Spirit of Resilience

**Guest Editors:** Lidia Guzy, Uwe Skoda and Stefano Beggiora

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# Eco-cosmology, Sustainability, and a Spirit of Resilience: An Introduction

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Lidia Guzy<sup>1</sup> , Uwe Skoda<sup>2</sup> and Stefano Beggiora<sup>3</sup> 

## Abstract

Introduction to the Special Issue “Eco-cosmology, Sustainability, and a Spirit of Resilience.”

## Keywords

Social and cultural anthropology, indigenous worldviews, ecocosmologies, endangered worldviews

Ecological disasters, environmental collapses, and existential threats are real-time experiences of contemporary humanity. In an increasingly globalized world dominated by corporate interests of a military, digital, and financial complex, it is easy to lose hope and motivation. Given the scale of global and local destruction, it is crucial for us not to lose our moral orientation and resilience. This guidance can be offered from an anthropological perspective, which revisits indigenous knowledge of small-scale societies or minority cultures and examines their resilience and sustainability models of life.

“Small is beautiful” is a common saying among anthropologists. Looking at small-scale life-worlds and worldviews can be revealing and instructive when it comes to sustainability. This special issue on “Eco-cosmologies, Sustainability, and the Spirit of Resilience” suggests that indigenous and/or local knowledge traditions and their ritual practices could today be a key for finding local and global solutions for a truly sustainable local and global world of cultural and ecological diversity and mutuality. While demonstrating the resilience of small-scale systems of sustainable thinking and human and non-human relations, global forces (and values) of extraction, exploitation, and subjugation of humans and nature can be counter-balanced.

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We use the term “eco-cosmologies” as defined by Guzy (2021a, 2021b) as indigenous knowledge systems on sustainability. Eco-cosmologies are understood here as worldviews and life-worlds intrinsically relating the human to the non-human, to the cosmos, and the other-than-human sphere, such as trees, animals, rivers, and mountains, and responding with indigenous knowledge and experience to non-human and other-than-human challenges and human-made crisis to existence (see Guzy & Kapalo, 2017).

Local knowledge systems are understood by us as cultures of sustainability. Such a proposition, however, should not be misconceived as an idealization of indigenous communities or as subscribing to a widely held view that these communities generally share a harmonious relationship with nature. The authors are aware of the myriad ways in which well-intended elite discourses proposed by urban activists championing the cause of indigenous people may not be well aligned with local community concerns or, at times, even counterproductive. Foregrounding indigeneity in social movements may relegate other forms of stratification to the background, hinting at a “darker side of indigeneity” (Shah, 2010, pp. 9ff).

Considering local knowledge systems as cultures of sustainability, here we emphasize the existence of alternative ontologies and different worldviews. They are often embedded in heterogeneous ecological knowledge, a reflection of indigenous cosmologies, epistemologies, and ontologies (see Kopenawa & Albert, 2013). These local knowledge systems are often criminalized, colonized, subverted, or commodified. With the process of industrial extraction of natural resources, diverse indigenous, analogous (coexisting but different) peoples and local communities have been deprived of their fundamental human rights for secured livelihoods and preserved eco-systems. An industrial and digital neo-colonial intrusion into the territories and minds of indigenous and analogous peoples is taking place worldwide. Sacred landscapes have been reduced to mines—“sources of life” to “resources” (Padel, 2012, p. 50; Skoda, 2021). With ecological degradation, the vulnerable worldviews, rituals, practices, and knowledge systems of indigenous/analogous peoples and local communities are critically threatened.

Contemporary indigenous ecological knowledge systems are always transmitted through spiritual and ecological ritual practices, representing a profoundly non-dualistic perspective on human and non-human agencies in a mutually shared world and cosmos (Århem, 1996, pp. 166–184; Kopenawa & Albert, 2013).

With the ecological destruction alongside the modernization and rationalization project of modernity disconnecting the human from the non-human, the most valuable local knowledge resources and eco-cosmological worldviews have been endangered and have had to adapt to dramatic societal, moral, geographical, and ecological changes. Simultaneously with the ecological destruction, indigenous as well as local rural cultures and spiritual communities also continue to be devalued, ridiculed, and belittled as if they were opposed to a scientific worldview of global urban knowledge cultures.



But indigenous knowledge systems and local rural rationalities continue to exist! Despite the genocidal threats of historical colonial and contemporary neo-colonial missions and agendas, indigenous cultures continue to sustain their value and knowledge systems. These knowledge systems show remarkable resilience in the face of such ruptures and ongoing threats. Though critiqued as a highly slippery concept pointing in very different directions, it is meaningfully tied in the special issue to another concept that it indirectly implies, namely, vulnerability, which in turn points at ethical concerns and approaches (Vardy & Smith, 2017, pp. 175ff).


The special issue shares this concern and intends to honor and acknowledge the multitude of local alternative models of sustainability offered by often marginalized and endangered indigenous or local cultures who have been able to sustain and exist because of their spirit, namely, their value-oriented morality! The multitude of local alternative models of sustainability do not require any approval or correction by corporate- and market-driven models of a globally defined and certified “good life,” such as the United Nations SDGs. They represent local eco-cosmologies embedded in rural communities and traditional value systems.

The special issue is a selection of papers presented in the context of the international anthropological conference on “Eco-cosmology, Sustainability, and the Spirit of Resilience” that took place at University College Cork (UCC), Ireland, in September 2018. The anthropological event was organized by the Marginalized and Endangered Worldviews Study Centre (MEWSC), UCC; the Moral Foundations of Economy & Society research centre (MFES), UCC; and the Anthropological Association of Ireland. The conference also launched a new UCC Frontier program in MA Anthropology, which, meanwhile, has proven to be a very successful postgraduate anthropology program in Ireland.

We hope that with the special issue on “Eco-cosmology, Sustainability, and the Spirit of Resilience,” we will contribute to broad interdisciplinary discussions on the broad theme of environmental, cultural, and social sustainability with reference to indigenous/analogous peoples and local/rural communities.

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### Short bio of Guest Editors:

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**Uwe Skoda** is Associate Professor for India and South Asia Studies at the Department of Global Studies, Aarhus University. As a scholar, he is working on the one hand on visual culture and especially photography and on the other hand in the field of political anthropology - particularly transformations of kingship, indigeneity and domestic politics. His recent books include “Bonding with the Lord. Jagannath, Popular Culture and Community Formation” (Bloomsbury, 2020, co-edited with Jyotirmaya Tripathy).

**Stefano Beggiora** is associate professor of history and literature of India and anthropology (Indian tribal religions and society) in the Department of Asian and North African Studies at the Ca' Foscari University of Venice, Italy, where he received his PhD in 2006. He conducted extensive fieldwork missions and specializes in South Asian shamanism. He has published several articles, chapters, and books on Indian Ādivāsīs (Saoras, Konds, Apatanis, etc.), colonial history, constitutional framework and laws for safeguarding the Scheduled Tribes and Scheduled Castes, contemporary history of political movements of India, and a postdoctoral research, with fellowship granted by the European Social Fund, on Indian economics.