

The World Anthropological Union (WAU) Congress 2024 “Reimagining Anthropological Knowledge: Perspectives, Practices, and Power”, Johannesburg, South Africa, November 11-15, 2024.

The **World Anthropological Union (WAU) 2024 Congress**, themed “*Reimagining Anthropological Knowledge: Perspectives, Practices, and Power*,” took place at the Misty Hills Country Hotel and Conference Center in Johannesburg from November 11 to 15, 2024.

Notably, this event marked the **inaugural WAU Congress**. In 2023, the WAU Steering Committee officially declared that, starting with this gathering, the WAU Congress will serve as the successor to the longstanding **IUAES Congresses**, a tradition that began in 1934.

The WAU 2024 Congress issued its call for panels with the following invitation: “As a self-reflective and reflexive discipline Anthropology has seen concomitant shifts in knowledge and practice. Most notably, since the 1960s, we have seen [post-] theoretical movements: post-structuralism, postmodernism, post-colonialism, post-humanism, post postcolonialism> decolonial shifts. Anthropology enjoys a unique position amongst the social sciences – we value plural knowledge through cultural relativism and steadfastly oppose ethnocentrism, both of which contribute to our distinct perspectives. We recognize the constructed nature of knowledge and the power dynamics which shape our understanding of the world. Anthropological knowledge is ever-evolving – attend a congress that delves into the various facets of knowledge making and the diversity in the theoretical, geographical, and ontological dimensions of knowledge production.”

The Congress was organized through the collaborative efforts of **Anthropology**

Southern Africa (ASnA) and the **World Anthropological Union (WAU)**, which comprises two chambers: the International Union of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences (IUAES) and the World Council of Anthropological Associations (WCAA).

Anthropology Southern Africa (ASnA) serves as the professional association for social anthropologists living and working in Southern Africa, representing members across seven Southern African countries. ASnA organizes the largest anthropological conferences in the region and collaborates with anthropological organizations across the continent and the world. Additionally, it provides a platform for publishing academic research through its journal, *Anthropology Southern Africa*. Taking on a challenging yet significant role, ASnA spearheaded the organization of this inaugural WAU Congress.

The **World Anthropological Union (WAU)** serves as an inclusive and cooperative forum that energizes transnational anthropologies. It functions as the interface uniting the missions of the IUAES and the WCAA, fostering international person-to-person dialogues and promoting collaborative exchange among anthropological associations. As a member of the International Science Council (ISC) and the International Council for Philosophy and Human Sciences (CIPSH), WAU upholds the ethical and scientific values of the discipline, positioning itself as anthropology’s primary international organization.

The Congress was co-convened by Helen MacDonald (University of Cape Town), Treasurer of both WAU and ASnA, and Gcobani Qambela (University of Johannesburg), President of ASnA. The organizing committee included Isaac Nyamongo, Anita Nudelman, Gabriel

Darong, Gabby Dlamini, Karabelo Temesi, Melusi Dlamini, Tien Chen, Heather O'Leary, and Shabnam Shaik.

The Congress website, available at <https://waucongress.org/>, offers a comprehensive resource with a detailed overview of the program and associated activities.

The WAU Congress took place from November 11 to 15 at the Misty Hills Country Hotel and Conference Center in Johannesburg, near the Cradle of Humankind World Heritage Site, renowned for significant fossil discoveries, including the famous "Mrs Ples" and "Little Foot." The event welcomed anthropologists from various countries across all continents and was conducted in a hybrid format, allowing both on-site and virtual participation. Of the more than 1,000 attendees, one third participated on-site, while two thirds joined online. The program featured 124 thematic panels, 19 roundtables, 2 workshops, 5 lekgotlas, 5 film screenings, and 7 book presentations. The full program and event details are available at: <https://waucongress.org/#>.

The event spanned five days, encompassing a diverse array of plenary and parallel sessions. The **Congress Inauguration** took place on the morning of November 11, with welcoming addresses delivered by Helen MacDonald (WAU Treasurer and principal Congress organizer), Gordon Mathews (WCAA Chair), Isaac Nyamongo (IUAES President), and Gabby Dlamini (former ASnA President). These were followed by a keynote lecture by Dr. Kharnita Mohamed, titled "*Epistemic Debilitation and the Erasure of Genocide*." In the subsequent days, **keynote lectures** were presented by Dr. Ziyanda Majombozi (Stellenbosch University), Dr. Michael Rivera (University of Hong Kong), and Prof. Rosalva Aída

Hernández Castillo (CIESAS, Mexico City). The Closing Address was delivered by Dr. Kelly Gillespie (University of the Western Cape).

Lekgotlas were a distinctive feature of the WAU Congress. A lekgotla is a South African term referring to a public space for village assemblies, court cases, and meetings of village leaders, as well as the consultative processes between groups pursuing a common goal within these spaces. The aim of this session format was to connect Congress participants with local communities engaged in specific activities highlighted by the lekgotla organizers. The themes explored included: (1) Human Origins and Anthropology (at the Cradle of Humankind World Heritage Site), (2) Bridging Worlds: Contemporary African Art in Global Discourse (at the NIROX Sculpture Park), (3) Water: A Source of Life (at the Cradle Mood Conservancy), (4) Traditional Health Practitioners: Discussion/Learning/Collaboration (at the Walter Sisulu Botanical Gardens), and (5) Public Anthropology of Food: Interdisciplinary and Intercultural Insights on Nutrition and Human Health (at Stelle Restaurant).

The **parallel panels**, where the majority of papers were presented, encompassed a wide range of themes. While most were organized by **IUAES commissions** and some by **WCAA Task Forces**, others were curated by individual co-organizers from two or three different countries. English was the official language of communication throughout the Congress.

The **World Council of Anthropological Associations (WCAA)** sponsored several roundtables and panels during the Congress. On November 11, Virginia R. Dominguez and Carmen Rial organized a roundtable titled "*Good Practices on*

Global Publishing.” An engaging panel, “*World Anthropologies: The World Council of Anthropological Associations (WCAA), its Member-Associations and the Making of a Plural Community of Anthropologists,*” was held on November 12, organized by Bela Feldman-Bianco and Andrew ‘Mugsy’ Spiegel. On November 13, Clara Saraiva organized “*The WCAA and IUAES Roundtable on AI,*” while Michel Bouchard and Subhadra Channa convened a roundtable titled “*Whose Side are We On? Voices and Statements Emanating from Anthropologists to the World Community.*” The panel “*What are Anthropological Values? Comparisons Across the World,*” organized by Gordon Mathews and Thomas Hylland Eriksen, took place on November 14. The final day, November 15, featured the roundtable “*Tensions Between the Local and the Regional: Towards a Differentiated Articulation,*” organized by Lía Ferrero and Bela Feldman-Bianco.

The **WCAA Global Cultural Policies Task Force** played a pivotal role in co-organizing two Congress events. The first was the roundtable titled “*Post Everything, Everywhere, All at Once: Adapting to the Turbulence of a Rapidly Changing World,*” co-organized by Fadwa El Guindi and Luci Attala.

Sponsored by the **WCAA Global Cultural Policies Task Force** and the **UNESCO-BRIDGES Coalition**, the session was held on November 14 from 8:30 to 9:45 am and featured five speakers: Luci Attala (University of Wales Trinity Saint David, UNESCO-BRIDGES UK Hub Director), Isaac Nyamongo (Co-Operative University of Kenya, IUAES President and WAU Co-Chair), Vesna Vučinić Nešković (University of Belgrade, WCAA Global Cultural Policies Task Force Chair, WAU

Liaison with UNESCO-BRIDGES), Noel Salazar (Past President of EASA, Former IUAES Secretary-General, WAU Liaison with ISC), and Fadwa El Guindi (University of California, Los Angeles, Founder of El Nil Research). Originally, Steven Hartman (Arizona State University, UNESCO-BRIDGES Coalition Founding Executive Director) and Thomas Reuter (University of Melbourne, Past WCAA Chair, Past IUAES Senior Vice President, Deputy Chair of the Anthropology, Public Policy and Development Practice Commission) were also scheduled to speak, but unforeseen circumstances prevented their participation. For further details, see the roundtable page: <https://waucongress.org/roundtable/?id=799>.

This roundtable explored the paradox that, despite having the most “educated” population in history, the world is on the brink of ecological and systemic breakdown (The Commons World Collective 2020, citing Orr 2011). As forecasts of global existential uncertainties mount, calls for transformative change span economic, social, educational, ethical, political, and environmental domains, while “business as usual” becomes increasingly untenable. Yet such transformation remains contested, generating novel tensions between local and global forces, shifting power structures, and polarizing political identities. The roundtable examined anthropology’s role in understanding and responding to these urgent calls for change. Drawing on post-capitalist, post-growth, and post-development frameworks, speakers analyzed both bottom-up initiatives that transcend national boundaries and top-down globalized approaches addressing humanity’s predicaments. Key topics included the value of creative, transdisciplinary approaches to

adaptation, the implications of climate change for humankind, the complexity of shifting geopolitical alignments, fostering local-to-global societal transformation through experimental pedagogies, and anthropology's potential to confront global change. By critically reflecting on transformations underway – or yet to occur – this discussion offered perspectives on navigating the turbulence of a rapidly changing world.

The second event co-organized by the WCAA Global Cultural Policies Task Force was a panel titled “*Toward a Decentred Anthropology of Inquiry: Engaging with China, Reimagining Sociality*,” organized by Ellen R. Judd and Vesna Vučinić Nešković.

Sponsored by the **WCAA Global Cultural Policies Task Force** and the **IUAES Anthropology, Public Policy and Development Practice Commission**, the panel took place on November 11, from 14:45 to 16:15. The session featured six speakers: Furong Wan (Changsha University of Science and Technology), Jieyu Liu (SOAS), Marta Nešković (Institute of Political Studies in Belgrade), Vesna Vučinić Nešković (University of Belgrade), Ellen R. Judd (University of Manitoba), and Tien Chen (Creative Chief at Wabuntu). Details on paper topics are available here: <https://system.waucongress.org/tools/timetable.html#monday>.

This panel explored a route toward decentring anthropology by engaging with practices of knowledge creation in China, challenging the dominance of Western perspectives. Grounded in China's distinctive intellectual traditions and contemporary innovations, the panel examined how knowledge practices are embedded in culturally specific modes of sociality and agency. Processes of social

transformation in China, from land reforms to evolving family relations and rural-urban mobility, highlight a rich landscape of locally embedded knowledge creation. Anthropology's ethnographic approach reveals these dynamic processes as instances of “knowing the world differently together” and offers tools to rethink and decentre anthropological knowledge. The panel solicited and engaged a range of knowledges in areas including agricultural land reform, water containment and flood management, landscape design, cultural heritage, family strategies, and public health and healthcare, demonstrating the potential for diverse studies to reimagine anthropological inquiry.

Numerous **business meetings** formed an integral part of the Congress agenda. The **IUAES General Assembly**, which took place on November 13, provided an overview of key activities since the IUAES-WAU 2023 Congress in India. Following a similar agenda, the **WAU Constituency Meeting** reported on parallel developments. Both assemblies announced the upcoming Congress, scheduled for **November 3-8, 2025**, in **Antigua, Guatemala**, under the theme “*Unearthing Humanity: Critical and Urgent Epistemic Redefinitions in World Anthropologies*.” Further details can be found on the Guatemala Congress website: <https://s5g5y.mjlp.lu/lp/s5g5y/OQT-ndCk9z433h2xmrVnB7>.

The WCAA-related meetings, namely the “*WCAA Symposium on Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)*” and the WCAA Delegates Meeting, were held on November 9 and 10 at the Holiday Inn Sunnyside Park in Johannesburg. Both were full-day events conducted in a hybrid format, with 30 participants in total, the majority of whom were delegates

and Organizing Committee members attending on-site. The WCAA Symposium addressed a variety of approaches to the issue of SDGs, featuring 18 paper presentations.

The **WCAA Delegates Meeting** was chaired by Gordon Mathews, the current Chair of WCAA. The first part of the meeting featured reports from the Chair, Treasurer, and Task Force Coordinator. The subsequent discussion focused primarily on issues regarding elected and appointed roles within the WCAA Organizing Committee. The outcomes of this discussion aimed to facilitate changes to the WCAA Constitution and its Operational Guidelines and Rules.

It was reported that **WCAA task forces** continued their active engagements. The current task forces include the Global Cultural Policies Task Force, Academic Precarity Task Force, WCAA Publishing Council, and the Anthropological Values Task Force (which replaced the Making Anthropology Global Task Force), as well as the Ethics Task Force, and the newly established Associations and World Anthropologies: Strengthening Dialogues, Fostering Joint Activities and Social Solidarities Task Force.

The discussion also addressed the need to identify **new task forces** that may be required in the future. Additionally, the meeting highlighted the ongoing success of **WAU Webinars** as a vibrant platform for engaging with intellectually and politically relevant anthropological issues. Delegates were invited to suggest new webinar topics for the coming months, promoting a collaborative and proactive approach to tackling emerging concerns.

In addition to the academic sessions and business meetings, the WAU Congress in Johannesburg provided numerous

opportunities to engage with local culture. Firstly, the Lekgotlas, held in various local settings, functioned as workshops for exploring and engaging with different domains of South African culture. Secondly, The Cradle Concierge Services organized a range of engaging tours for Congress participants, including the Lesedi Cultural Village, where the architecture of various African tribes was showcased alongside traditional dances, singing, cuisine, and souvenirs representing their cultural heritage, including home life and dress.

The WAU Congress 2024 can be considered a resounding success. Conducted in a hybrid format, it posed significant challenges for the organizers and technical staff, who had to coordinate both physical and online events. Despite these complexities, participants attending in person had the opportunity to fully immerse themselves in the Congress's intellectual, cultural, and social richness. This experience clearly highlights the unique advantages and benefits of hosting congresses in a live format.

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