

Introduction – Approaching Climate Change Adaptation: Knowledge, Power, Communication

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The consequences of human-induced climate change are as diverse as the adaptation strategies people have started to develop. Approaches to climate change range from local initiatives to national and global programs and are embedded in various knowledge systems and partially contesting world views. This special issue aims to improve the understanding of those dynamics that are linked to knowledge, power, and communication when adapting to the diverse repercussions of climate change. The communication and integration of this situated knowledge are considered crucial for fair and transparent climate change adaptation measures. However, this integration is also described as problematic, highlighting different epistemologies, competing political agendas, societal and economic inequalities, and clashing ontologies. The impact of climate change on society is currently discussed mostly in terms of adaptation, resilience, and vulnerability. Ideas of adaptation are often regarded as “neutral” drivers of action and seem to be “the only viable option for survival” (de Wit 2014, 57). However, the rationalities which characterize current adaptation concepts are criticized because they have been shaped predominantly by the natural sciences and ignore aspects of climate justice as well as social, cultural, political, and economic conditions on the ground (Nightingale et al. 2020).

Scholars from the environmental humanities, including folklorists, who focus on knowledge-power relations, diverse actors, and the different crises narratives which

shape the development, communication, and application of adaptational strategies, have underlined the need to overcome the naturalizations and depoliticizations of climate change adaptations (Klepp & Chavez-Rodriguez 2018). These scholars demand a critical examination of the biopolitical implications of adaptation concepts (Taylor 2015), such as inclusion and exclusion processes, and call for approaches sensitive to cultural diversity, power relations, economic interests, and rationalities in adaptation settings which include postcolonial and decolonizing research perspectives (Chakrabarty 2012). These kinds of research approaches are also meant to enforce the use of local environmental knowledge (Barnes et al. 2013; Eriksen 2021; Klepp & Fünfgeld 2021)—often expressed in agricultural heritage, traditional craftsmanship (Bakels & Bisschop 2023), or particular modes of storytelling (Hermann & Kempf 2018; Fatorić & Egberts 2020)—and transcend dichotomies between humans and their environments. Thus, they also open up to different ontologies regarding nature(s) and new emerging rights discourses (Burgers & den Outer 2021). An increasing number of “natural entities”—forests, rivers, mountains – are recognized globally as legal entities with enforceable rights.¹

Nevertheless, the recognition of legal subjectivity and consequent legal rights over natural entities is not sufficient, because it does not question the principle behind the capitalist accumulation mechanism that first made nature separate and appropriable, which is the same mechanism now making it an object of protection. This is a classic analysis of capitalism: nature is described and produced as an entity external to society, either in terms of objective reality and, therefore, commodifiable, or insurmountable limits that require the recalibrating of optimistic and unilinear models of economic growth within the new oxymoron of sustainable development. This nature/society dichotomy, from Descartes and Bacon onward, has been the basis of Western capitalist ontology (Patel & Moore 2017). This also implies a hierarchy of power in which the human dominates nature, and what is, occasionally, described as natural is, by subtraction, defined by what is not human, following specific strategies of domination and subalternization:

The human ‘separation from nature’ took shape around a truly massive exclusion. The rise of capitalism gave us the idea not only that society was relatively independent of the web of life, but also that most women, Indigenous Peoples, slaves and colonized peoples everywhere were not fully human and thus not full members of society. These were people who were not – or were only barely – human. They were part of Nature, treated as social outcasts – they were *cheapened*. (Patel & Moore 2017, 24)

Cheapness, depreciation being the core strategy of capitalistic accumulation, through the relationships of life is made into the circuits of production and consumption at “as low a price as possible” (Patel & Moore 2017). However, the ecological crisis and climate change prove dramatically, now more than ever, that nature is never cheap (Moore 2014, 2015). One cannot address climate change without questioning capitalism as a specific ecological regime (cheap nature, Moore 2011) and its reductivist dualistic ontology.

This special issue aims to improve the understanding of those dynamics that are linked to knowledge, power, and communication when adapting to the diverse repercussions of climate change. The contributing authors focus in their ethnographic case studies on the producing, distributing, communicating, and contesting of knowledge in different geopolitical and social contexts, ranging from dealing with the spreading of algae on Mexican beaches to the increase of ticks in Finland, and from participatory energy practices in Italy to the unexpected results of climate change adaptation workshops in Vanuatu.

Different questions are addressed in the contributions corresponding to broader discussions of climate change adaptations we, as editors, would like to take up in this introduction. We will refer to discussions on different engagements with climate change policies, the use of cultural heritage and traditional knowledge in climate change adaptation, and the necessity of developing more-than-human research and policy perspectives to decenter and enrich human-centered approaches in climate adaptation research.

Engaging with Climate Change Policies

The fight against the repercussions of anthropogenic climate change has taken shape in diverse forms of legal and political instruments: extending from the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, to the Green Deal of the European Union and its implementations on the national level of the member states, and to communal or local instruments. Instead of an evaluation on how the projected aims of these policies have been achieved, our contributions, in the spirit of an anthropology of policies, instead ask: “How do people engage with policy and what do they make of it?” (Shore & Wright 2011, 8). This question implies further questions relating to the appropriation of climate change policies and how they are framed in different settings.

Vanuatu is a Small Island Development State (SIDS) in Oceania which is severely affected by the consequences of climate change. In his article, Arno Pascht discusses the effects on Ni-Vanuatu communities that are in the focus of many international climate change policies, including on the ground, climate change workshops. These are often organized by mobile international consultants that follow a rather Western service and profit-oriented logic. The workshops are meant to deliver visible outcomes within a short time (Klepp & Fünfgeld 2021) working with what Keele calls “actionable climate knowledge” (2019, 9), which is based on a classical dichotomy between nature and culture. Pascht discusses how well the villagers link their traditional knowledge and practices of diversifying their livelihoods to the new challenges of climate change—modifying or neglecting the knowledge offered by the climate change adaptation workshops based on Western knowledge that does not fit their needs and socio-ecological imaginaries.

On the contrary, in a case study illustrated by Laura K. Otto, climate change adaptation policies in Mexico follows the logic of capitalism and commodification, and is far away from activating local or traditional knowledge. The regional and national government’s response to the harmful coastal Sargassum algae bloom prioritizes the

whims of the tourism industry instead of focusing on the needs of coastal communities and their livelihood securities as much as on the environment. It becomes obvious that policies of climate change adaptation or so-called “second-order effects” of climate change regarding the effects of climate change policies bear the great risk of creating new vulnerabilities and injustices for these already marginalized communities.

However, while the insight into the necessity of climate protection policies and adaptation efforts is growing, the design and goal of these politics and measures are contested, also in societies of the Global North (Adloff & Neckel 2020). The question of which structural changes and social innovations are required, or whether only minor changes in (environmental) policy and the use of technical solutions are sufficient, is disputed (Nightingale et al. 2020). The contribution of Monica Musolino, Fabio Mostaccio, Erika D’Aleo, and Agatino Nicita regarding two communities in Northern and Southern Italy where cooperative cohousing management practices promote the emergence of shared energy consumption shows how initiatives for climate mitigation, energy independence of communities, and a deeper, structural transformation can trigger social innovation dynamics. Based on the idea of sharing and caring, we can learn from this case study that climate change might also work as a resource and a catalyst for desirable social innovation.

Approaching and Coping with Climate Change through Storytelling, Narratives, and Cultural Heritage

Scholars from different disciplines (Nisbet 2018), and surely, not least, folklore scholars, ethnologists, and anthropologists, have broadly investigated how climate change is communicated, narratively framed, and translated: for instance, from metric data into societal discourses calling for action (Becker 2020), in terms of climate knowledge and climate justice (Flor 2020), or with reference to different climate change temporalities (Kverndokk et al. 2021). Storytelling is considered an adaptation strategy to bring forward local ecological knowledge and support communities affected by severe impacts of climate change leading to migration and a tearing apart of social and cultural relations.²

The Ni-Vanuatu create new local ontologies of climate change speaking of *klaemet jenj* and *envaeromen*. Pascht argues that these should not be understood as literal translations into the local Bislama language but rather as ontological innovations more apt to their holistic world view. Here, the Western concept of climate change, which is linked more to natural science explanations of changing environments, is altered and narratively linked to social degradation and capitalist lifestyles – what could better illustrate the socio-ecological crisis of our times than such a relational socio-ecological concept of climatic change?

The building of cohousing/energy communities looked at by Monica Musolino, Fabio Mostaccio, Erika D’Aleo, and Agatino Nicita centers on mutual trust. The authors show how trust is established in this community by cocreating a “suitable language” that enables all of the heterogenous community members to follow and participate in the learning of ecologically as much as socially more sustainable ways of living, and

goes far beyond the simple employment of new technical reconfigurations.

Changing environments can be fundamentally distressing and emotionally harmful—an emotional state that philosopher Glenn Albrecht calls *solastalgia* (2005). Sanna Lillbroända-Annala, in her Finnish case study on human-tick relations, employs this term to describe people’s perception of nature and their behavior in the outdoors, which has changed dramatically due to the increase of ticks because of climate change. For many people fearing diseases transmitted by ticks, carefree days in the garden or the forest belong in the past. When discussing the narratives of loss and pain over a “risk-free” nature she finds in newspaper articles, social media entries as much as in the results of questionnaires, Lillbroända-Annala demonstrates how the “new risks of nature” have led to certain novel habits as a form of adaptation.

Intangible cultural heritage (ICH) operates through the awareness of local knowledge and skills as well as connected traditions, customs, stories, and narratives (UNESCO 2022). The knowledge and skills expressed in intangible heritage provide its practitioners with a sense of identity and continuity. Taking place in the present, ICH has relationships with the past, but is, above all, understood as a practice of future-making (Harrison 2020). The ICH bearers transmit their knowledge and skills to future generations. The potential of intangible heritage, and heritage in general, as a resource for climate change management and sustainable futures is well-documented (Bakels & Elpers 2021; Ballard et al. 2022, 16), however, it seems to be relatively underutilized by policymakers (Fatorić & Egberts 2020, 1 and 6; Wagner 2023). UNESCO’s strong emphasis on intangible heritage as a source of community-based resilience which can drive climate change adaptation and mitigation, and the organization’s call to state parties to “promote access to and transmission of knowledge concerning the earth and the climate” should lead to communication and coordination between all relevant sectors (culture, environment, climate) and foster inclusive policies that link ICH and climate action (UNESCO 2022, Chapter VI.3).

Those policies should also recognize the passive components of intangible heritage: as ICH is linked to specific ecosystems, it can contribute to a more resilient approach to climate change, but, at the same time, is at risk of being lost if climate change affects the environment (e.g. Wagner 2023 for the South Pacific region).

The 2023 multinational nomination of the traditional sustainable agricultural technique of grassland irrigation for the UNESCO *Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity* is presently receiving a lot of attention. This under-acknowledged method used in Austria, Belgium, Germany, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, and Switzerland involves a sophisticated system in which grasslands are irrigated by water from rivers, streams, and springs. It uses gravitational force and relies on manually created constructions, such as channels and ditches, to distribute water from naturally occurring water catchment points closer to the fields. The nomination file describes the traditional irrigation as “a community-based, sustainable, adaptable, energy-independent and biodiversity-minded water supply solution in agriculture that is of great importance to the practitioners themselves and the wider communities of people collaborating or profiting from its impact on the environment” (Nomination file no. 01979). Anthropologists, ethnologists, heritage experts, and others will have to

explore how the UNESCO instrument of listing grassland irrigation as ICH will have effects in the future: which knowledge resources will be mobilized, and in which way this intervention of heritage policy may have an impact on climate change policies and the further development of climate adaptation measures (SIEF 2021).³

Climate Change Adaptation in More-than-Human Entanglements

It goes without saying that changing climate conditions do not affect humans alone but all living beings and their environments; starving polar bears losing habitat and hunting grounds due to melting ice caps are by far the most iconic image of the climate crisis. Even though these multiple “others” experience severe harm and existential threats (e.g. Bastian & Hawitt 2023), besides some charismatic animals, they have received little attention in current Western discussions on climate justice. In order to enrich and decenter this human-centered approach, calls for multispecies justice have become louder, demanding climate-just futures with, for, and beyond humans (Celermajer et al. 2021); a perspective that also seems much more in line with non-Western and nondualistic perceptions and ontologies of nature and culture.

However, there are also species which adapt and gain from changing weather conditions as they can increase their reproductive cycles or expand their habitat. The contributions of Sanna Lillbroända-Annala on ticks moving increasingly towards northern areas and of Laura K. Otto on the propagation of Sargassum algae landing on Mexican beaches demonstrate this vividly. These new multispecies relations are anything but welcome: in both case studies, there are worries about health risks, even though in the case study of Mexican coastal communities, these are overshadowed by an outcry of the tourist industry losing attractive destinations. Another realm severely affected by new more-than-human entanglements promoted by climate variabilities is agriculture, where the spreading of pests has increased (Peselmann 2023). These harm vegetal, animal, and eventually also human life by putting food security and economic survival of particularly small-scale farmers at risk (FAO 2022). Animals and particularly plants can develop strategies to adapt to new climatic conditions – usually over a longer period of time. These processes are often enforced and accelerated by human intervention, such as the breeding of new and more resistant varieties (with or without the assistance of biotechnology). The development of modified plant varieties can still lead to a maladaptation if political structures and economic conditions do not support a transition: the introduction of new plant varieties with their specific needs might also increase the dependencies of growers and, thereby, their vulnerability, as is shown in the fight against coffee leaf rust in Mexico, a fungus which profits from climatic variabilities (Ruiz-de-Oña & Merlin-Urbe 2021).

Attempts have been made toward an allyship with plants to support the mitigation of climate change repercussions. In Pascht’s article, participants of a workshop on climate change adaptation are encouraged to collaborate with *gliricidia sepium*, a tree meant to fix nitrogen in the soil and, thus, fertilize the surrounding ecosystem. This experiment failed, but there are other more successful approaches that include the planting of trees and other vegetation to reduce surface and air temperatures by

providing shade and through evapotranspiration—an effect used especially to deal with heat islands in urban environments (e.g. Dümpelmann 2020).

To summarize, this collection of articles demonstrates the potential for developing more effective and just climate change adaptation policies and interventions through the utilization of ICH, traditional knowledge, and localized multispecies relationships. To put these concepts into practice, we must explore, analyze, and scrutinize climate adaptation as a powerful tool of governance and future-making. Heritage expert Janna oud Ammerveld responds in her article to the contributions of this issue and questions the concept of adaptation as a human challenge. She calls for humanities scholars to develop their core concepts and research methods to address these issues. Adaptation seems to her to be referring to a seemingly well-balanced past that we need to give up and, instead, accept a changed future we do not feel comfortable with nor ready for. She suggests replacing the concept of adaptation with *solastalgia* as it contains, in her understanding, more of a much-needed awareness and sentiment of the presence. Furthermore, she proposes looking for a *solastalgia* for the future, asking the question of “what’s ahead that we desire?” The humanities have a crucial role to play when looking for answers to this question for a desirable world under the conditions of climate change. The humanities, with their epistemological heritage, methods and analytical frameworks, are key to understanding people and their cultural resources in changing ecological times. We should make the discipline’s expertise and resources accessible and jump deeper into the messy realities, normative discussions, and political struggles for a just transformation.

Notes

- 1 One example is the Whanganui River, one of New Zealand’s longest rivers. After the Māori struggle to save the Whanganui for more than a century, the courts in New Zealand ruled in 2017 that the river was a separate entity, with the Māori and the New Zealand government as guardians. Such legal decisions are no longer isolated cases. The Spanish inland sea Mar Menor was the first European ecosystem to become a legal entity in 2022.
- 2 Maida Owens from the Louisiana Folklife Program argues in her workshop “Climate Change Needs Folklorists” that folklorists should employ their skills to engage with policymakers and participate in community resilience conversations (see: <https://american-folkloresociety.org/resources/climate-change-needs-folklorists-a-workshop-with-maida-owens/>).
- 3 It can only be mentioned briefly here that museums also play a central role in the documentation and communication of climate change knowledge and skills attached to diverse cultural heritage elements. Scholars and museum experts, such as Fiona Cameron (2015) and Rodney Harrison together with Colin Sterling (2021), strongly emphasize that museums

should use their transformative potential and adopt activist approaches. To achieve this, museums need a new vocabulary and new knowledge practices, and they must present the complexity of our world in a differentiated and self-reflective way. In many respects, museums are, therefore, in a state of change and rediscovery regarding the question: What do the museums of the present and future look like?

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