

# Elke Mader Obituary (1954–2021)

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After Elke Mader was appointed to the Chair of Social and Cultural Anthropology at the University of Vienna in 2006, she declared that she had not ultimately expected to obtain a permanent position in academia. Two decades of precarious work and temporary jobs left her unsure about her future as an anthropologist. Thirteen years later and six months before her planned retirement, Elke was diagnosed with cancer. After two years fighting the illness, she passed away on 8 August 2021 at the age of 67. This obituary touches on a selection of Elke's research, teaching and academic achievements. It does not pretend to be exhaustive in any way but rather aims to showcase aspects and pieces of Elke's academic interests that the authors shared with her at particular moments in time.

Elke was closely associated with the Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology of the University of Vienna since her undergraduate studies in sociocultural anthropology (*Völkerkunde*). In 1986, she completed her doctorate with a thesis on subsistence and the organization of work among the Achuar of the Peruvian Amazon. With a study on personhood, vision and power among the Shuar and Achuar in Ecuador and Peru, Elke became one of the first women to defend a post-doctoral thesis (*Habilitation*) at the Department in 1997. Both theses resulted from intensive fieldwork. She spent a total of 38 months in Peru, most of the time together with the late Richard Gippelhauser, and she conducted another 18 months of research in Ecuador.

From 1986 to 2004, Elke was an adjunct lecturer with temporary contracts at the Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology in Vienna, and a lecturer and visiting professor at other institutions, such as the Austrian Latin America Institute and the

Gender College of the University of Vienna. After a two-year substitute professorship, in 2006 she was appointed to be the first female full professor at the Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology of the University of Vienna. Elke also held several administrative positions in the University: vice dean of the Faculty of Social Sciences (2008–2012), deputy director of the Study Programme for Social and Cultural Anthropology (2012–2014), director of the Interdisciplinary Programme for Higher Latin American Studies (2013–2017), and head (2014–2016) and deputy head (2016–2018) of the Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology.

Besides her teaching and administrative duties, Elke developed her research and publication record. Her fields of interest included Amazonian anthropology, the anthropological study of myth, ritual and religion, the anthropology of tourism, globalization and media as well as visual anthropology. Later in her career, she became particularly interested in globalization processes in relation to Indian cinema and film, as well as in ritual dynamics in rural Austria. Elke also pioneered the development and implementation of e-learning and blended or hybrid learning and teaching in sociocultural anthropology and the social sciences in general. Besides running her own projects, she supervised and co-supervised more than 300 academic theses, which addressed a diversity of research topics.

In her own research among Indigenous communities in the Amazon rainforests of Peru and Ecuador, she became increasingly interested in questions about personhood, cosmologies, ontologies, world views, globalization, mythologies and rituals. The phrase ‘once upon a time’ was central to Elke’s theoretical and empirical work on myth and ritual (Mader 2008). She understood any type of narrative performance – oral traditions, legends, fairy tales and storytelling in general – as a means of making sense of the world and its polyphonic discourses. Elke was particularly interested in the relationships between myth and ritual, narration and action. Looking at this dynamic relationship also means investigating how knowledge is being transmitted and transferred, and how this constitutes a space of reflection, evaluation and critique (Mader 2018).

Elke’s first major contribution to the anthropology of myth was her work on personhood and vision-quest among the Shuar and Achuar in Ecuador and Peru (Mader 1999). She developed a theoretical and methodological approach to the very notion of the ‘person’ by exploring how identity, self-awareness and social roles and behaviour are tightly interconnected with a person’s vision-quest. This interconnectedness eventually results in the transfer of myth to social reality. Through her work with Indigenous People from the Amazonian region, Elke became increasingly interested in the legacy and consequences of colonialism in Latin America, such as political and economic instability, social inequality, classism, discrimination and racism. Social inequalities, and in particular the discrimination against Indigenous People, led her to learn more about the Indigenous world, culture, language and ontology.

Elke aimed at also utilising her research to contribute to a more equal, just and intercultural society. For this reason, for instance, she decided to publish her post-doctoral

thesis in Spanish (Mader 1999). Even today, this book is widely used among students and teachers in Ecuador and beyond. Elke's research and academic practices contributed to what has been termed 'knowledge dialogue' in Ecuador. This dialogue is a result of Indigenous activism and projects of intercultural education and aims to contribute to the formation of a more equal and just society by reducing discriminatory practices. In particular, higher education has been called upon to promote the sharing of knowledge, to strengthen, advance and motivate the dialogue between scientific and traditional knowledge systems, to contribute to the production of diverse knowledge that emerges in the Global South and to train professionals accordingly.

By building further on her long-term ethnographic research in Latin America, Elke also provided new perspectives on analyzing ritualized practices and mythical language. In doing so, she was eager to transfer her insights to other thematic and regional fields (Mader 2008). Elke published widely on shamanism and the issue of power in different contexts (e.g. Mader 2007, 2018; Rubenstein and Mader 2006). She wrote about the magical discourse of love and questions of sex and gender (Mader 2004). Furthermore, she developed a passion for cinema and explored myth and ritual in this context, taking particular pleasure in exploring the universal trickster in many different forms and appearances (Davis-Sulikowski and Mader 2007). Bollywood and Hindi film became another major interest of hers. Elke explored this media phenomenon and its connection to other digitally mediated social spaces and environments, such as online communities, by focusing in particular on one of the major stars of this global mythscape: the actor, director and producer Shah Rukh Khan (Dudrah et al. 2015; Mader 2011).

This research led Elke to understand the internet as a proper anthropological field-site that needs to be explored in depth. What is it that people create when they communicate and interact online, in internet forums, via mobile apps and on social media platforms? Questioning the conceptualization of 'digital togetherness' has been at the very centre of the interdisciplinary project of internet studies, as well as of anthropology's growing interest in 'the digital'. While doing research on Bollywood fans and their various digital practices, Elke did not shy away from deploying seemingly far-fetched concepts to describe and analyse different forms of digital sociality. In doing so, she fell back on Turner's concepts of 'communitas' and 'liminality' and on Overing's conceptualization of 'conviviality' (Mader 2011).

Conviviality accentuates the affective side of sociality and the virtues of sharing and generosity, as opposed to the structural functioning of society. It thus allows us to contribute to the understanding of distinct ways of living, experiencing and feeling sociality, including in a digital context. Elke demonstrated that digital fan practices, such as the creation and circulation of Bollywood fan art, co-constitute a space for experiencing various dimensions of conviviality (Mader 2015). By building on her extensive knowledge of anthropological theories and social life in Amazonia, and by connecting that with her interest in digital media and technologies, she contributed to the emerging fields of the anthropological study of fans and digital anthropology alike (Mader 2019).

Despite spending most of her academic career in precarious positions, and despite a less than ideal student-teacher ratio at the Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology in the University of Vienna, Elke was always keen to teach, supervise and support students and junior colleagues alike. Building on this passion for teaching and sharing knowledge, and her genuine interest in digital media, new technologies and didactic developments, she initiated and led various teaching and learning projects. Elke formed a team of anthropologists with a common interest in technology and teaching to pioneer in the creation and implementation of technology-enhanced learning and teaching in sociocultural anthropology and in the social sciences in general.

From 2001 to 2004, Elke led an interdisciplinary project at the Austrian Latin America Institute to produce digital learning material for the physically non-existent Latin American Studies in Austria ('Latin American Studies Online/LASON'). This material was made openly available and has been used by a variety of institutions and individuals in and beyond the university context (Mader et.al. 2004). The follow-up project 'OEKU-Online' (2004–2006) continued to produce open and interdisciplinary learning content, though now with a focus on the relationships between economy, culture and environment. Furthermore, a team of teachers and researchers collaboratively developed and implemented hybrid learning scenarios and environments by blending e-learning with face-to-face learning (Mader et al. 2006).

As a full professor, Elke took further technology-enhanced learning projects to the University of Vienna. This time, however, these projects not only produced learning and teaching material, they also continued to develop learning environments, scenarios and related methodological tools to be included strategically in different curricula at the University of Vienna. First, these scenarios and strategies were included in the social and cultural anthropology study programme within the project 'Strategies for Networked Learning' (2006–2008) (Mader et.al. 2008). When Elke was vice dean of the Faculty of Social Sciences between 2008 and 2012, these learning and teaching scenarios and strategies also became key elements in the then newly developed interdisciplinary introduction phase for students at the Faculty of Social Sciences ('eSOWI-STEP', 'SOWI-STEOP' and 'Content Creation for SOWI-STEOP') (e.g., Budka et al. 2011).

All of Elke's projects – research and teaching alike – built upon her ability to cooperate, motivate and share knowledge, as well as on her unpretentiousness and fairness. She ensured, for example, that the achievements of project partners and participants were always properly acknowledged and recognized. In addition, she promoted junior academics and supported colleagues throughout her career, for instance by encouraging joint publications or by initiating series of lectures.

Throughout her academic life, Elke was a role model in many ways. In the 1980s she was a fearless ethnographer who ventured into the unknown. In the 1990s she was an academic who had to fight professional precarity. In the 2000s and at the height of her academic career, she was a full professor who stood for integrity, cohesion and especially for the uncompromising support of students. We will remember Elke as a

sensitive, respectful and curious anthropologist. She always raised questions and did not pretend to know all the answers. She loved fieldwork and was genuinely interested in people. She enjoyed looking at the world ‘with stars in her eyes’ while attempting to get a better understanding of the world’s complexity.

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