

## Obituary Elke Mader (1954 – 2021)

By *Ernst Halbmayer\**

Elke Mader, friend, colleague and professor in the Department of Cultural and Social Anthropology at the University of Vienna from 2006 to 2020, passed away on 8 August 2021 at the age of 67 after a long illness. I had known Elke since the late 1980s when she started to lecture at the Department in Vienna. She defended her doctoral thesis (Mader 1985) on subsistence and work organisation among the Achuar of the Peruvian Amazon with a focus on time allocation and gender under the supervision of Prof. Walter Dostal in 1986. At that time, she had already conducted a total of 21 months of fieldwork among the Achuar, together with Richard Gippelhauser (Gippelhauser & Mader 1990) at the Rio Huasaga, in the Loreto Department of Peru.

My cooperation with Elke became more intense when I returned from my doctoral fieldwork amongst the Yukpa of Venezuela in 1992. At that time, Elke had already started to work in Ecuador among the Shuar in the Morona-Santiago Province in the Upano Valley, focusing on new topics such as mythology, visionquest rites, gender relations, intercultural relations, history and the current socio-political organisation of the Shuar. These themes became formative for her future scholarly work and developed in different directions over the following decades. Over the years, our ongoing exchange on Lowland South American Anthropology developed further and included publication projects, the organisation of conference workshops and teaching events.

In 1992, Latin America – and especially Amazonia – had moved to the forefront of an emerging decolonial and ecological consciousness triggered by criticisms of the quincennial celebrations of the so-called discovery of the Americas, as well as the UN Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro during the same year. Both events provided a new global awareness, visibility and political support for the rapidly strengthening indigenous movement in Latin America. In this context, Elke was engaged in raising consciousness for

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indigenous concerns and perspectives based on her experience among Aénts Chicham speakers, as the Shuar/Achuar languages are called today. She co-edited works on indigenous resistance (GfbV 1992), indigenous politics of nature (Mader 1994), the Shuar Federation (Mader & Sharup 1993) as well as the history of Shuar resistance (Mader 1992).

Between 1990 and 2000, she worked for another two and a half years among the Shuar of Ecuador and returned to her first field site in Peru among the Achuar in 1991 for an additional three months; this rich ethnographic experience provided the basis for developing her ethnography on transformational and composite Shuar/Achuar personhood, a concept that emerged from a detailed analysis of myth, vision quest rituals and personal power. This work (Mader 1996), which was later published in Spanish entitled *Metamorfosis del poder* (1999), was submitted as a postdoctoral thesis (Habilitation) and defended in 1997. She became, as far as can be traced, the first woman to defend a postdoctoral thesis at the Department of Cultural and Social Anthropology in Vienna. After her Habilitation, she continued to work in Ecuador in the context of the FWF – Austrian Science Fund Project ‘Intercultural relations and knowledge transfer in shamanic and folk medicine traditions of Latin America’ until 2000.

Elke’s interest in myth, ritual and power was always articulated in terms of transformation and circulation: The transformations that myths describe and rituals perform, as well as the transformations that myths and ritual themselves go through over the course of time and their circulation in the context of increasing intercultural relations and cultural hybridisation. The transformational and composite aspects of the person elaborated by Elke in her postdoctoral thesis became also a central issue in Amazonian anthropology (e.g. Vilaça 2005; Santos-Granero 2012) and were developed by her in terms of the person’s multiple spiritual aspects (Mader 1999, 2002b, 2005). This multiplicity had its social counterpart in the intercultural processes of hybridisation (Mader 1995; Mader & Hirzer 2011). Many of the papers she wrote during the course of the 1990s and early 2000s, which are too numerous to be mentioned here, focus on shamanism, myth, magic and chants (*anents*).

Elke was a gifted ethnographer. Ethnography and the complexity of social life served her as a basic source of objection to theoretical concepts. She was always keen to use ethnographic evidence to argue that socio-cultural phenomena were ‘more complex than that’. From such an ethnographically grounded position, she critically engaged with the positions of fellow Amazonists (e.g. Mader 1996, 2002a), pointed to the limitations of existing theories and showed that different approaches only selectively explain aspects of cultural phenomena that went beyond established theoretical frameworks.

Elke maintained a close, long-term relationship with the Austrian Latin America Institute and was a member of both its Scientific Advisory Board and

its Executive Board. She was also a board member of the Austrian Study Group for Research on Latin America and was closely connected to the Austrian Latin Americanist community.

In the early 2000s, new topics became central to her work: nature, space and landscape (Gingrich & Mader 2002; Halbmayer & Mader 2004a, b), and, with them, tourism (2004). Elke also started to expand her ethnographic engagement beyond South America. Fascinated by the, as she once called it, ‘shamanic dimension of Tibetan Buddhism’, Elke travelled in 2000 and 2001 to Nepal and made first field visits for a planned project on ‘culture, landscape and tourism’ that would connect research fields in Ecuador, Nepal and the Austrian Alps. Though the project never emerged as such, the engagement with Nepal and especially India and the Austrian Alps – which she explored frequently as a dedicated hiker – continued.

The years between 2000 and 2006 were a time of multiple engagements in the face of the precariousness of a scientific career before assuming a professorial position. Elke was teaching and engaged with the Interdisciplinary Programme for Higher Latin American Studies at the Austrian Latin America Institute. Moreover, she pioneered the development and implementation of e-learning and blended learning strategies and services in sociocultural anthropology and the social sciences in general; she chaired several projects, ranging from ‘Latein-america-Studies Online’ (2001–2003) to ‘OEKU Online’ (2004–2005), which dealt with economy, culture and the environment. She continued this work after becoming a professor by implementing an open-access web-based hypermedia content pool with interconnected learning units authored by staff members of the Viennese institute (<http://eksa.univie.ac.at/>). Between 2003 and 2008, at least nine publications, all co-authored with Philipp Budka and others, were published on inter- and transdisciplinary web-based learning systems in social science education; their topics were blended learning strategies and tools for evaluating e-learning environments. Some of the e-learning content provided the basis for books, such as Elke’s *Anthropology of Myths* (Mader 2008).

In 2001, Elke was a faculty member of the first doctoral programme on gender at the University of Vienna, and in 2002 and 2003, she was a visiting professor at the Gender Kolleg. Gender was an ongoing topic of interest in Elke’s scientific engagement, starting with her doctoral thesis and continuing in her publications on the Shuar/Achuar. She showed that a complementary division of labour does not necessarily imply symmetry and equality in all fields of life (Mader 1997, 2001, Mader & Gippelhauser 1989a), and it also became a topic in her later analysis of film blockbusters (Davies-Sulikowski & Mader 2007).

After the retirement of Professor Karl Wernhart in 2002, his position was not filled until 2006, when Elke Mader finally became the first female full professor at the Viennese Department of Cultural and Social Anthropology. She served as

head of the Master programme in Gender Studies (2008) and was involved in the elaboration, application and organisation of the first doctoral programme on gender funded by the University of Vienna, the Gender Initiativkolleg (GIK) on 'Gender, Violence and Agency in the Era of Globalisation', and was involved in the 'Gender and Transformation' research focus at the Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Vienna and the Gender: Ambivalent In\_Visibilities (GAIN) research platform.

Elke Mader served as Vice President of the 54th International Congress of Americanists (2012) in Vienna, 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 University 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.

Elke had a continuing interest in myth and ritual and expanded the analysis of myth to an analysis of film (2008, 2011a) and cinema, and to media anthropology more broadly. Thus, globalisation processes in relation to Indian cinema became central issues. Global Bollywood and the Indian cinema star Shah Rukh Khan in transcultural ritualised contexts (Dudrah et al. 2015; Mader 2011b) became her new affection, and long before COVID-19 induced a hype *about* digital ethnography, she studied European Shah Rukh Khan Fan cultures (Mader 2015; Mader & Budka 2009) by hybrid means of participant observation and digital ethnography in social media networks. Her other focus was on ritual dynamics in rural Austria, especially Salzburg, as well as new variants of alpine masked Krampus runs (Mader 2016). Last but not least, she continued to work on her ethnographic material on the Shuar and published on Shamanic modernities and ritual dynamics among the Shuar (Mader 2018) based on a workshop at the International Congress of Americanists that we organised together. She also analysed the transformation of Shuar Uwi chonta palm rituals in the context of Ecuadorian intercultural politics and new media representations (Mader 2019, 2021).

Elke suffered from a long illness that severely restricted her activities in her last years. Thus, she could not participate in the SALSA conference in Vienna in 2019, where so many international colleagues missed her, and she could only partially assist at the symposium in honour of her retirement from the University of Vienna in October 2020. We have lost a dear friend, a dedicated lowland South Americanist, a gifted ethnographer, a female pioneer in the rapidly deteriorating world of male academic hegemony and an open minded, deeply human, widely supportive colleague, with a unique ethnographic experience that all who had the privilege of knowing and engaging with Elke will miss.

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