



Bridging Currents: Emerging Trends in Indonesian Anthropology

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The international seminar and workshop [“Current Trends in Indonesian Anthropology”](#), held on 12 September 2024 at Universitas Gadjah Mada (UGM), brought together researchers, students, and institutional partners from Indonesia and Austria. Organized as part of the 60th anniversary celebrations of UGM’s Department of Anthropology, this event served not only as a venue for academic exchange and collaboration but also as a platform for reimagining how anthropology is practiced, taught, and publicly engaged.

Co-organized by Sita Hidayah (Department of Anthropology, UGM), Gabriele Weichart (Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology, University of Vienna) and Daniela Paredes Grijalva (Institute for Geography and Regional Research, University of Vienna), the workshop highlighted both long-standing ties and emerging collaborative frameworks between the two institutions. Opening lectures addressed the participatory digital ethnography learning system and reflected on collaborative fieldwork and dissemination strategies across the Austria–Indonesia academic corridor.

A major difference that stood out between the Indonesian and Austrian academic contexts is, quite evidently, scale. Indonesia’s anthropological landscape encompasses a vast and diverse array of methodologies, departments, field sites, and communities. The size and demographic complexity of the country provide Indonesian anthropologists with a multitude of opportunities for engagement, application, and collaboration. Another important distinction lies in the more fluid exchange between so-called theory and practice. The boundaries between academic research and applied work are often porous – anthropologists, for instance, document human rights violations related to land grabs, support community struggles, or consult for cultural heritage companies ensuring cultural sensitivity and local benefit in tourism-based development.

The Department of Anthropology at UGM and the University of Vienna have enjoyed a fruitful partnership for over a decade, fostering joint research, student mobility, and collaborative teaching. Although this workshop marked the formal conclusion of Gabriele Weichart’s employment at the University of Vienna, the tone was not of farewell but of continuation. Her academic drive and deep institutional ties are sure to nourish future collaborations.

Rather than listing all participants individually, we highlight five themes that stood out for their originality, relevance, and resonance with current anthropological debates.

1. Artificial Intelligence and Youth Digital Labor

Pradipa Rasidi (EngageMedia) presented an ethnographic study on AI imaginaries among working-class youth employed as political buzzers in Indonesia. Rather than seeing AI as disruptive, these youth treat it as a “bot companion”, drawing from *warnet* (internet cafe) gaming culture to gamify precarious labor and mimic middle-class tech-sector roles. This bottom-up view of AI as part of youth aspiration challenges prevailing Eurocentric concerns around automation and labor displacement.

2. Exhibition as Multimodal Ethnography

Rugun Sirait (Center for Anthropology Studies, University of Indonesia) discussed two recent experiments in translating ethnographic research into public exhibitions. One focused on forest fire governance in Central Kalimantan as part of the project Fire Play; another transformed TikTok sound trends into an art installation. These scalable and multimodal strategies not only engage new audiences but also point toward a public-facing anthropology that resonates with recent turns to visual and participatory methods.

3. Ghosts, Religion, and Mangrove Ecologies

Ode Zulkarnain (State Islamic Institute of Ambon) shared work on how mangrove conservation in eastern Indonesia is shaped by everyday encounters with spirits and religious beliefs. Using concepts such as hauntology and entanglement, his research illustrated how ecological stability emerges not only from policy but from cosmological relations. This perspective adds to global discussions on more-than-human anthropology – a field also gaining traction in global debates.

4. Applied Anthropology for design and local livelihoods

Endang Purwasari (Institut Seni Indonesia, Surakarta) highlighted how anthropology, often seen as distant from design, can in fact become a close partner in creating innovation. Through a collaborative project with product, fashion, and interior designers in Tanjung Pinang, Riau Islands, ethnographic research and community engagement provided the empirical foundation for developing culturally situated interventions in the creative economy. Within a human-centered design framework, field data were translated into design concepts through iterative brainstorming sessions and then developed into prototypes. The project shows how anthropological knowledge can extend beyond theoretical discourse to generate applied contributions to local livelihoods and income-generating activities.

5. TITEN and data sovereignty “Participatory Digital Learning System”

Sita Hidayah, Elan Ardri Lazuardi, and M. Zamzam Fauzanafi (Department of Anthropology, UGM) presented the TITEN application, developed in response to the necessity to re-evaluate technological infrastructure underpinning anthropological knowledge production. The colonial legacy influences how anthropological knowledge is practiced, taught, and distributed, but is also embedded in instruments and systems used to collect, manage, store, analyze, and disseminate anthropological knowledge. They

highlighted the concentration of power of tech companies over data, infrastructure, and knowledge. The extractive and surveillance nature of many research tools has continuously perpetuated existing power imbalances. At the heart of this, TITEN covers processes from fieldwork to the public. It goes beyond documenting, storing, and using data and information, into shifting dynamics of communities as “objects of research” to “co-creators of knowledge”.

The [workshop](#) was a space to showcase efforts that bridge the gap between the North and South. The exchange programs between the University of Vienna and UGM have enabled meaningful fieldwork collaboration for instance among anthropology students from both institutions in Indonesia, research stays in Austria for researchers from UGM, and seminars incorporating diverse perspectives and experiences, furthering decolonizing and decentering standpoints, ensuring the spirit of mutual learning and shared authorships between Indonesian and Austrian-based scholars and students. There is a strong wish for continuity, with hopes that such generative approaches will sustain and further strengthen Austrian–Indonesian relations in anthropology for years to come.

In addition to the thematic richness, the seminar successfully laid the groundwork for ongoing collaborative networks. The inception of partnerships among Indonesian researchers and institutions was a significant outcome, with several initiatives for joint projects and exchanges discussed during the seminar. Overall, the seminar was highly effective in both stimulating intellectual engagement and fostering cross-cultural academic networks. The event highlighted not only the academic rigor of the participants but also their commitment to supporting one another’s well-being and advancing international scholarly collaboration.



Figure 1. Participants of the Current Trends in Anthropology Workshop. (photo by Puspita Nindya Sari)

Together, these examples demonstrate how Indonesian anthropologists are engaging with local urgencies while dialoguing with global theory. Many of the workshop's presenters collaborated across institutional and disciplinary boundaries, reflecting a shared commitment to socially embedded and methodologically innovative research. As Austrian anthropology increasingly seeks to diversify its theoretical canons and methodological toolkits, workshops like this one underscore the mutual benefit of collaboration across currents, geographies, and academic cultures. From ethnographic exhibitions to digital activism, Indonesian anthropology offers fresh pathways for engaged scholarship that traverses North–South, East–West divides.



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DISCLOSURE

The authors declare no conflict of interest.