

# Anthropology News

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## SECTION NEWS



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Recognizing that the association's sections represent the rich diversity of the discipline's subfields, *AN* includes Section News, which provides news of specific relevance to members of each section (eg, summaries of section business meetings, section meeting presentations, section-featured annual meeting lectures). Members are encouraged to make full use of other *AN* editorial sections to report items of more general interest (eg, meeting dates, death notices, commentaries). Contact information for section contributing editors is available in individual columns.

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## **Anthropology and Environment Section**

LAURA OGDEN, CONTRIBUTING EDITOR

This month Renzo Taddei applies key ideas from anthropology's understandings of risk and uncertainty to develop frameworks for studying climate change cross-culturally.

### **Blame: The Hidden (and Difficult) Side of the Climate Change Debate**

*By Renzo Taddei (State U Campinas, Brazil)*

Between 1877 and 1879, Northeast Brazil was crippled by one of the region's most historically significant droughts. Around a half million people may have died due to drought-related famine and epidemics. Many of the region's Catholic-majority inhabitants believed the drought was a form of divine punishment for the moral corruption of society, an idea reinforced in an epistle issued by the local bishop. More than a century later, in January 2004 as I was carrying out fieldwork in the region, extremely intense rains flooded the area, displacing over 100,000 people. During interviews, some of those impacted echoed earlier beliefs that the disaster was the result of divine punishment. This time they pointed to television headlines—animal cloning, NASA's expedition to Mars and the war in Iraq, among other things—as causes for divine discontent. Humans were going beyond their proper sphere of action, they said.

This research called my attention to the role of blame in cultural models about climate. The main international debates on climate change focus almost exclusively on the phenomenon's physical causes, while at the same time there is an enormous ethnographic literature that reveals "blame" to be integral to how societies deal with crises in general, and climate related ones in particular. This reveals a conceptual gap where anthropology can effectively make critical contributions.

Indeed, it seems that the association between climate events and supposed human misdeeds is culturally pervasive and enduring. Of course in some places these beliefs may not be dominant, but they tend to reappear as a strong paradigm in moments of crisis. For instance, Mary Douglas, in *Risk and Blame*, provides ample evidence that this way of dealing with crises is not restricted to tribal and traditional societies but marks Western societies alike. If she is right (and I believe she is), it makes the topic of blame politically relevant to our analyses of societal reactions to climate events and uncertainties.

One example of how blame is associated with climate can be seen in the rejection of climate modeling in water management. As Steve Rayner and his collaborators demonstrated in California and as I witnessed in Brazil, water managers resist incorporating new technologies that increase uncertainty, even if in

the aggregate there are gains in efficiency. As an illustration, imagine a situation where two individuals are in conflict for the water stored in a reservoir: both want the water, but they also want to keep a certain volume saved for future needs. If a climate forecast predicts high probability of heavy rains in the upcoming rainy season, they may use more water in the present, thus resolving the conflict. But since climate forecasts are probabilistic, due to the extreme complexity of the atmosphere, the hydrological models will also become probabilistic. In the long run a forecast will fail, resulting in a water crisis. The public and most politicians don't see the inherent uncertainties of modeling, and in a situation of crisis there is a general expectation that someone is accountable. Not unlike the search for divine causation, the inherent uncertainty of climate modeling may produce an atmosphere where blame is politically expedient (and water managers risk losing their jobs). This context means that it is extremely difficult to convince water managers to use climate-based technologies.

Understanding how blame is present in cultural models about climate, in climate politics and in the local institutionalized ways of addressing crises is, from an anthropological perspective, necessary if the discipline is to make effective contributions to the international debate on climate change. While international debates discuss how much certainty we need to enable political action, a second, equally important question is how much uncertainty our political systems can take before triggering blaming and scapegoating rituals. Similarly, if culturally embedded models frame the idea of climate change as a situation where nature is "punishing" humanity for its misdeeds—carbon emissions, pollution, destruction of forests, reduction of biodiversity and the like—individuals may take this punishment as deserved, which may induce them to assume a posture of resignation and inaction. Naturally, this is a hypothesis to be tested ethnographically.

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