Reemergence of Mpox: Roles of Anthropology in Public Health Preparedness and Response

Inayat Ali[1,2*]

[1]Department of Anthropology, Fatima Jinnah Women University, Rawalpindi, Pakistan

[2]Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology, University of Vienna, Austria

*Inayat Ali, Department of Anthropology, Fatima Jinnah Women University, Rawalpindi, Pakistan. Email: Inayat_qau@yahoo.com

Abstract

The recent resurgence of monkeypox or "mpox," declared as public health emergency requires comprehensive public health responses. This article explores the critical role of anthropology in enhancing these responses, emphasizing how anthropological insights can address both ethical challenges and cultural complexities inherent in such outbreaks. By integrating anthropological perspectives, public health strategies can be better tailored to local contexts, improving community engagement and compliance. The article briefly discusses how anthropologists can illuminate emerging moral dilemmas, inform culturally sensitive interventions, and aid in understanding the socio-cultural dynamics that impact coping mechanisms. Ultimately, this approach fosters more effective, equitable, and resilient public health responses to mpox and similar crises.

Keywords: monkeypox; culturally sensitive interventions; ethical challenges; socio-cultural dynamics; outbreak response; health emergency; public health; anthropology.

The Backdrop: Reemergence of Mpox

Monkeypox or "mpox" was first identified in humans in 1970 in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, which since then has mostly caused sporadic infections and outbreaks in West and Central Africa (Mitjà et al. 2023). In July 2022, the WHO declared it a Public Health Emergency of International Concern due to its unprecedented spread beyond these regions (Mitjà et al. 2023). Thereafter, the infection began to wind down.

However, in August 2024, mpox has reemerged in various countries around the globe, with a particularly significant escalation of cases observed in Africa. As a result, the African Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (Africa CDC) has declared a "public health emergency of continental security" (Hollingham 2024). Originating in the Democratic Republic of Congo, it

has rapidly spread from to neighboring countries (Hollingham 2024). The backdrop contains the inreasing number of affected people and deaths. Consequently, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared it a global public health emergency on August 15, 2024 (Junaidi 2024).

The outbreak, originating from an endemic strain known as Clade I in Congo, has now escalated with the emergence of a new variant, Clade Ib, which spreads more easily through routine close contact, particularly among children (Reuters 2024). This year alone, over 15,000 cases and 461 deaths have been reported, marking a staggering 160 percent increase from the same period last year, with 18 countries affected (Hollingham 2024).

In response to this growing critical public event, Africa CDC Director General Jean Kaseya emphasized the dire need for vaccines. With only about 200,000 doses currently available, there is a significant shortfall in the required supply (Reuters 2024). The continent needs over 10 million doses to effectively combat the outbreak, and while Africa CDC has a plan to secure more than 10 million doses starting with 3 million in 2024 (Reuters 2024). Vaccination often brings different challenges to the center stage related to vaccine's availability, affordability, accessibility and acceptability, especially during a public health emergency (Ali, Ali, and Iqbal 2021). Similar concerns can occur in Africa in addressing the current critical event.

The rapid spread of monkeypox across borders highlights the interconnected nature of public health and the necessity for international cooperation. The rapid escalation of the virus and the emergence of a new, more transmissible variant, i.e., Clade Ib, necessitate immediate and coordinated action (Hollingham 2024). Public health emergencies know no borders, and in our interconnected world, a threat to one region is a threat to all. The pandemic of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) is a great example of it.

Roles of anthropology in public health response

Simultaneously, in dealing with such public health emergencies, there is a great need for qualitative researchers, such as medical anthropologists, who can play a vital role in various areas. For example, they can conduct detailed qualitative analyses to understand patterns of distribution and spread of the virus. They can also help counter various competing narratives, as critical public health events often give rise to rumors and conspiracy theories. COVID-19 revealed the emergence and impact of these competing narratives, which led WHO to call this phenomenon an "infodemic" (Ali 2020).

Furthermore, such critical health events often lead to stigmatization, where individuals who contract the virus are socially marginalized, and necessary quarantine measures exacerbate this process. In these situations, medical anthropologists can play a crucial role in effectively conveying awareness messages to the community, ensuring that no one is stigmatized. By addressing the interplay between essential "rituals of containment" and socio-cultural practices, they can help mitigate the significant impact on those who contract the virus (Ali 2021).

Medical anthropologists can also facilitate community engagement by fostering dialogue and understanding between health authorities and the public. They can identify and address cultural

beliefs and practices that may hinder effective disease control, ensuring that interventions are culturally sensitive and accepted. Additionally, they can document the lived experiences of affected individuals, providing valuable insights into the social and psychological aspects of the outbreak. This holistic approach not only aids in managing the current crisis but also builds resilience and trust within communities, which is essential for future public health emergencies. By integrating qualitative research with epidemiological data, medical anthropologists contribute to a more comprehensive and effective response to public health challenges.

In addition, each critical public health event brings new ethical challenges and moral entanglements as a "new normal" emerges, rendering previous practices "abnormal" (Ali, 2023). The above-mentioned social scientists can study and illuminate "extraordinary and transcendental moral worlds" that affect coping mechanisms and strategies for managing the situation (Ali 2023).

These experts can provide nuanced insights into how communities navigate the shifting moral landscape, offering guidance on ethical decision-making in the face of unprecedented circumstances. They can also help identify and address potential conflicts between public health measures and cultural norms, ensuring that interventions are both effective and culturally respectful. By understanding the ethical dimensions of public health responses, social scientists contribute to more compassionate and equitable strategies that consider the diverse needs and values of affected populations.

Moreover, their research can inform policy development, ensuring that ethical considerations are integrated into public health planning and response efforts (Lindsay-Smith 2019). This holistic approach not only enhances the effectiveness of interventions but also fosters trust and cooperation between communities and health authorities, which is crucial for the success of any public health initiative.

A Way of Conclusion

The reemergence of mpox, with its pronounced escalation in Africa, highlights the imperative for developing public health strategies that are both comprehensive and socioculturally attuned. Anthropology is pivotal in elucidating the socio-cultural dynamics that (re)shape the epidemiology and management of this infectious disease. Incorporating anthropological perspectives is necessary to tailor public health responses to local contexts, thereby enhancing community engagement and the efficacy of interventions.

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