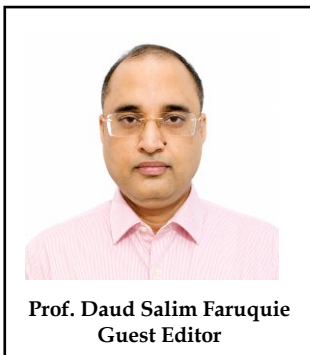


Guest Editorial

Law, Culture and Justice in the Global South: Towards an Evidence-Informed Anthropology of Human Dignity

"The life of the law has not been logic; it has been experience."

~ Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr.



societies negotiate power, belonging, rights and responsibilities.

The twenty-first century has confronted humanity with paradoxes that are as profound as they are persistent. Never before has the world witnessed such unprecedented advances in science, technology and global interconnectedness, yet never have questions of justice, identity, environmental sustainability, cultural survival and social inequality appeared so urgent. Across the Global South, these challenges are particularly complex because they are embedded within colonial legacies, socio-economic disparities, ecological vulnerabilities, demographic transitions and rapidly evolving political landscapes. In such a milieu, anthropology offers a vital reminder that law is not merely an institutional arrangement, nor culture simply an inherited tradition. Rather, both constitute living systems through which

The present focal issue of *Anthropological Bulletin* arrives at a particularly significant historical moment. Under the theme "**Law, Culture and Justice in the Global South**," the contributors collectively illuminate the intricate intersections between legal institutions, cultural practices and lived human experiences. While the papers explore diverse empirical settings, from environmental restoration and juvenile justice to cultural heritage, community rights, rehabilitation and governance, they converge upon a common intellectual proposition: justice cannot be meaningfully understood without appreciating the cultural contexts within which it is imagined, contested and realised.

Anthropology has long challenged the assumption that law exists solely within statutes, constitutions or courtrooms. As Clifford Geertz (1983) observed, law is fundamentally "a distinctive manner of imagining the real." Legal systems are simultaneously repositories of norms and arenas of social negotiation. They derive their legitimacy not merely from legislative authority but from their resonance with people's lived realities. The Global South, characterised by legal pluralism and diverse cultural traditions, exemplifies this dynamic with remarkable clarity. Here, customary institutions often coexist with formal legal structures, and questions of justice frequently extend beyond legal compliance to encompass dignity, identity, historical memory and collective wellbeing.

An equally compelling thread emerging from this issue is the growing recognition that evidence and context are not competing paradigms but complementary foundations of effective policy. Contemporary public discourse often presents evidence-based policymaking as synonymous with quantitative indicators, experimental designs or statistical certainty. Such perspectives, while valuable, remain incomplete unless they are enriched by contextual understanding. Anthropology contributes precisely this dimension. Through ethnographic inquiry, historical analysis and qualitative interpretation, it uncovers forms of evidence embedded within everyday life, evidence that reveals not only *what* works, but also *why, for whom* and *under what conditions* interventions succeed or fail (Dopson, & Fitzgerald, 2005).

This integration of empirical evidence with contextual understanding has become increasingly indispensable in addressing the multidimensional challenges confronting the Global South. Environmental degradation, armed conflict, migration, youth vulnerability, digital transformation and

widening inequalities cannot be adequately understood through disciplinary silos. They require interdisciplinary scholarship capable of connecting ecological realities with legal frameworks, cultural values with institutional reforms, and local experiences with global policy debates.

The contributions assembled in this volume collectively demonstrate this intellectual richness. The opening paper's exploration of ecological recovery and environmental justice illustrates how sustainable development extends beyond technical conservation to embrace community participation, cultural values and social equity. Environmental restoration, viewed through an anthropological lens, becomes not simply a scientific enterprise but a profoundly human endeavour involving relationships between people, institutions and ecosystems.

Equally significant is the examination of juvenile justice, where the authors invite readers to reconsider conventional punitive paradigms in favour of evidence-informed rehabilitation and child-rented approaches. Contemporary criminological research increasingly demonstrates that restorative interventions, family support and community engagement often yield more sustainable outcomes than purely retributive measures. Such scholarship reminds us that justice is ultimately measured not by the severity of punishment but by society's capacity for transformation and reintegration.

Another noteworthy contribution addresses the protection of libraries and cultural heritage during armed conflict. In an age when wars increasingly target symbols of identity alongside civilian populations, safeguarding cultural memory assumes renewed importance. Libraries, archives and museums represent far more than repositories of books or artefacts; they embody collective memory, intellectual continuity and civilisational resilience. Their destruction impoverishes not merely individual nations but humanity as a whole. The discussion therefore extends beyond heritage preservation to fundamental questions concerning international humanitarian law, cultural rights and global ethical responsibility.

Several papers further explore the relationships between governance, social institutions, community participation, legal consciousness and marginalised populations. Although differing in disciplinary orientation and methodological approach, these contributions collectively underscore a shared insight: justice becomes meaningful only when institutions remain responsive to the lived experiences of those whom they are intended to serve. Whether addressing vulnerable communities, cultural identities, legal awareness or administrative practices, the authors consistently demonstrate that sustainable reform requires engagement with local realities rather than reliance upon abstract institutional models.

Taken together, the contributions illustrate the remarkable breadth of contemporary anthropological inquiry. They reveal anthropology not as an isolated academic discipline but as an integrative framework capable of connecting law with culture, policy with practice, and empirical evidence with ethical reflection. This interdisciplinary orientation is especially valuable at a time when societies increasingly confront problems that transcend traditional disciplinary boundaries.

The contemporary policy landscape further reinforces the relevance of such scholarship. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, particularly those relating to peace, justice, strong institutions, reduced inequalities and climate action, all recognise that development cannot be sustained without inclusive governance and culturally sensitive policymaking (Oosterhof, 2018). Yet implementation frequently falters because universal frameworks encounter diverse local realities. Anthropology bridges this divide by illuminating how global aspirations are interpreted, negotiated and adapted within specific social contexts.

This perspective also resonates strongly with the emerging philosophy of evidence-informed governance. Evidence should not be understood merely as statistical significance or measurable outcomes; it should encompass historical experience, institutional learning, community knowledge and ethical deliberation. Robust policymaking requires methodological pluralism, an appreciation that quantitative analysis and qualitative understanding together provide a more comprehensive basis for decision-making than either approach alone. Such an integrated conception of evidence is particularly pertinent for societies navigating complex developmental transitions.

As Guest Editor, I regard this focal issue as more than a thematic collection of scholarly articles. It represents an invitation to rethink how anthropology contributes to contemporary debates on justice and governance. The papers encourage readers to move beyond binary distinctions: between tradition and modernity, formal and informal institutions, quantitative and qualitative evidence, local knowledge and global policy. Instead, they advocate a more nuanced understanding in which these dimensions interact to shape human wellbeing and social transformation.

The strength of this volume ultimately lies in its commitment to intellectual dialogue across disciplines, regions and methodological traditions. At a time when public debates are increasingly polarised, anthropology reminds us that complexity should not be feared but embraced. Justice is rarely achieved through universal prescriptions alone; it emerges through continuous engagement with culture, history, institutions and human experience.

It is hoped that the discussions presented in this issue will stimulate further interdisciplinary research, encourage evidence-informed legal and social reforms, and inspire scholars, practitioners and policymakers to recognise that sustainable justice must always remain culturally grounded, empirically informed and fundamentally centred upon human dignity. Such a vision is not merely relevant for the Global South; it offers valuable lessons for an increasingly interconnected world where the pursuit of justice remains one of humanity's most enduring aspirations.

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