

Remembering Armin Prinz (1945-2018)

Ruth Kutalek

Armin Prinz, former head of the Department of Ethnomedicine at the Medical University of Vienna, died unexpectedly on 25 August 2018. Positioned in the medical faculty, he was the first professor of medical anthropology in Austria.

Prinz was born on 29 July 1945 in Öblarn, a mountain village in the eastern Alps in the federal state of Styria, Austria. He earned his doctorate in ethnology in 1976 and in medicine in 1981, both in Vienna, and was awarded the title of *venia docendi* 1989 with his habilitation thesis ‘Ethnomedizinische, ethnopharmakologische und medizinanthropologische Untersuchungen bei den Azande Zentralafrikas’ at the then Medical Faculty of the University of Vienna. Working both as an emergency doctor at the Vienna Airport and as a department head at the MedUni Vienna he embodied the interlinkage of medicine and ethnology and ‘lived’ his interdisciplinarity. Often he said, ‘For the physicians I am an ethnologist and for the ethnologists I am a physician’. He saw himself as both and was amused when people wanted to constrain him to one discipline or the other.

Prinz’s life was not rectilinear. As a teenager, he dropped out of school and decided to go to sea. He graduated from the sailor school on the ‘training ship Germany’ in Bremen, and then worked for a few years for major German shipping companies, but malaria forced him to give up his job. At the age of twenty-four, he completed his high school diploma as an external student, and then began his studies of ethnology and medicine.

His research was based on many years of fieldwork among the Zande in the northeast of the Democratic Republic of Congo in the 1970s and 1980s under conditions we would not expect today's doctoral students to put up with. He was always accompanied by his medium-format Mamiya camera. He used his excellent photographs in many of his publications and was one of the first to introduce visual media into medical anthropology. From the 1990s on, as the political situation in DRC deteriorated, he switched his research focus to Senegal but returned to the Zande and Congo on several occasions. He got involved with popular painters in Kinshasa and organized yearly art exhibitions. During his last return to the Zande in 2012 he supported the WHO in addressing the Ebola outbreak in Isiro with his ethnomedical expertise of the area.

He began teaching in 1981, and his lectures were legendary. Most students were carried away by his extensive expertise, his wit, and his enthusiasm about Africa. He published on the topics of ethnomedicine, nutritional anthropology, ethnopharmacology, and the history of medicine. He supervised many students, whom he also often included in his research in Congo and Senegal. He set up his own library and founded the Collection Ethnomedicine, which is now housed in the World Museum in Vienna with ethnographic objects and contemporary paintings by African artists. Parts of the collection are now being shown in the Kunsthhaus Graz in the exhibition 'Congo stars', which opened in September 2018.



An artist's impression of Armin Prinz fighting malaria. (SapinArt, Atelier Cheri-Cherin 2005; Sammlung Armin Prinz der Österreichischen Ethnomedizinischen Gesellschaft, Weltmuseum Wien).

In 1998 he and his colleague Ruth Kutalek founded the *Viennese Ethnomedicine Newsletter (VEN)*, which was funded by the Vienna International Airport. The newsletter contained a wide variety of contributions related to medical anthropology, such as brief articles, field reports, interviews, and student work, and it established communication with other medical anthropology centres in Europe and beyond. The newsletter devoted special attention to African art related to health and sickness and to visual medical anthropology. Its existence ended in 2011 when Prinz retired and the funding ended.

Prinz was a true universalist and a fervent fieldworker. In the 1970s he produced several documentary films on the traditional treatment of various medical conditions and on the use of termite and poison oracles among the Zande. He was highly interested in ethnopharmacology and published widely on medicinal and poisonous plants as well as on food plants in Central Africa. He also recorded the historical pathways of plants that were rediscovered through Western pharmacology, such as *Rawolfia spp.* and *Chincona spp.* Prinz always tried to bridge the sciences by explaining ethnomedicine and medical anthropology to medical doctors and, vice versa, to introduce biomedical questions to the social sciences. In the classical field of ethnomedicine he published his ethnographic research on the role of the healer in Zande society, on specific idioms of distress (such as 'kaza basolo'), on death and dying, and on perceptions of food and diet. He saw ethnomedicine as an important contribution to medical sciences but firmly defined it as a social science and strongly cautioned against using it as an auxiliary science to medicine.

Armin Prinz was a passionate scientist, mentor, physician, and anthropologist, and a visionary for many issues, such as intercultural competence and global health. His colleagues, former students, and his family will miss him dearly.

Selected publications

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1986. 'Initialerlebnis und Heilberufung'. *CURARE*, Sonderband 5: 373-386.
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2012. 'What about Ethnomedizin? Reflections on Its Early Days in German-speaking Countries' 47 (with R. Kutalek and V. C. Münzenmeier). *Anthropology and Medicine* 19 (1): 39-47.
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