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Anthropology

Lecture Essay – Vinay Kamat

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“Infectious Disease and the Medicalization of Malaria Control in Tanzania”

Vinay Kamat is an anthropologist who teaches at the University of British Columbia and is known for his research in Tanzania and India. In this lecture Kamat talked about the spread and control of childhood malaria in Tanzania. Specifically, he discussed how medication for malaria is changing and how these changes are affecting the population in Tanzania that is afflicted with malaria. He talked about how socio-cultural constraints greatly influence mothers’ decisions of how to treat their children with sicknesses.

There are many constraints which influence a parent’s decision: limited ability to health facilities because of social status and poverty, expensive costs, distance from their home, bad hours of operation, etc. Kamat says that there is too much of an emphasis on these constraints and that cultural knowledge about disease, cultural meanings of sicknesses, and how mothers communicate and relate with health care providers need to be considered if governments want to really stop the spread of malaria.

Kamat’s studies of the Tanzanian people showed that when parents of malaria-infected children were deciding where to go to treat their children, they were greatly influenced by many social and cultural factors. Many parents do not think their children have a major disease and simply believe that they have a fever. Because they have cultural knowledge that teaches them the causes and symptoms of childhood fevers they often attempt to use home-based treatments to treat what they think is a fever but is actually malaria. Essentially, Kamat argues that there needs to be more attention paid to the socio-cultural factors that influence the seeking of treatment for childhood malaria.