

APPLYING CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY

An Introductory Reader

Aaron Podolefsky/Peter J. Brown



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To our families:
Ronnie, Noah, and Isaac;
Betsy, Nico, Patrick, and Thomas

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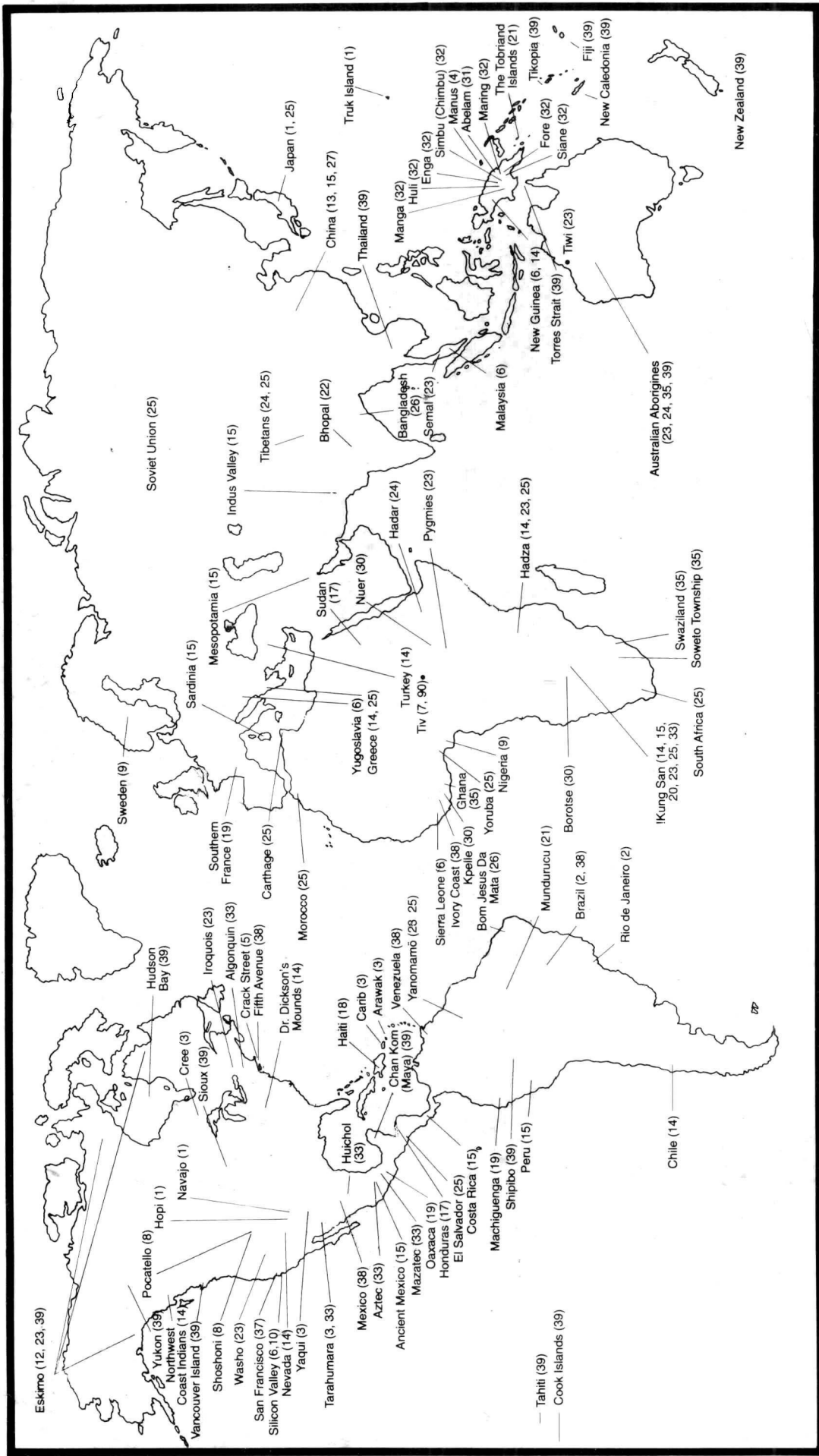
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Locator Map for Peoples and Places Discussed
 (Article numbers are in parentheses.)

To the Student

introductory course in any discipline is chock-full of new terminology, concepts, and facts. Sometimes students forget that these new ideas and vocabulary are actually intellectual tools that can be put to work analyzing and solving problems. In preparing this book, we have selected readings that will show you how anthropological concepts, discoveries, and methods can be applied in today's world.

The study of anthropology can help you view the world in a completely different way. You can come to appreciate the great diversity of human cultures and the interrelatedness of economic, sociopolitical, and religious systems. Anthropology can give you a broad perspective on humanity and help you understand other people's beliefs and customs. In doing so, it can help you become a better citizen in an increasingly global society.

The fascinating side of anthropology seems obvious to most educated people, but there is also a practical side of the discipline, complementary and well known. We have selected the readings in this book to emphasize that practical, applied side. Many of the articles are examples of anthropological ideas and research methods in action—being used to understand and solve practical problems. We have included several profiles of anthropologists working outside the college and university setting that show how they are applying anthropology. We believe that the fundamen-

tal lessons of anthropology can be applied to many careers and all areas of human endeavor.

Over the years, we have found that students often read assignments without planning, and this actually makes studying less efficient. Before you read a section, it is important that you first spend a few moments skimming it to get an idea of what it is about, where it is going, and what you should look for. This kind of preliminary reading is a poor idea for mystery novels but it is essential for academic assignments. With this preparation, the article may become a jumble of facts and figures; details may be meaningless, because you have missed the big picture. By planning your reading first, you can see how the details relevant to the central theme of an article.

To help you with planning your reading, we have included questions at the beginning of each article. By studying the questions in advance, you may gain an idea of what is to come and why the article is important. This will help make the time you spend reading more fruitful. Most of the questions highlight the central themes of the essay or draw your attention to interesting details. Some of the questions, however, do not have straightforward answers—they are for thought and topics for discussion.

These articles have been selected with you, the student, in mind. We hope they convey to you the excitement about the anthropological adventure, and we expect that you will find them both enjoyable and thought-provoking.

To the Instructor

Introductory cultural anthropology has become an established part of the college curriculum, and through this course our profession communicates with a large and diverse audience. Members of that undergraduate audience differ in experience, academic concentration, and career aspirations. For those students considering anthropology as a major, we need to provide (along with other things) a vision of the future, of anthropological work to be done in the public domain as well as within the academy. For them, we need to provide some answers to the question, "What can I do with a degree in anthropology?" For students majoring in other areas, such as business, engineering, or psychology, we need to address the question, "How can anthropological insights or research methods help us understand and solve human problems?" If we can provide such a service, we increase the likelihood that students will find creative solutions to the professional problems that await them, and we brighten the future of our anthropology majors by underscoring the usefulness of an anthropological perspective on the practical problems of today's world.

Over the years, we have found that most introductory texts have done little more than include a chapter on applied anthropology at the end of the book. This treatment implies that the application of anthropological knowledge is a tangent or afterthought—at best, an additional subject area, such as kinship or politics.

We disagree. We believe that the applications of anthropology infuse each of its subfields. (Our earlier text, *Applying Anthropology*, includes sections on biological anthropology and archaeology.) This reader collection of articles that provide examples of both

basic and *applied* research in cultural anthropology and anthropological linguistics.

One of our primary goals is to demonstrate some of the ways our discipline is used outside the academic arena. We want anthropology to be seen as a field that is both interesting and relevant to the real world. If the public at large, students seem well aware that the subject matter of anthropology is fascinating, but they seem unaware of both the fundamental questions of humanity addressed by anthropologists and the practical applications of the field.

Any student who completes an introductory course in cultural anthropology should learn that anthropological work, in its broadest sense, may include (or at least contribute to) international business, epidemiology, program evaluation, social impact studies, dispute resolution, organizational analysis, market research, and nutrition research, even though their introductory anthropology texts make no mention of these fields. To emphasize how anthropology can be put to work in different settings, we have included several profiles of anthropologists whose careers involve applying anthropology outside the university setting.

We chose the readings in this book to complement the typical course in introductory cultural anthropology. The sequence of articles follows the organization of standard cultural anthropology textbooks, grouped under traditional headings such as sex and marriage, rather than headings based on the applied areas such as medical anthropology or the anthropology of development. As in most contemporary textbooks, anthropological linguistics is included under culture and communication.

Although people distinguish between basic and applied research, much of anthropology falls into a gray area, having elements of both. Many selections in this reader fall into that gray zone—they are brief ethnographic accounts that contain important implications for understanding and resolving problems. We could have included a large number of articles exemplifying strictly applied research—an evaluation report of agency performance, for example. While this sort of research is fascinating and challenging to do, it is usually not exciting to read. We have selected articles that we believe are fascinating for students and convey the dual nature (basic/applied) of social science research.

To help students better understand the matter, we have included a number of pedagogical aids: introductions and guiding questions for each article; a global map that pinpoints the locations of places and peoples discussed in the articles; an index for easy reference, an extensive glossary and index.

In our experience, introductory students are eager to learn about the applications of anthropological knowledge as they are fascinated by the logical insights into human history and culture. The selections in this book should not only help students understand why cultural anthropology is important in today's world, but also should make the course more memorable and meaningful.

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Introduction: Understanding Humans And Human Problems

For the uninitiated, the term *anthropology* conjures up images of mummies' tombs, Indiana Jones, and treks through rough steaming jungles or over high alpine peaks. Anthropologists agree that their chosen field is exciting, that they have been places and seen things that few experience firsthand, and that they have been deeply and emotionally involved in understanding the human condition. At the same time, however, the vision of anthropology presented in the fiction media is probably done more to obscure the true nature of the profession than it has to enlighten the public about what we really do.

Providing an accurate image of anthropology and anthropological work is both simple and complex. Essentially, anthropology is the study of people, or more properly, of humankind. But, you may say, many disciplines study people: psychology, sociology, history, biology, medicine, and so on. True, but anthropology is different in that it seeks to integrate these separate and narrow views of humanity. To understand ourselves, we need to join these disparate views into a single framework, a process that begins with our biological and evolutionary roots, explores the development of culture through the prehistoric and historical periods, observes the uniquely human ability to develop culture through communication, and examines the diversity of recent and present-day cultures that inhabit the globe.

From this conception of the *holistic* and *comparative* study of humankind emerge what are termed the four fields of anthropology: biological (or physical) anthropology, archaeology, anthropological linguistics, and cultural anthropology. Some universities offer an introductory course that covers all four of these subfields. Other schools cover the field in two or three introductory courses. Each approach has its advantage.

The former may more fully integrate the biological and historical dimensions of humanity; the latter allows students to explore each subfield in greater depth. This book can introduce you to cultural anthropology and how it is used in today's world.

Another way to divide the discipline—in fact, almost any discipline—is into *basic* and *applied* research. These categories are important in this reader because we would like students to appreciate both the basic and applied sides of cultural anthropology.

A survey of natural and social scientists and engineers conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau for the National Science Foundation used the following definitions of these fundamental concepts: *Basic research* is a study directed toward gaining scientific knowledge primarily for its own sake. *Applied research* is a study directed toward gaining scientific knowledge in an effort to meet a recognized need.

Anthropology is a discipline concerned primarily with basic research. It asks "big" questions concerning the origins of humankind, the roots of human nature, the development of civilization, and the functions of our major social institutions (such as marriage and religion). At the same time, anthropologists have put to use the methods and skills developed in basic research to help in solving human problems and fulfilling the needs of society. Anthropologists have, for example, worked with medical examiners in the identification of skeletal remains and with NASA to redesign their equipment to accommodate a wider range of users; anthropologists have also helped communities preserve their cultural heritage and helped businesses and government agencies understand the social impacts of program development projects.

Although the application of anthropology has a long history, it has, until recent years, remained in

shadows of “pure” or basic research. The last 15 years have seen a change. From 1971 to 1981 the proportion of doctoral dissertations in applied anthropology grew from 15 to 27 percent. Anthropologists have gone beyond their traditional occupational roles in universities and museums and are now working in a broad range of settings. They are employed at all levels of government, in the private sector, and in a variety of nonresearch capacities (such as administrator, evaluator, or policy analyst).

In response to the growing opportunities for anthropologists outside of academia and to the demands of students, an increasing number of master’s degree and doctoral programs are designed to provide training specifically in the applications of anthropology. This is not to say that the classified ads list jobs titled “anthropologist.” Rather, for those interested in anthropology, there are increasing opportunities to find careers that draw on anthropological training and skills. Profiles of people in nonacademic careers (consumer marketing, high-tech industry, and school administration) can be found in this reader. At the same time, studies have shown that there will be increasing job opportunities for anthropologists in universities and colleges during the 1990s.

Applications of anthropology are found in all four fields. Anthropological work includes the identification of skeletal remains (forensics); the study of size and fit for the design of clothing, furniture, or airplane cockpits (ergonomics); exploration of the patterns and causes of disease (epidemiology); evaluation of the effectiveness of programs (from Third World development to crime prevention); assessment of community needs; prediction of the social impact of change; analysis of organizations such as businesses or government agencies; market research; and research into health and nutrition, to name but a few.

School administrators, engineers, business leaders, lawyers, medical researchers, and government officials have become aware that the substantive knowledge, the unique perspective, and the research skills of anthropologists are applicable to practical problems—in the United States as well as other countries. As we explore anthropology, keep in mind the interplay between and interdependence of basic cultural research and the applications of anthropological knowledge and research methods to the solution of human problems.

CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY

Cultural anthropology is concerned with the description and analysis of people’s lives and traditions. In the past, cultural anthropologists almost always did re-

search in far-off “exotic” societies, but today, expanded our research interests to include our own society. Cultural anthropology can add much to the basic and applied scientific understanding of human behaviors and beliefs. The study and interpretation of other societies—of their traditions, customs, and view of the world—is inherently interesting and important because it documents the diversity of human lifestyles. The anthropological approach to understanding other societies also has practical value in addressing contemporary human problems and needs.

The concept of *culture* is central to anthropology. It refers to patterns of economy, social organization, belief, and values, which are learned and shared by members of a social group. Culture is traditional knowledge passed down from one generation to the next. Although generally stable over time, culture is also dynamic and fluid, changing through borrowing or invention. The influential American anthropologist Franz Boas championed the concept of culture for understanding human diversity; culture, Boas argued, is distinct from biological “race” or language. Anthropologists have shown that all cultural lifestyles have intrinsic value and should be studied. Other societies deserve to be studied and understood without being prejudged using our own (and sometimes intolerant) beliefs and values. A universal tendency to prejudge, called *ethnocentrism*, is something educated individuals should avoid.

Culture is the crowning achievement of human evolution. To understand ourselves is to appreciate cultural diversity. Dependence on *culture* as the primary mechanism of survival sets humans apart from other members of the animal kingdom. It is responsible for the tremendous evolutionary success of our species, which has grown in population (sometimes to the point of overpopulation) and can inhabit every niche on the planet.

The paradox of culture is that, as we learn to understand our own cultural beliefs and values, we unconsciously learn to reject those of other peoples. At birth, we are predisposed to cultural learning, but we are not programmed to adopt a particular culture. As we grow, our parents, our schools, and our societies teach us what is right and wrong, good and evil, acceptable and unacceptable. At the subconscious level, we learn the symbolic meanings of behavior and through interpretation we interpret the meanings of actions. Beliefs, values, and symbols must be understood within the context of a particular culture. This is the principle of *cultural relativity*.

In addition to the concept of culture, the anthropological approach to the study of human behavior and belief has two essential characteristics: a

approach and a comparative framework. The *holistic approach* means that anthropologists see a particular part of culture—for example, politics, economy, or religion—in relation to the larger social system. Individuals are viewed, not in isolation, but as part of an intricate web of social relationships. Although an anthropological study may have a particular focus, the holistic approach means that the broader cultural context is always considered important because the different parts of a cultural system are interrelated. When, for example, the economy or technology changes, other aspects of the culture will change as well.

The *comparative framework* means that explanations and generalizations are informed by cross-cultural research. Questions about humanity cannot be based on information from a single society or a single type of society—like the industrial societies of the United States and Europe. Such a limited framework is simply too narrow for understanding the big picture that basic anthropological research seeks. By studying others within a comparative frame, we can better understand ourselves. If other cultures are a mirror in which we see ourselves, then anthropology is a mirror for mankind.

The broad generalizations about culture and society that we have been talking about are based on detailed knowledge of the world's cultures. To gain this knowledge, anthropologists go to the people. Often accompanied by spouses or children, we pack our bags and travel to far-off lands—to the high mountains of New Guinea, the frozen arctic, the savannas of Africa, the jungles of South America. Increasingly, anthropologists are bringing their research methods and comparative, holistic perspective into the cities and suburbs of America, the American schoolroom, or the corporate jungle. This "research adventure" has become the hallmark of cultural anthropology.

The research methods used by the cultural anthropologist are distinctive because they depend, to a large extent, on the firsthand experiences and interpretations of the field researcher. Cultural anthropologists conduct research in natural settings rather than in laboratories or over the telephone. This method for studying another society is often called *participant observation*, *ethnography*, or *qualitative methods*. The goal of describing, understanding, and explaining another culture is a large task. It is most often accomplished by living in the society for an extended period, by talking with people, and, as much as possible, by experiencing their lives.

The fieldwork experience usually involves a kind of culture shock in which the researcher questions his or her own assumptions about the world. In this way, fieldwork is often a rewarding period of personal growth. In their work, anthropologists expect to find

that other people's behavior, even when it seems bizarre when seen from the outside, makes sense when it is viewed from the people's own point of view. This is why anthropological research often means letting people speak for themselves. While doing research, the anthropologist often thinks of himself or herself as a child—as being ignorant or uninformed and needing to be taught by the people being studied. This approach often involves in-depth interviewing with a few key informants and then interpreting (and writing about) that other culture for the researcher's own society. The ethnographic method, pioneered and developed in anthropology, is now being used in a range of applied areas, including marketing, management research, and school evaluation. Although ethnography is an important research style, the reader in this book demonstrates that many different methods are used in anthropology today.

The applications of cultural anthropology are diverse. Internationally, anthropologists are involved in programs of technical assistance and economic development in Third World nations. These include agriculture and rural development; health, nutrition, and family planning; education; housing and community organization; transportation and communication; and energy. In the domestic scene, anthropologists do many of the same things in more familiar settings. They evaluate public education, study agricultural extension programs, administer projects, analyze policy (such as U.S. refugee resettlement programs), and research crime and crime prevention, for example.

In the private sector, cultural anthropologists add a fresh perspective to market research. They analyze office and industrial organization and culture. They are creating language and cultural training workshops for businesspeople and others who are going overseas. These workshops are intended to reduce the likelihood of cross-cultural misunderstanding and to reduce the problems of culture shock for the employee and, often more important, for his or her family.

Applied anthropological work can be divided into four categories. In the first group, applied and basic research look very much alike, except that the goal of applied research is more directly linked with a particular problem or need. For example, in Selection 1, Susan H. Lees studies a rural community and learns about the unintended consequences brought by agricultural development. Such studies of agricultural development provide planners and policy makers with important insights for understanding the development process. This knowledge can lead to the design and implementation of programs that better serve the people of the region.

In the second category, anthropologists work as researchers for a government agency, corporation, or interest group on a specific task defined by the client. Richard Scaglione's work (Selection 31) for the Papua New Guinea Law Reform Commission, for example, could pass for basic research, except that it was commissioned by the government with very practical uses in mind: designing a new and culturally appropriate legal system.

In the third category, anthropologists work as consultants to business and industry or to government agencies that need in-depth cultural knowledge to solve or prevent a problem. In Selection 8, Barbara Jones enters the realm of law to assess the level of misunderstanding between government agents and a group of Native American women. Anthropologists often act as cultural brokers, mediating and translating between groups who are miscommunicating, not because of their words but because of cultural meanings.

Finally, a few anthropologists have developed and administered programs. Gerald F. Murray's work in

reforestation in Haiti (Selection 18) exemplifies development and actual administration of a project in which cultural understanding is a fundamental component. The overwhelming success of this agrarian project attests to the practical value of anthropological understanding for solving human problems.

A great deal of anthropological work remains to be done; this seems to be one of the better-kept secrets of the twentieth century. People have a far easier time focusing on the individual as the level of analysis. When divorce, drug abuse, or suicide affect large numbers of people, we may look to the individual and to psychology for answers. However, when divorce rates climb to 50 percent of all marriages and the suicide rate increases tenfold we must look beyond the individual to forces that affect society at large. If we are so immersed in our own culture, we have a hard time seeing it as a powerful force that guides and controls—our behavior. We begin these reflections therefore, with two papers that convey the hidden, powerful, nature of culture.