

# Cultural Anthropology

**A PROBLEM-BASED  
APPROACH**



**THIRD  
EDITION**

**RICHARD H. ROBBINS**

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State University of New York at Plattsburgh



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Anthropologists enjoy a unique perspective on education. For us, learning and teaching form part of a cultural process affected by a host of social, cultural, individual, and situational factors. For the anthropologist, a classroom constitutes but one of many learning environments and, like other environments, influences the kind of learning that occurs within its boundaries. For us, classrooms have their own unique cultures, some of which may be more or less conducive to the kinds of learning to which teachers and students aspire.

I designed *Cultural Anthropology: A Problem-Based Approach* to help instructors and students in introductory courses in cultural anthropology to foster a classroom culture that, regardless of class size and instructional technique, actively involves students in the learning process, promotes critical thinking, and impresses on students that they, along with other peoples and cultures of the world, are cultural animals worthy of anthropological study.

How can the use of this book contribute to active learning? I think in at least three ways. First, the material is organized by problems and questions, rather than topics. Each of the first eight chapters of the book focuses on a specific problem of anthropological—as well as general—concern:

- How can people begin to understand beliefs and behaviors that are different from their own?
- How do we explain the transformation of human societies over the past 10,000 or so years from small-scale, nomadic bands of hunters and gatherers, to large-scale, urban-industrial states?
- How do we explain the emergence of the modern nation-state?
- Why do people believe different things, and why are they so certain that their view of the world is correct, and that others are wrong?
- What does a person have to know to understand the dynamics of family life in other societies?
- How do people determine who they are, and how do they communicate who they think they are to others? Why are modern societies characterized by social, political, and economic inequalities?
- How do societies give meaning to and justify collective violence?

While these problems may have no definitive solutions, they drive much intellectual inquiry. From each are derived specific questions, each of which is amenable to study and research and from which it is possible to come to a more or less definitive conclusion. These include:

- Is modern medicine more effective than traditional curing techniques?
- How do people come to accept social hierarchies as natural?
- What are the characteristics of peaceful societies?

Chapter 9 presents some applications of anthropology to solving problems reflecting cultural diversity.

The selection of specific problems and questions for the text was a difficult one. It is impossible in an introductory-level textbook in cultural anthropology to present all problems and questions of relevance to cultural anthropologists. However, I have tried to select problems and questions central to anthropological concerns, and that allow discussion of anthropological subjects and works typically covered in introductory courses in cultural anthropology. The Topic-Questions Correspondence Chart, which links topics to questions considered in the text, can be used in guiding discussion.

TOPIC-QUESTIONS CORRESPONDENCE CHART

The following chart indicates the chapters or questions in which topics treated in the typical cultural anthropology textbook are addressed.

TOPIC	CORRESPONDING QUESTIONS OR CHAPTERS
Applied Anthropology	Chapter 9
Art	Question 4.2
Caste	Question 6.1
Colonialism	Question 2.3; Question 2.5
Corporations	Question 3.3; Question 3.4
Cultural Evolution	Question 2.1
Cultural Relativism	Question 1.2
Culture Change	Chapter 2; Chapter 9
Culture Concept	Chapter 1
Ecology	Question 1.5; Question 2.3
Economic Anthropology	Chapter 2; Chapter 3; Question 7.1; Question 7.2
Education	Question 3.3; Question 4.2; Question 6.3; Chapter 9
Family Organization	Chapter 5
Feud	Question 8.1; Question 8.3
Fieldwork	Question 1.3
Food Production	Question 2.2; Question 2.3
Gender Roles	Chapter 5; Question 6.2; Question 6.3; Question 7.3
Gift Giving	Question 5.3; Question 6.4; Question 6.5
Globalization	Question 2.2; Question 2.3; Question 2.5
Hunters and Gatherers	Question 2.1; Question 2.5; Question 8.2
Identity	Chapter 6

<i>TOPIC</i>	<i>CORRESPONDING QUESTIONS OR CHAPTERS</i>
Industrialization	Question 2.2; Question 2.3
Kinship	Chapter 5; Question 6.2; Question 7.4
Language and Culture	Question 1.4; Question 4.1; Question 4.3; Question 6.3; Question 7.4; Question 8.2
Marriage Rules	Chapter 5
Medical Anthropology	Question 2.4
Nation-State	Chapter 3
Peasants	Question 2.1; Question 2.3; Question 2.5; Chapter 5
Political Organization and Control	Chapter 3; Question 7.5; Question 8.2; Question 8.3; Question 8.4; Question 8.5
Religion	Question 1.1; Question 1.2; Question 3.3; Chapter 4; Question 6.4
Revolution	Question 7.2; Question 8.4
Ritual	Question 1.4; Question 1.5; Question 2.4; Question 4.2; Question 4.3; Question 6.2; Question 6.3; Question 6.4; Question 6.5
Sexuality	Question 1.5; Question 4.2; Question 4.4; Question 6.2; Question 6.3
Sexual Stratification	Question 5.1; Question 5.2; Question 5.3
Social Stratification	Chapter 7
Status and Rank	Question 2.1; Question 2.2; Question 2.3; Chapter 7; Chapter 9
Subsistence Techniques	Question 2.1; Question 2.2
Symbolism	Question 1.1; Question 1.4; Question 1.5; Question 4.1; Question 4.2; Question 4.3; Question 6.3; Question 6.4
Systems of Exchange	Question 6.5
Urbanism	Question 7.4
War and Feud	Chapter 8

In providing the material to explore answers to the questions posed in the textbook I have tried to present a balanced approach and to invite readers to form their own informed responses, and I have tried to select studies and writings that represent both those classical studies typically found in introductory-level courses as well as newer or less well-known works that bear on contemporary concerns.

A second way that *Cultural Anthropology: A Problem-Based Approach* will contribute to active learning is through exercises, case studies, and simulations—some of which are included in the textbook, while others are included in the

instructor's manual, *A Handbook for Active Learning*, available with the text. These are designed to help students realize some of the implications of the problems or questions for their own lives, as well as for others. They may be used by students and instructors in various ways. They can serve as discussion questions, writing exercises, or as topics of group inquiry or cooperative learning. I have used them as topics of group work in classes as large as 75 students, and I believe they can be used effectively in even larger classes. If used as group inquiry topics, the exercises are designed to take no more than 15 to 20 minutes for group work. As writing exercises they can be used to prime classroom discussion; students can prepare brief responses prior to class, and these responses can be used as a starting point for discussion. My own experience is that the use of these exercises conveys to students the positive value, the enjoyment, and the necessity of intellectual exchange. The exercises also allow students to bring to the class and contribute their own informed responses to the questions discussed in the textbook. The instructor's manual also includes suggestions on using the exercises, as well as information on what to expect in the way of student responses. It includes a guide to articles in introductory readers, and film and video material to accompany each question raised in the book, along with suggestions on how the films or videos can be used to stimulate discussion.

The third feature that will contribute to active learning stems from my conviction that people learning about the cultures of others cannot fully appreciate them without first understanding something of their own cultural perspectives. That is, to appreciate the fact that people construct their worlds, students must appreciate the fact that they, as cultural animals, do the same. For that reason, the textbook contains numerous comparisons of world cultures with American cultures, and many of the exercises in the textbook and instructor's manual invite students to apply what they have learned to the analysis of their own behaviors and beliefs.

To assist students and instructors there is a dedicated Web site for the book at:

**<http://faculty.plattsburgh.edu/richard.robbyns/ca/>**

The Web site includes study resources for students, articles, additional links to other sites, and resources for instructors.

Finally, I have included in the book links to Web sites related to the topics and questions we discuss. There are also some excellent Web sites that maintain links to anthropology sites. These include:

Anthropology Resources on the Internet

**<http://home.worldnet.fr/~clist/Anthro/index.html>**

Lisa Mitten's Home Page

**<http://www.pitt.edu/~lmitten>**

Department of Anthropology at the University of California, Santa Barbara

**<http://www.anth.ucsb.edu/links/pages/>**

Anthro.Net

**<http://www.anthro.net/>**

Implicit in the textbook and the manual materials is the conviction that the culture of the classroom should foster cooperation. However, cooperation does

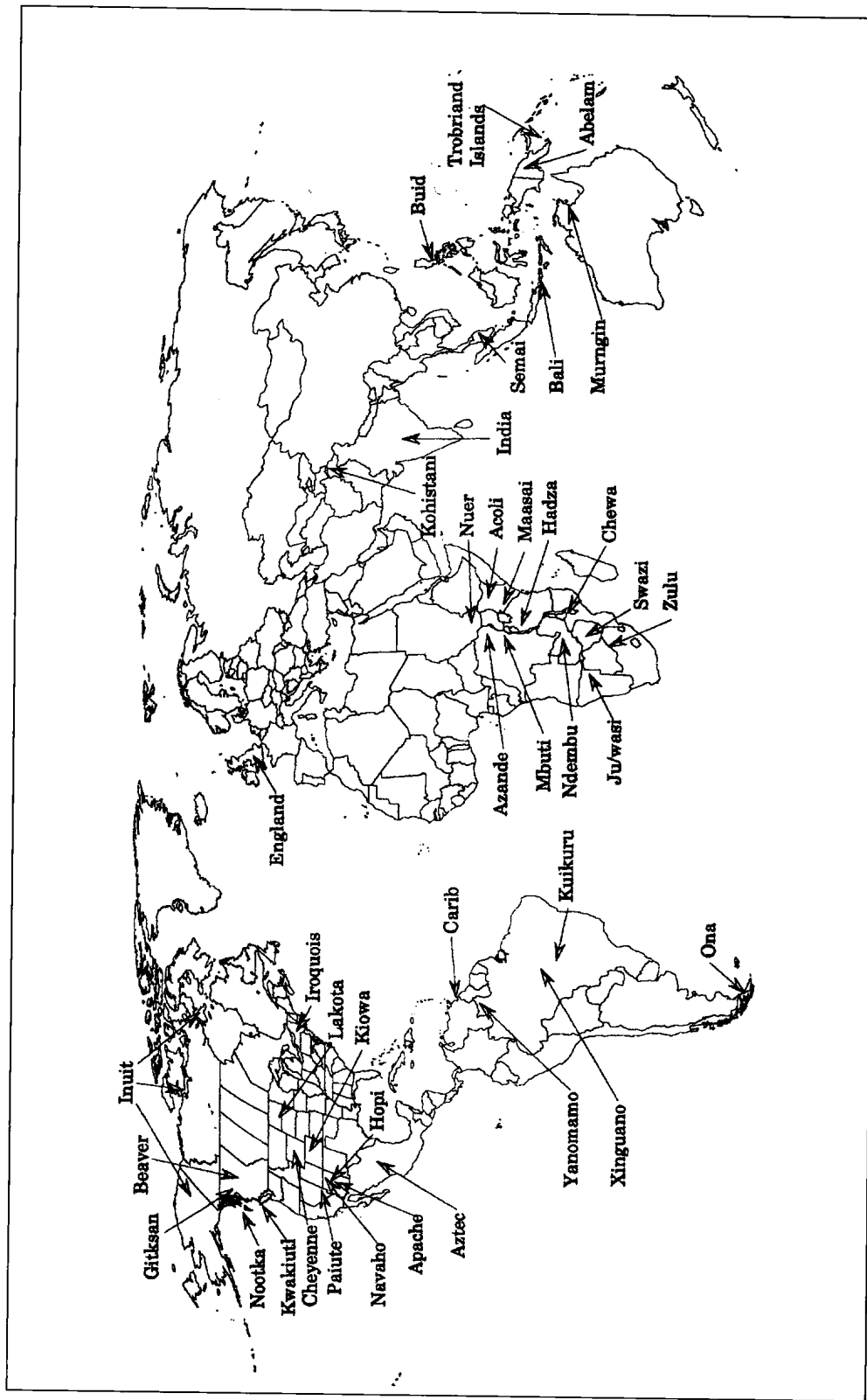
not preclude conflict and critique. In fact, it assumes it. I would be grateful for comments from instructors and students about the book, the questions, and the general approach, as well as for suggestions for additional exercises, videos or films, or other materials that would enhance the use of *Cultural Anthropology: A Problem-Based Approach*. I also would be happy to distribute those suggestions to others who are using the book. I can be contacted at the Department of Anthropology, SUNY at Plattsburgh, Plattsburgh, NY 12901, or through electronic mail at richard.robbsins@plattsburgh.edu.

Richard H. Robbins

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GEOGRAPHIC LOCATIONS OF PEOPLES REFERRED TO IN THE TEXT

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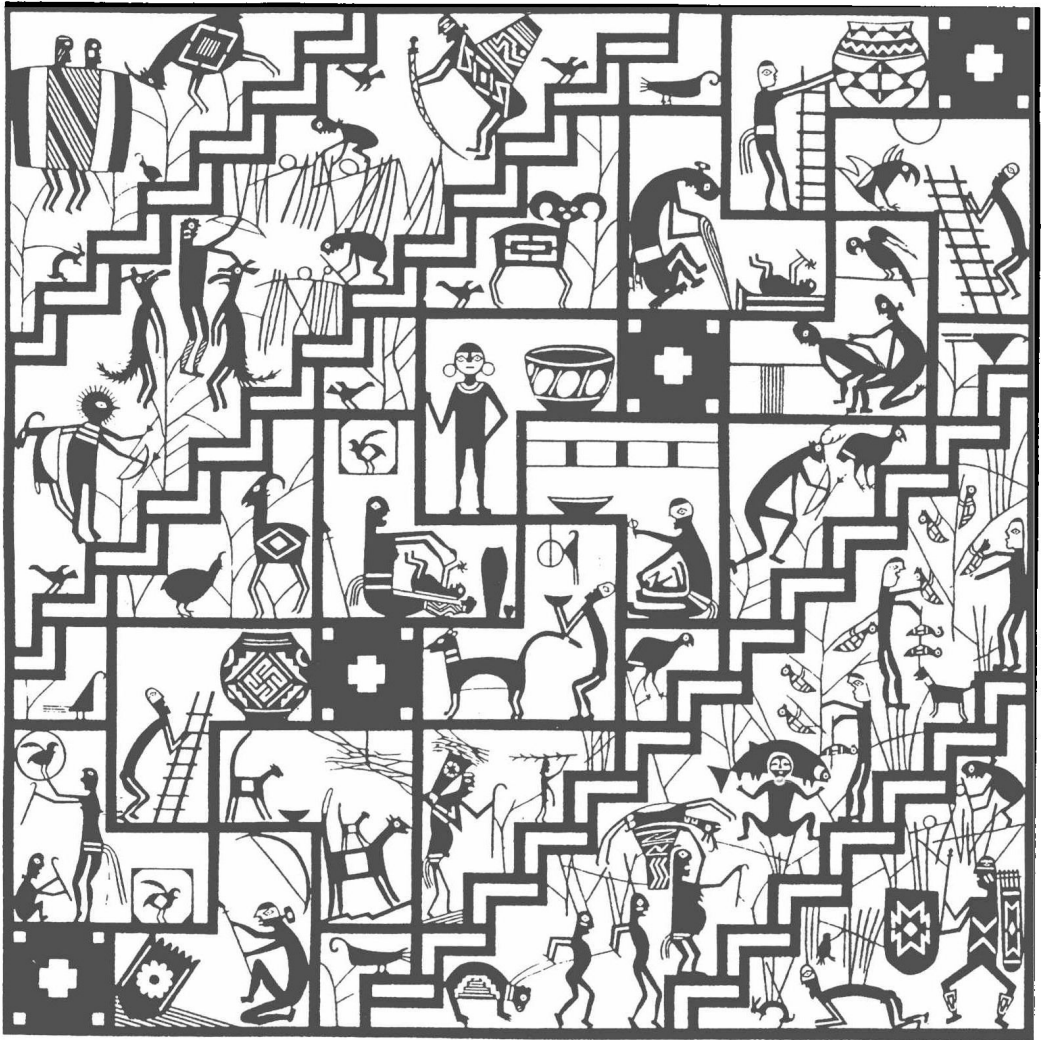
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## C H A P T E R 1

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# CULTURE AND MEANING

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**PROBLEM 1: HOW CAN PEOPLE BEGIN TO UNDERSTAND BELIEFS AND BEHAVIORS THAT ARE DIFFERENT FROM THEIR OWN?**

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[W]e have come to think of our social and cultural world as a series of sign systems, comparable to languages. What we live among and relate to are not physical objects and events; they are objects and events with meaning; not just complicated wooden constructions but chairs and tables; not just physical gestures but acts of courtesy or hostility. If we are able to understand our social and cultural world, we must think not of independent objects but of symbolic structures, systems of relations which by enabling objects and actions to have meaning, create a human universe.

Jonathan Culler

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## INTRODUCTION: *The World Behind Everyday Appearances*

In **cultural anthropology**, as in every science, we strive to look beyond the world of everyday experiences to discover the patterns and meanings that lie behind that world. Take, for example, the typical classroom combination chair and desk.

In our taken-for-granted, everyday world this piece of furniture is a utilitarian object: something to sit on, or write on, or even put our feet on. But for the cultural anthropologist the classroom chair and desk tells some interesting tales and poses some interesting questions. For example, why do we have chairs at all? Many societies don't; people sit or squat on the ground or the floor or sit on stools or benches. Historically, the chair likely first appeared in Europe or the Near East but wasn't even common in Europe until the eighteenth century. And why does the classroom chair take the form it does? Why don't we sit on stools? One feature of the chair that anthropologists might explore as they try to decipher the meaning of the classroom chair and desk is the erect position into which it forces the body—compelling it, in effect, to “pay attention.” We might take a clue from French philosopher Michel Foucault; he refers to the shaping of the human body as a “political anatomy,” a way that people's bodies are controlled by others to operate with the necessary speed and efficiency. Political anatomy produces, Foucault says, “docile bodies.”

An anthropologist might suggest that the combination classroom chair and desk is part of the political anatomy of educational settings, part of the system of relations that gives meaning to the classroom; that is, this piece of furniture forms the body into a shape that prepares it (or forces it) to attend to a teacher and not to others in the same room. Moreover, it is appropriate to its unique setting in the classroom, as are other objects of furniture. Imagine, for example, replacing classroom chairs with swiveling bar stools, whose main purpose is to promote bodily mobility and conversation with others.

Once alert to the idea that the classroom chair might serve as an instrument of control, we might notice other ways in which classroom design serves as a mode of discipline. The distribution of people in space, with each person in a particular “spot” in neat, ordered rows, serves to discipline people to “pay attention” to the classroom center and not to others around them. We might also notice the distinctive ordering of time and the use of clocks, bells, and whistles