

CORE CONCEPTS IN CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY



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To Jan Beatty

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♦ Preface ♦

key terms and issues of contemporary cultural anthropology. It is not a condensed version of the fourth edition of our textbook Cultural Anthropology: A Perspective on the Human Condition; this is something new. Our goal is to provide students with a rapid sketch of the basic ideas and practices of cultural anthropology in a style analogous to a bibliographic essay. A good bibliographic essay prepares its readers to do their own research by giving them an idea of what sources are available and where and how those sources fit into research in that field. So, too, we hope, with this volume: we want students to know what the core concepts and key terms are in cultural anthropology and where they come from so they have a context for understanding anthropological writing, especially ethnographic writing, when they turn to it.

Clearly, then, our expectation is that this text will be used in conjunction with ethnographies and/or collections of readings during the term. For that reason, we have omitted ethnographic examples and other kinds of details found in our textbook Cultural Anthropology (and most introductory texts), and we have concentrated on what students need to know in order to read anthropology effectively.

Features

- Flexibility. This text can be used in many different ways. It can be used by itself as a concise introduction to cultural anthropology when the course time that can be devoted to covering the discipline is limited. It can also be used in conjunction with other readings. We assume that instructors may provide favorite ethnographic examples to illustrate the issues they raise in lectures. Core Concepts in Cultural Anthropology may be assigned at the beginning of the term to go along with introductory lectures and be referred to as needed. Or specific chapters of this text may be assigned to be read along with particular ethnographies or course topics. To accommodate various uses, we have made each chapter self-contained and have included cross-references to related topics in other chapters wherever possible.
- ◆ Brief and affordable. What you have in your hands is a framework, a basic orientation to cultural anthropology. A consequence of writing a concise introduction is that many of the details and nuances of the field are left out. It is our hope that the brevity and affordability of this text will allow the assignment of additional course readings and will engender class discussions that bring back the nuance and subtlety that are a part of every human endeavor.
- Provides abundant study aids. Each chapter opens with a list of key terms discussed in that chapter. Each chapter ends with a concluding paragraph, which summarizes the concepts introduced in the chapter, and a list of suggested readings, which—along with an extensive end-of-book bibliography directs students to more detailed discussions. An online Study Guide provides additional learning help.
- ◆ Includes a chapter on theory. Because all anthropological writing is theoretically situated, we have included a chapter on theory in cultural anthropology. We think it is important for students to get a sense of where what they are reading fits into anthropology. We also think they need some tools for interpreting what they are reading because ethnographic

writing often refers to alternative theoretical positions and it is useful for students to know the issues in those positions and in the debate.

• Offers a list of ethnographies in print. A Web site accompanies the text that lists and plots on a world map all available ethnographies in print and provides pertinent information. A list of ethnographies, organized geographically, appears in the front of the instructor's copies as well.

A word about the chapters and where to find certain materials: as we put the book together, we found that some important topics fit better into broader topics. For example, discussion of research methods in anthropology will be found in Chapter 1, "Anthropology" and discussion of gender, race, class, ethnicity, and nonkin forms of social organization are found in Chapter 6, "The Dimensions of Social Organization."

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We'd like to thank the reviewers of this text for their careful comments: Julianna Acheson, Western Washington University; Shelly Braun, University of Utah; Jean S. Forward, University of Massachusetts; and Martha Kaplan, Vassar College.

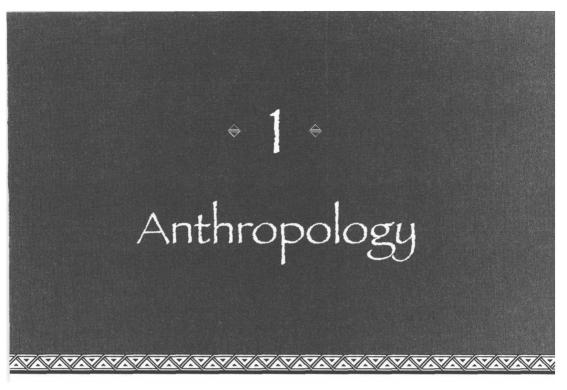
Finally, and briefly, we would like to thank our editor, Jan Beatty, who suggested a book like this to us in the first place. It has been an interesting and valuable project for us, as it directed our attention to the various ways in which cultural anthropology might be presented. We hope that you find it to be an effective tool for teaching anthropology to new generations of students.

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The key terms and concepts covered in this chapter, in the order in which they appear:

anthropology holistic comparative fieldwork evolutionary

biological anthropology primatologists paleoanthropologists forensic anthropologists

cultural anthropology culture informants participant-observation ethnography monograph ethnology

anthropological linguistics linguistic anthropology language

archaeology prehistory

applied anthropology development anthropology

objective knowledge positivism modernism postmodernism reflexive NTHROPOLOGY IS A discipline that exists at the borders of the social sciences, the humanities, and the biological sciences. The term itself comes from two Greek words: anthropos, meaning "human beings," and logia, "the study of." The "study of human beings" would seem to be a rather broad topic for any one field, but anthropologists take the name of their discipline seriously, and anything that has to do with human beings probably is of potential interest to anthropologists. Indeed, anthropology can be formally defined as the study of human nature, human society, and the human past. This means that some anthropologists study human origins, others try to understand diverse contemporary ways of life, and some excavate the past or try to understand why we speak the ways we do.

Given its breadth, what coherence anthropology has as a discipline comes from its perspective. Anthropology is holistic, comparative, field based, and evolutionary. For anthropologists, being holistic means trying to fit together all that is known about human beings. That is, anthropologists draw on the findings of many different disciplines that study human beings (human biology, economics, and religion, for example), as well as data on similar topics that they themselves have collected, and attempt to produce an encompassing picture of human life.

However, to generalize about human nature, human society, and the human past requires information from as wide a range of human groups as possible. Anthropologists realized long ago that the patterns of life common in their own societies were not necessarily followed in other societies. And so, anthropology is a comparative discipline: anthropologists must consider similarities and differences in as wide a range of human societies as possible before generalizing about what it means to be human.

Because anthropology is interested in human beings in all places and at all times, anthropologists are curious about how we

got to be what we are today. For this reason, anthropology is evolutionary. A major branch of anthropology is concerned with the study of the *biological* evolution of the human species over time, including the study of human origins and genetic variety and inheritance in living human populations. Some anthropologists have also been interested in *cultural* evolution, looking for patterns of orderly change over time in socially acquired behavior that is not carried in the genes.

Anthropology in North America historically has been divided into four major subfields: biological anthropology, cultural anthropology, linguistic anthropology, and archaeology.

Biological anthropology is the subfield of anthropology that looks at human beings as biological organisms. Biological anthropologists are interested in many different aspects of human biology, including our similarities to and differences from other living organisms. Those who study the closest living relatives of human beings—the nonhuman primates (chimpanzees and gorillas, for example)—are called primatologists. Those who specialize in the study of the fossilized bones and teeth of our earliest ancestors are called paleoanthropologists. Other biological anthropologists examine the genetic variation among and within different human populations or investigate variation in human skeletal biology (for example, measuring and comparing the shapes and sizes of bones or teeth using skeletal remains from different human populations). Newer specialties focus on human adaptability in different ecological settings, on human growth and development, or on the connections between a population's evolutionary history and its susceptibility to disease. Forensic anthropologists use their knowledge of human anatomy to aid law enforcement and human rights investigators by assisting in the identification of skeletal material found at crime or accident sites or at sites associated with possible human-rights violations.

Cultural anthropology (sometimes called social anthropology in Great Britain) is another major subfield of anthropology. Cultural anthropologists investigate how variation in the beliefs and behaviors of members of different human groups is shaped by culture, sets of learned behaviors and ideas that human beings

acquire as members of society. (For a fuller discussion of the concept of culture, see Chapter 2.) Cultural anthropologists specialize in specific domains of human cultural activity. Some study the ways people organize themselves to carry out collective tasks, whether economic, political, or spiritual. Others focus on the forms and meanings of expressive behavior in human societies language, art, music, ritual, religion, and the like. Still others examine material culture—the things people make and use, such as clothing, housing, tools, and the techniques they employ to get food and produce material goods. They may also study the ways in which technologies and environments shape each other. For some time, cultural anthropologists have been interested in the way non-Western peoples responded to the political and economic challenges of European colonialism and the capitalist industrial technology that came with it. They investigate contemporary issues of gender and sexuality, transnational labor migration, and the post-cold war resurgence of ethnicity and nationalism around the world. And some cultural anthropologists have started to examine the increasing influence of computer technology on the social and cultural life of peoples throughout the world.

In all of these cases, the comparative nature of anthropology requires that what is taken for granted by members of a specific society—the anthropologist's own, as much as any other—must be examined, or "problematized." As a result, there is a double movement in anthropology: anthropologists study other ways of life not only to understand them in their own terms but also to put their own ways of life in perspective.

To make their discipline comparative, cultural anthropologists began to immerse themselves in the lives of other peoples. Traditionally, cultural anthropology is rooted in **fieldwork**, an anthropologist's personal, long-term experience with a specific group of people and their way of life. Where possible, anthropologists try to live for a year or more with the people whose way of life is of concern to them. The result is a fine-grained knowledge of the everyday details of life. Cultural anthropologists get to know people as individuals, not as "data sets." They remember the names and faces of people who, over the course of a year or more,

have become familiar to them as complex and complicated men, women, and children. They remember the feel of the noonday sun, the sounds of the morning, the smells of food cooking, the pace and rhythm of life. In this sense, anthropology traditionally has been an *experiential* discipline. This approach does, of course, have drawbacks as well as advantages: anthropologists are not usually able to make macrolevel generalizations about an entire nation or society and their attention is not usually directed toward national or international policy-making or data collection. They are often, however, well aware of the *effects* of national or international decisions on the local level. In fact, in recent years, a number of anthropologists have done illuminating work about nations, refugees and migrations, and international and global processes.

People who share information about their way of life with anthropologists traditionally have been called informants. In recent years, however, a number of anthropologists have become uncomfortable with that term, which to some conjures up images of police informers and to others seems to reduce fully-rounded individuals to the information they provide. But anthropologists have not been able to agree on an expression that might replace "informant"; some prefer "respondent" or "teacher" or "friend," or simply refer to "the people with whom I work." Regardless of the term, fieldworkers gain insight into another way of life by taking part as fully as they can in a group's social activities, as well as by observing those activities as outsiders. This research method, known as participant-observation, is central to cultural anthropology.

Cultural anthropologists write about what they have learned in scholarly articles or in books, and sometimes they document the lives of their research subjects on film. The word monograph is sometimes used to describe the books that anthropologists write; an ethnographic monograph, or ethnography, is a scholarly work about a specific way of life. Ethnology is the comparative study of two or more ways of life. Thus, cultural anthropologists who write ethnographies are sometimes called ethnographers, and anthropologists who compare ethnographic information on many different ways of life are sometimes called ethnologists.

A third major subfield of anthropology, called anthropological linguistics or linguistic anthropology, is the branch of anthropology concerned with the study of human languages. For many people, the most striking cultural feature of human beings is language, the system of arbitrary vocal symbols we use to encode our experience of the world and of one another. Anthropological linguists were some of the first people to transcribe non-Western languages and to produce grammars and dictionaries of those languages. They also have worked to show the ways in which a people's language (or languages) serves as the main carrier of important cultural information. In tracing the relationships between language and culture, these anthropologists have investigated a range of topics (see Chapter 3 for details).

In all their research, anthropological linguists seek to understand language in relation to the broader cultural, historical, or biological contexts that make it possible. Modern anthropological linguists are trained in both formal linguistics and anthropology, and some cultural anthropologists study linguistics as part of their professional preparation.

Archaeology, the fourth traditional subfield of North American anthropology, can be defined as a cultural anthropology of the human past involving the analysis of the material remains of earlier human societies. Through archaeology, anthropologists discover much about human history, particularly prehistory, the long stretch of time before the development of writing. Archaeologists look for evidence of past human cultural activity, such as postholes, garbage heaps, and settlement patterns. Depending on the locations and ages of the sites they are digging, archaeologists may also have to be experts in stone-tool manufacture, metallurgy, or ancient pottery. Because archaeological excavations frequently uncover remains such as bones or plant pollen, archaeologists often work in teams with other scientists who specialize in the analysis of these remains.

The work archaeologists do complements the work done by other kinds of anthropologists. For example, paleontologists may find that archaeological information about successive stone-tool traditions in a particular region may correlate with fossil evidence

TABLE 1.1 The Traditional Subfields of Anthropology

Biological anthropology Cultural anthropology Linguistic anthropology Archaeology

of prehistoric occupation of that region by ancient human populations. Cultural anthropologists may use the work of archaeologists to help them interpret contemporary patterns of land use or forms of subsistence technology.

While popular media often portray archaeologists as concerned primarily with exotic ancient "stuff" (the "Indiana Jones syndrome," we might call it), archaeologists themselves are usually more interested in seeking answers to cultural questions that can only be addressed properly by considering the passage of time. For example, archaeologists can use dating techniques to establish the ages of artifacts, which then allows them to hypothesize about patterns of sociocultural change in ancient societies. For example, tracing the spread of cultural inventions over time from one site to another allows them to hypothesize about the nature and degree of social contact between different peoples. Some contemporary archaeologists even dig through layers of garbage deposited by people within the past two or three decades, often uncovering surprising information about modern consumption patterns. (Table 1.1 lists the four traditional subfields of anthropology.)

In recent decades, increasing numbers of anthropologists have been using the methods and findings from every subfield of anthropology to address problems in the contemporary world, in what is called **applied anthropology**. This subfield has grown rapidly as an area of involvement and employment for anthropologists. Some applied anthropologists may use a particular group's ideas about illness and health to introduce new public health practices in a way that makes sense to and will be accepted by members of that group. Others may apply knowledge of traditional social organization to ease the problems of refugees trying to settle in a new land. Still others may tap their knowledge of traditional and Western methods of cultivation to help farmers increase their crop yields. Taken together, these activities are sometimes called development anthropology because their aim is to improve people's capacities to maintain their health, produce their food, and otherwise adapt to the challenges of life in the contemporary world.

Applied anthropologists with a background in archaeology may be involved with contract or salvage archaeology, or they may work in cultural resource management to ensure that the human past is not destroyed by, say, the construction of new buildings, highways, or dams. Biological anthropologists may become involved in forensic work, such as the determination of social characteristics of crime or accident victims, or in nutrition.

In recent years, increasing numbers of anthropologists have come to view applied anthropology as a separate field of professional specialization—related to the other four fields but with its own techniques and theoretical questions. More and more universities in the United States have begun to develop courses and programs in applied anthropology.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, most anthropologists viewed their growing discipline as a science. They agreed that the truth about the world was accessible through the five senses; that a properly disciplined rational mind could derive universal, objective truths from material evidence; and that a single scientific method could be applied to any dimension of reality, from the movement of the planets to human sexual behavior. Such investigation was supposed to produce objective knowledge: undistorted, and thus universally valid, knowledge about the world. Anthropologists felt free to apply scientific methods in any area of anthropological interest, from stone tools to religion, confident that the combined results of these efforts would produce a genuine "Science of Man" (as it was then called). This set of ideas and practices is known as positivism.

Today, many critical observers of the natural and social sciences connect these ideas to a complex Western cultural ideology called modernism. Modernism can be (and has been) viewed in terms of liberation from outdated traditions that prevent people from building better lives for themselves and their children. Critics have argued, however, that modern Western science, rather than being a universal path to objective truth, is itself a culture-bound enterprise connected to a specific definition of progress. Many members of non-Western societies agree with these critics that in their experience, modernist ideas have been used by powerful Western states to dominate them and to undermine their traditional beliefs and practices. From their perspective, Western-style "progress" has meant the loss of political autonomy, an increase in economic impoverishment, and environmental degradation, and destruction of systems of social relations and values that clash with the "modern" way of life.

This criticism of modernism, accompanied by an active questioning of all the boundaries and categories that modernists set up as objectively true, has come to be called postmodernism. Its plausibility as an intellectual position increased after the end of the Cold War in 1989, when many previously unquestioned cultural and political "truths" about the world seemed to crumble overnight. To be postmodern is to question the universalizing tendencies of modernism, especially of modernist understandings of science. Postmodernists point out that people occupying powerful social positions often are able to pass off their own cultural or political prejudices as universal truths, while dismissing or ignoring alternative views held by powerless groups.

Anthropologists, of course, had long considered themselves to be debunkers of distorting Western stereotypes about non-Western peoples. Having frequently defended the integrity of indigenous societies against the onslaughts of modernizing missionaries and "development" experts, they had come to assume that they were on the side of those whose ways of life they studied. From the perspective of some members of these same societies, however, as well as from the viewpoint of postmodernists, anthropologists looked just

like another group of outside "experts" making their own universal claims about human cultures, behaving no differently from chemists making universal, "expert" claims about molecules.

Postmodern criticism prompted anthropologists to engage in a reappraisal of their discipline, and, in particular, to rethink what was involved in fieldwork and the writing of ethnography. While cultural anthropologists continue to value careful observational methods and accurate, systematic data gathering, many of them also take seriously certain parts of the postmodern critique. For example, modeling ethnographers in the field on natural scientists in their laboratories appears problematic once ethnographers grant that the subject matter of anthropology, unlike that of chemistry, consists of human beings, members of the same species as the scientists studying them. Rather than a relationship between a curious human being and inert matter, anthropological fieldwork always involved a social relationship between at least two curious individuals. This meant that the cultural identity and personal characteristics of fieldworkers had to be taken into account when attempting to make sense of their ethnographic writing. Put another way, fieldwork had to become a reflexive activity, in which anthropologists carefully scrutinized both their own contribution to fieldwork interactions and the responses these interactions elicited from informants. Many contemporary cultural anthropologists have accepted the challenges of doing reflexive fieldwork and are persuaded that such fieldwork produces better, more accurate ethnography than modernist methods ever did. Reflexive fieldworkers are much more explicit about the limitations of their own knowledge and much more generous in the credit they give to their informants. Some have written their ethnographies in new, experimental styles that often read more like novels than dry, scientific texts.

Indeed, many ethnographers today no longer act as outsiders but have taken up the challenge of doing participant-observation in a culture to which they belong. They are conscious of potential pitfalls but are convinced that their professional training will help them provide a unique and valuable perspective. They see their task as finding a way to combine the most valuable elements of the postmodern critique of ethnography with a continuing respect