

BEING HUMAN

AN INTRODUCTION TO CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY



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PREFACE

Introductory cultural anthropology courses often act as gatekeepers to the field. Many future anthropologists are “converted” to the discipline as a result of taking introductory courses. In many cases, these classes appear to serve as rites of passage in which students must memorize arcane formulas before being permitted to view the more recent and exciting discoveries of the field. This approach to introductory cultural anthropology classes evokes male puberty rites in which a boy must undergo fasting, beatings, and subincision before being allowed to see the flutes.

Because of their emphasis on memorization rather than comprehension, many introductory texts seem caught in a time warp that presents culture as *static* rather than *dynamic* and focuses on social *structure* rather than social *interaction*. As a result, in later anthropology courses students must often unlearn material they have encountered as dogma in their introductory classes.

At the other extreme, introductory texts that attempt to break out of the traditional mold often present an idiosyncratic view of anthropological theory, even going so far as to make up new terms and concepts. Introductory students—who are too susceptible to the lure of rote memorization under the best of circumstances—are then badly prepared to deal with more sophisticated concepts presented in later courses.

When teaching courses in introductory cultural anthropology, I have often been frustrated by the sense that I must teach against the book to incorporate contemporary anthropological research. While teaching upper-division courses and conducting graduate seminars on theory and research methods, I have noted that students sometimes never fully recover from the limitations of the “checklist of anthropological facts” approach to introductory courses.

Being Human: An Introduction to Cultural Anthropology is an attempt to make anthropological theory accessible to introductory cultural anthropology students through the use of simple language and by illustrating the relevance of anthropological concepts to their own lives. At the same time, the emphasis in this text is on conveying the underlying

logic of anthropological theory and placing it in its historical context. Specifically, I try to:

1. *Bridge the “we–they” dichotomy.* Anthropologists have traditionally distinguished between European and “other” societies by such terms as “civilized–primitive” and “simple–complex.” More recently, theorists have rejected such value-laden terms in favor of more neutral concepts, including “industrial–preindustrial.” Still, this dualistic view of the world reinforces the we–they dichotomy, which many anthropologists now reject as colonialistic. The dualistic approach also obscures real differences among the “they.” This not only results in inaccurate stereotypes of the “other,” but places real obstacles in the way of theoretical analysis.

For example, does any anthropologist using the dichotomy “Western–non-Western” really believe the indigenous peoples of China, India, Papua New Guinea, and Australia are equivalent? China and India are both hierarchical societies based on intensive agriculture; Papua New Guinea represents the Big Man complex, an informal leadership organization grounded in horticulture; and many Australian aborigines are foragers, whose political organization is at the egalitarian end of the scale. The only thing they have in common is that they are “not us.”

Being Human deals with the we–they dichotomy head-on in the first two chapters by discussing the conceptual and organizational bases of the we–they dichotomy, its relationship to distinguishing between “self” and “other,” and its importance to the anthropological approach.

2. *Study society’s “other half.”* Though women make up approximately half of the world’s population,¹ traditional research and formulation of anthropological theory have focused on men. In many cases, anthropological definitions of society are based entirely on descriptions of the interactions of men, with some notable exceptions, such as Jane Goodale’s *Tiwi Wives*. The view of society as being

¹According to 1990 United Nations estimates, of the world’s 5.29 billion population, women number 2.63 billion (49.7 percent) and men number 2.66 billion (50.3 percent).

male reflects traditional Eurocentric values and may have little to do with the way people in other cultures view themselves.²

Although anthropologists say they study cultures holistically, anthropological theories are often based on only 50 percent of the population. Most introductory anthropology texts attempt to deal with contemporary research by adding a chapter on gender. This only serves to reinforce the conception of society as male, with females constituting a residual category. *Being Human* treats social systems holistically, integrating recent research on gender into all aspects of social structure, including kinship, economics, political systems, and religion.

3. *Integrate studies of American and Western culture.* Much of the lure of anthropology lies in studying the “exotic other,” but as a number of anthropologists have noted, the object of this quest is to learn more about ourselves. Authors of introductory texts typically give the nod to this wisdom by including, almost as an afterthought, pictures of U.S. presidents or of North American marriage ceremonies. However, as George Marcus and Michael M. J. Fischer observe, “For the most part, anthropologists have taken the job of reflecting back upon ourselves much less seriously than that of probing other cultures.”³ *Being Human* includes examples of American culture wherever relevant. This approach has three goals: (1) it transcends the we–they dichotomy; (2) it makes anthropology more relevant to students; and (3) it helps students apply anthropological concepts in their daily lives.

4. *Integrate concepts of cultural change into the text.* Traditionally, cultures are described in introductory texts as though they were static, and discussions of change are tacked on at the end of the book as an afterthought. In fact, virtually all groups studied by anthropologists are undergoing change, and this should be an integral part of class discussion. Conceptually, this approach is easier for students to assimilate. I have noted that students often seem confused when the issue of cultural change is introduced at the end of the course. “Why did I learn the contents of the book,” they sometimes say, “when now I find out it has all changed?” Integrating cultural change throughout the book also helps make

the material more relevant since ecological issues have become part of the popular culture.

5. *Illustrate key concepts with examples from specific cultures.* When choosing texts, I am often torn between a text and a reader. The text provides an overview, but often squeezes the life out of anthropology, since ethnographies are an integral part of the discipline. On the other hand, readers generally lack continuity and touch lightly upon anthropological theory, forcing me to dedicate my classes to discussing basic theory. *Being Human* attempts to bridge this gap by emphasizing anthropological theory, with supplemental examples that provide insight into the anthropological experience.

In addition, after basic anthropological concepts are introduced in the first ten chapters, they are applied in Chapters 11 through 14, in which appear twelve mini-ethnographies organized around subsistence patterns. These are selected to represent a variety of traditional cultures in many parts of the world and are edited to illustrate the relationship among the various aspects of culture and social organization. Each mini-ethnography also includes a section stating how colonialism or other forms of cultural change have affected the people being discussed.

6. *Provide cultural and historical context for concepts.* Traditionally, cultural anthropology texts are organized according to various aspects of social structure—economic systems, kinship, political systems, and religion—sandwiched between introductory chapters on language and culture and a concluding chapter on cultural change. *Being Human* has taken a somewhat different approach illustrating the interrelatedness of different aspects of social organization and encouraging students to acquire key anthropological concepts in a logical and historical context. Thus, students do not simply memorize terms; they gain an understanding of what the terms and concepts imply and why anthropologists consider them important in analyzing human beings.

Part One, a consideration of the human perspective, describes processes involved in defining human beings and locates the processes in a social and cultural context. Chapter 1, “We the People,” focuses on the we–they dichotomy, defines and explains the importance of ethnicity, and discusses processes of social organization. Chapter 2, “People Looking at People,” defines the concept of culture and discusses such topics as world view; it also describes the anthropological approach and subfields, and deals with the issue of the anthropologist as a human observer and participant. In Chapter 3, “The Adventure of Anthropology,” the story

²A male-centered world view is reflected in the use of pronouns in English, the Judeo-Christian creation myth, and Freudian theory, among other cultural expressions.

³George Marcus and Michael M. J. Fisher, 1986, *Anthropology as Cultural Critique: An Experimental Moment in the Human Sciences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 111.

of developing anthropological concepts begins to unfold through the adventures of early anthropologists.

Part Two contains two chapters on the material aspects of culture. Chapter 4, "Culture as Adaptation," focuses on contemporary issues in cultural evolution, tracing the "evolution" of theory from Karl Marx, through Leslie White and Julian Steward, to Jared Diamond and John Bodley. It evaluates the concept of evolution as "progress" and examines the role of economics in such factors as overpopulation and diminishing environmental resources. Chapter 5, "Culture in Its Material Context," considers the importance of subsistence patterns and systems of exchange in human social organization. Chapter 5 also discusses the cultural materialist perspective on culture as expressed in Marvin Harris's analysis of India's sacred cow and Michael Harner's analysis of Aztec human sacrifice.

Part Three uses psychological anthropology and kinship theory to consider the context of acquiring and transmitting culture. Chapter 6, "On the Nature of Human Nature," provides an overview of psychological theories in anthropology and describes the process of socialization cross-culturally. Kinship—including marriage and descent—is treated in Chapter 7, "Sex, Marriage, and Family Relationships."

Part Four focuses on the question of meaning, as represented in language and communication, religion, and expressive culture. Chapter 8, "Language and Symbols, Order and Chaos," discusses the role of language and symbols in ordering and communicating social and cultural experience. Chapter 9, "Natural and Supernatural Orders," explores cross-cultural concepts of human nature and the cosmos as expressed in religious explanation and magical manipulation, and as acted out in ritual and the dynamics of religious organization. Chapter 10, "Expressive Culture," describes social and cultural experimentation in art, theater, dance, and play.

Part Five, covering human ways of life, presents mini-ethnographies of specific groups to illustrate the value of the holistic approach. Each of the four chapters provides an overview of a particular type of subsistence pattern illustrated by three examples practiced in a particular social and environmental context. This allows students to compare variations on a particular subsistence theme. Chapter 11 focuses on foragers: the !Kung of Africa, the Ainu of Japan, and the Kwakiutl of western Canada. Chapter 12 focuses on pastoralists: the Nandi of Africa, the Basseri of Iran, and the Yolmo of Nepal. Chapter 13 focuses on horticulturalists: the Yanomamo of Venezuela and Brazil, the Mundugumor of New

Guinea, and the Yap Islanders of the Pacific. Chapter 14 focuses on intensive agriculturalists: the Aztecs of Central Mexico, the Nayar of southern India, and the Han of northern China. Each of these chapters incorporates a discussion of the effects of cultural change on the groups described.

The adventure of anthropology continues in Part Six, which carries forward the book's emphasis on the human perspective in anthropology. Chapter 15, "The People We Study," focuses on the dramatic changes in groups studied by anthropologists, framed within the context of anthropological theory and contemporary anthropological research. Chapter 16, "The People We Are," describes careers in anthropology as seen through the eyes of anthropologists. *Being Human* is the first introductory text to describe the culture and social organization of academic anthropology. In addition, Chapter 16 provides examples of work in applied anthropology. Material presented in the chapter is illustrated through two boxes written by anthropologists about their own careers: H. B. Kimberley Cook describes her discovery of female aggression among dwellers in a South American island community; Paul Bohannon explores his career from its genesis among such luminaries as A. R. Radcliffe-Brown to his transition from academic anthropology into mass media.

It is often said that you only truly understand a subject when you begin to teach it. After more than twenty years of studying and teaching anthropology, I only began to understand the rich potential of anthropology for explaining human attitudes and behavior after I began to write this book.

As is appropriate for an introductory anthropology text, *Being Human* is the product of various types of kin ties and exchange networks. Prentice Hall is at the center of these relationships: early on Nancy Roberts saw the merits of the book and steered me past the shoals of authorship. Rob DeGeorge propelled the book through a series of tight deadlines and oversaw a staff that produced a beautiful book. Marcy Perman goaded me on by reminding me of the need to start working on my next book, *Psyche and Society*, a reader in psychological anthropology. Kathy Ringrose supplied me with a rich array of photos from which to choose, and my research assistant Ardice Hartry came through in crunches with prompt and accurate data.

At UCLA, Allen Johnson, Douglass Price-Williams, and Jacques Maquet—along with a number of other professors—provided me with solid training in anthropology. The departments of anthropology at UCLA, California State University–Northridge, and Santa Monica College gave me the opportunity to test

many of these concepts in the classroom. Joan Barker made this book possible, by luring me away from my media career and into teaching anthropology.

Laurel Ashley-Peterson, Kimberley Cook, Judith Marti, Lex Hixon, and Susan de Santis provided needed editorial input, and the following reviewers kept me on track at key points in preparing the manuscript: Nabeel Abraham, Henry Ford Community College; Diane E. Barbolla, San Diego Mesa College; Mary Jill Brody, Louisiana State University; Julia B. Burdett, LaGrange College; Josef Gamper, Monterey Peninsula College; Timothy J. Klobberdanz, North Dakota State University; John M. Long, East Los Angeles College; Christine Loveland, Shippensburg University; Joyce Lucke, Indiana University-Pennsylvania University, Columbus; and Michael Robbins, University of Missouri. Special thanks go to those who urged me on when my own spirits were flagging: Karen Saenz, Susan Wallace, Nell Griffith, Lance and Rachel Robbins, Antonia Peña-Hernandez, and Karol Chew. Becca Robbins served as my research assistant early in preparation of the manuscript.

This book is dedicated to the bilateral kin group that traces descent from its founding ancestor, Mari Womack. It began with Greg, Jeff, and Laura Womack and has expanded through both consanguineal and affinal ties. Affines now include Kathy Freeman Womack, Michelle Gravatt Womack, and Dick Williams. Consanguineal ties extend to Greg Womack, Jr., Aaron Womack, and Michael Womack. These consanguineal and affinal kin inherit my most valued possessions: resilience in the face of adversity, a sense of humor under all circumstances, and an enthusiasm for life and learning.

There is yet another descent group to be recognized: the students who continue to be “converted” to anthropology in my classroom, as well as those who will discover anthropology through this book.

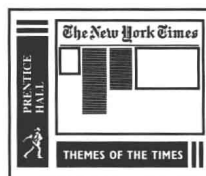
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Mari Womack is a writer and anthropologist specializing in symbols, religion, gender, and American popular culture. She holds a Ph.D. in cultural anthropology from UCLA, and teaches anthropology at UCLA, California State University–Northridge, and Santa Monica College. She is author of two books—*Faces of Culture* and *Sport as Symbol: Images of the Athlete in Art, Literature and Song*—and co-editor of a third, *The Other Fifty Percent*, a reader on gender.

Dr. Womack has been quoted in *The New York Times*, *The Los Angeles Times*, and *The Wall Street Journal*, and has appeared on a number of television programs, including the *Today* show, applying anthropological insights to contemporary issues. She served as consultant and scriptwriter for the PBS television series *Faces of Culture* and has been asked

to edit a reader on psychological anthropology. She will also be writing a book on symbolic anthropology, entitled *Clarity and Contradictions: A Guide to the Anthropological Study of Symbols*, for a new series of books on anthropological topics.

Formerly an international radio broadcaster for Voice of America, Dr. Womack has reported on news events ranging from U.S. presidential elections to earthquakes. She has interviewed a number of distinguished subjects, from Benezir Bhutto of Pakistan to Nobel prize winning scholars to film stars. *How Many Miles to Nirvana*, a book of short stories on her travels—to remote regions of Chile, to the north coast of Alaska, to the former Yugoslavia, and to various parts of Asia—is forthcoming.

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