# CORE CONCEPTS IN CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY

SECOND EDITION

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# Preface

THIS BOOK IS A CONCISE introduction to the fundamental key terms and issues of contemporary cultural anthropology. It is not a condensed version of the fifth 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, how they are related to one another, and where they come from so the students have a context for understanding anthropological writing, especially ethnographic writing, when they turn to it.

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 in most introductory texts), and we have concentrated

on providing a scaffolding on which students can rely as they begin to read anthropological writing.

## 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 very successfully in conjunction with other readings, either anthologies or ethnographies, or both. *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. Another approach, popular with users of the first edition of *Core Concepts in Cultural Anthropology,* is to assign specific chapters to be read along with particular ethnographies or course topics. The book can also be used in upper-level classes where a review of the basic key terms and issues in the field may be valuable, or as a quick way to orient nonanthropology students taking upper-level anthropology courses. To accommodate various uses, we have made each chapter as self-contained as possible and, in the second edition, have added numbered section headings, for ease in assigning specific sections if needed. We 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. One consequence of writing a concise introduction is that many of the details and nuances of the field are left out. We assume that instructors will provide favorite ethnographic examples both in class and in other readings to illustrate the issues they raise in class. It is our hope that the brevity and affordability of this text will allow the assignment of additional course readings and will engender lectures and class discussions that bring back the nuance and subtlety that are a part of every human endeavor, including anthropology, teaching, and learning.

- *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 a larger historical and theoretical context in anthropology. We also think they need some tools for interpreting what they are reading because ethnographic writing often presents and debates alternative theoretical positions and it is useful for students to know the issues addressed in those positions and raised in the debate.
- *Offers a list of ethnographies in print.* A Web site that accompanies the text 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 within broader categories. 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 is found in Chapter 6, "The Dimensions of Social Organization."

## What's New in the Second Edition?

- Section headings have been added to make it easier for students to navigate the text and to give instructors additional flexibility should they wish to assign segments of chapters as needed for their particular course organization.

- Discussions of various concepts and terms have been rewritten, revised, or expanded for purposes of clarification.
- The discussion of the culture concept has been expanded and updated.
- Discussions of subsistence patterns, modes of resource distribution, and social organization have been expanded in a way that avoids simple, unidirectional interpretations of cultural evolution. The second edition has a new discussion of Leslie White's approach to cultural evolution and of Marcel Mauss and gift exchange versus commodity exchange. It has new material on globalization and local consumption practices.
- This edition has an expanded discussion of ritual.
- The final part of the theory chapter has been revised to take account of recent developments beyond the positivist/postmodernist debate.
- New material will be found on media and popular culture, with additional material on cyberculture.
- The second edition has new material on hypergamy and on new reproductive technologies.
- Readers will find references to the precapitalist world system centered in India and to contemporary examples of nonwestern capitalism.
- The discussion of caste and class has been updated.
- Cross-reference terminology has been changed to make clear that the cross-reference refers to additional mentions of the term. These may be the original definition, expanded discussions, or additional references to the term.
- Readers will see some additional suggestions for further reading.

## Acknowledgments

We'd like to thank the reviewers of this text for their careful comments: Shelly Braun, University of Utah; Martha Kaplan, Vassar College; and Jon McGee, Southwest Texas State University.

Finally, we would like to thank 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.

# Contents

# 1 Anthropology

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

anthropology
holistic
comparative
evolutionary

biological anthropology
primatologists
paleoanthropologists
forensic anthropologists

cultural anthropology
culture

fieldwork
informants
participant-observation
monograph

ethnography
ethnology

anthropological linguistics
linguistic anthropology
language
archaeology
prehistory

applied anthropology
development anthropology
objective knowledge

positivism
modernism
postmodernism
reflexive

ANTHROPOLOGY IS A DISCIPLINE that exists at the borders of the social sciences, the humanities, and the biological sciences. The term 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.

## 1.1 An Anthropological Perspective

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 have collected, and attempt to produce an encompassing picture of human life. In the same way, when an anthropologist studies a specific group of people, the goal is to produce a holistic portrait of that people's way of life by bringing together information about many different facets of their lives—social, religious, economic, political, linguistic, and so forth—in order to provide a nuanced context for understanding who they are and why they do what they do.

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.

## 1.2 The Subfields of Anthropology

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, and 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 have 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 the anthropologists' 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 also use a variety of other