



Anthropology

Course Code: Anth101

Credit Hours: 3

Unit One
Introducing
Anthropology and its
Subject Matter

Definition, Scope and Subject Matter of Anthropology

Anthropology is the study of people their origins, their development, and contemporary variations, wherever and whenever they have been found. It is a broad scientific discipline dedicated to the comparative study of humans as a group, from its first appearance on earth to its present stage of development. Of all the disciplines that study humans, anthropology is by far the broadest in scope.

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In more specific terms, anthropology is a science which:

Investigates the strategies for living that are learned and shared by people as members of human social groups;

Examines the characteristics that human beings share as members of one species (*homo sapiens*) and the diverse ways that people live in different environments;

Analyses the products of social groups -material objects (material cultures) and non-material creations (religion/beliefs, social values, institutions, practices, etc).

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Anthropology is an intellectually challenging, theoretically ambitious subject, which tries to achieve an understanding of culture, society and humanity through detailed studies of community life, supplemented by comparison. At the deepest level, it raises philosophical questions, which it tries to respond to by exploring human lives under different conditions. It seeks to explain how and why people are both similar and different through examination of our biological and cultural past and comparative study of contemporary human societies. Its ultimate goal is **to develop an integrated picture of humankind** a goal that encompasses an almost infinite number of questions about all aspects of our existence. We ask, for example, what makes us human? Why do some groups of people tend to be tall and lanky, while others tend to be short and stocky? Why do some groups of people practice agriculture, while others hunt for a living?

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- As a matter of simplicity and brevity, anthropology primarily offers two kinds of insight.
- First, the discipline ***produces knowledge*** about the actual biological and cultural variations in the world;
- Second, anthropology offers **methods and theoretical** perspectives enabling the practitioner to explore, compare, understand and solve these varied expressions of the human condition.

Scope and subject matter of anthropology

The breadth and depth of anthropology is immense. There no time and space left as far as man exists. In other words, the temporal dimension covers the past, the present and even the future. In terms of the spatial dimension, anthropology studies from Arctic to Desert, from Megapolis to hunting gathering areas. The discipline covers all aspects of human ways of life experiences and existence, as humans live in a social group.

It touches all ***aspect of human*** conditions as far as there is a relation between human beings and natural environment and man and man. Anthropology not only tries to account for the social and cultural variation in the world, but a crucial part of the anthropological project also consists in conceptualizing and understanding similarities between social systems and human relationships.

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- As one of the foremost anthropologists of the twentieth century, Claude Lévi-Strauss, has expressed it: *'Anthropology has humanity as its object of research, but unlike the other human sciences, it tries to grasp its object through its most diverse manifestations'*. In other words, anthropology studies humanity with its all aspects of existence, and in its all means of differences (diversity) and similarities (commonality). **Where every human being lives, there is always anthropology.**
- The discipline is also accounting for the interrelationships between different aspects of human existence, and usually anthropologists investigate these interrelationships taking as their point of departure a detailed study of local life in a particular society or a delineated social environment.

Sub-fields of anthropology

- **Physical/Biological Anthropology**

- Deals with tracing the biological origins, evolutionary changes and the genetic diversity of the human species.

- **Physical** anthropology is the branch of anthropology most closely related to the natural sciences, particularly biology; that is why it is often called biological anthropology. Human biology affects or even explains some aspects of behavior, society, and culture like marriage patterns, sexual division of labor, gender ideology etc. The features of culture in turn have biological effects like the standards of attractiveness, food preferences, and human sexuality.

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- Physical anthropology is essentially concerned with two broad areas of investigation: **human evolution and genetics**.
- **Human evolution** is the study of the gradual processes of simple forms into more differentiated structures in hominid. It is interested in reconstructing the evolutionary record of the human species using fossils/bones. Human evolution is further divided into two specialties: Paleoanthropology and Primatology.
- Palaeoanthropology (paleo meaning “old”) is the study of human biological evolution through the analysis of fossil remains from prehistoric times to determine the missing link that connect modern human with its biological ancestors.
- Primatology studies about primates or recent human ancestors to explain human evolution. Primatologists study the anatomy and social behavior of such non-human primate species as gorillas and chimpanzees in an effort to gain clues about our own evolution as a species.

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- **Genetic studies** concerns to investigate how and why the physical traits of contemporary human populations vary throughout the world. It focuses to examine the genetic materials of an organism such as DNA and RNA. In addition, genetic studies are crucial in understanding – how evolution works and plays important role in identifying the genetic source of some hereditary disease like sickle cell anemia and cystic fibrosis.

Archaeological Anthropology

- Archaeological anthropology or simply archaeology studies the ways of lives of past peoples by excavating and analyzing the material culture/physical remains (**artifacts, features and eco-facts**) they left behind.
- **Artifacts** are material remains made and used by the past peoples and that can be removed from the site and taken to the laboratory for further analysis. Tools, ornaments, arrowheads, coins, and fragments of pottery are examples of artifacts.
- **Features** are like artifacts, are made or modified by past people, but they cannot be readily carried away from the site. Archaeological features include such things as house foundations, ancient buildings, fireplaces, steles, and postholes.
- **Eco-facts** are non-artifactual, organic and environmental remains such as soil, animal bones, and plant remains that were not made or altered by humans; but were used by them. Eco-facts provide archaeologists with important data concerning the environment and how people used natural resources in the past.

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- Archaeology has also its own subfields or areas of specialties. The most important ones are -*Prehistoric Archaeology and Historical Archaeology*.
- Prehistoric archaeology investigates human prehistory and prehistoric cultures. It focuses on entire period between 6,000 years ago and the time of the first stone tools (the first artifacts), around 2.5 million years ago, is called prehistory.
- Historic archaeologists help to reconstruct the cultures of people who used writing and about whom historical documents have been written. Historic archaeology takes advantage of the fact that about 6,000 years ago, some human groups invented language and began to write down things that can tell about the past.
- We Ethiopian have very glorious past. Area logical findings in North, south, east and western part of the country have shown our county belonged to those countries which have old civilization.

Linguistic Anthropology

- Linguistic anthropology or anthropological linguistics studies human language as a cultural resource and speaking as a cultural practice in its social and cultural context, across space and time.

Language is basically a system of information transmission and reception. Humans communicate messages by sound (speech), by gesture (body language), and in other visual ways such as writing. Analogous to genes that carry and transmit genetic materials to offspring, languages hand down cultural traits from one generation to another. In fact, some would argue that language is the most distinctive feature of being human. Although animals could develop certain behaviors through conditioning that mimic to humans, they do not have a capacity to pass on their own offspring. This is the boundary between human beings and other animals including higher primates.

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- Linguistic anthropology, which studies contemporary human languages as well as those of the past, is divided into four distinct branches or areas of research: *Structural or Descriptive Linguistics*, *Historical Linguistics*, *Ethno-Linguistics*, and *Socio-linguistics*.
- **Structural /Descriptive Linguistics:** -studies the structure of linguistic patterns. It examines sound systems, grammatical systems, and the meanings attached to words in specific languages to understand the structure and set of rules of given language. Every culture has a distinctive language with its own logical structure and set of rules for putting words and sounds together for the purpose of communicating. In its simplest form, the task of the descriptive linguist is to compile dictionaries and grammar books for previously unwritten languages. For structuralist linguist or structural linguistic anthropologist, even if there are thousands of human languages, at least structurally all of them are similar making it possible for everyone of us to grasp and learn languages other than our so called 'mother tongue'.

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- **Ethno-linguistics (cultural linguistics):** examines the relationship between language and culture. In any language, certain cultural aspects that are emphasized (such as types of snow among the Inuit, cows among the pastoral Maasai, or automobiles in U.S. culture) are reflected in the vocabulary. Moreover, cultural linguists explore how different linguistic categories can affect how people categorize their experiences, how they think, and how they perceive the world around them.
- **Historical linguistics:** - deals with the emergence of language in general and how specific languages have diverged over time. It focuses on the comparison and classifications of different languages to differentiate the historical links between them.

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- ***Socio-linguistics***: -investigates linguistic variation within a given language. No language is a homogeneous system in which everyone speaks just like everyone else. One reason for variation is geography, as in regional dialects and accents. Linguistic variation also is expressed in the bilingualism of ethnic groups.
- Linguistic anthropology generally focuses on the evolution of languages. It tries to understand languages variation in their structures, units, and grammatical formations. It gives special attention to the study of unwritten languages. Language is a key to explore a culture.

Socio-Cultural Anthropology

- It is also often called **Socio-cultural anthropology** or **Socio-cultural anthropology**. It is the largest sub-field of anthropology. It deals with human society and culture. Society is the group of people who have similar ways of life, but culture is a way of life of a group of people. Society and culture are two sides of the same coin. Socio-cultural anthropology describes, analyzes, interprets, and explains social, cultural and material life of contemporary human societies. It studies the social (human relations), symbolic or nonmaterial (religious, language, and any other symbols) and material (all man-made objects) lives of living peoples.

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- Socio-cultural anthropologists engage in two aspects of study: Ethnography (based on field work) and Ethnology (based on cross-cultural comparison).
- **Ethnography** provides a comprehensive account of a particular community, society, or culture. It describes the features of specific cultures in as much detail as possible including local behavior, beliefs, customs, social life, economic activities, politics, and religion. These detailed descriptions (ethnographies) are the result of extensive field studies (usually a year or two, in duration) in which the anthropologist observes, talks to, and lives with the people he or she is studying. During ethnographic fieldwork, the anthropologist (ethnographer) gathers data that he or she organizes, describes, analyzes, and interprets to build and present that account, which may be in the form of a book, article, or film.

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- **Ethnology** is the comparative study of contemporary cultures and societies, wherever they may be found. It examines, interprets, analyzes, and compares the results of ethnography the data gathered in different societies. It uses such data to compare and contrast and to make generalizations about society and culture. In other words, Ethnologists seek to understand both why people today and in the recent past differ in terms of ideas and behavior patterns and what all cultures in the world have in common with one another. Looking beyond the particular to the more general, ethnologists attempt to identify and explain cultural differences and similarities, to test hypotheses, and to build theory to enhance our understanding of how social and cultural systems work. Indeed, the primary objective of ethnology is to uncover general cultural principles, the “rules” that govern human behavior.

Unique (Basic) Features of Anthropology

- Anthropology is unique in its **scope**, **approach**, **focus** and **method of study**.
- Anthropology has a broad scope. It is interested in all human beings, whether contemporary or past, "primitive" or "civilized" and that they are interested in many different aspects of humans, including their phenotypic characteristics, family lives, marriages, political systems, economic lives, technology, belief, health care systems, personality types, and languages. No place or time is too remote to escape the anthropologist's notice.
- In its approach anthropology is holistic, relativistic, and focused one. Holistic in a sense that it looks any phenomena from different vantage points. Accordingly, anthropology considers culture, history, language and biology essential to a complete understanding of society. Anthropology seeks to understand human beings as whole organisms who adapt to their environments through a complex interaction of biology and culture.

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- Anthropology's comparative perspective helps to understand differences and similarities across time and place. Another important perspective is a way of looking at people's ideas. It considers insiders' views as a primary focus of any anthropological inquiry. Anthropological studies give attention to how people perceive themselves and understand their world; how a particular group of people explain about their action, or give meaning to their behavior or cultural practices.

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- Another important unique feature is its research approach. Anthropology is highly dependent on qualitative research to understand the meaning behind any human activity. Extended fieldwork, participant observation, in-depth and key informant interviews and focus-group discussion are qualitative research instruments to explore information change and continuities in human societies. Ethnographic fieldwork is an important strategy is normally required to spend a year or more with research subjects and document realities occurring across time. For most anthropologists, fieldwork is a process requiring them to 'tune-in; hangout; and hang-on' to the societies and cultures whom they are interested to study.

Misconceptions about anthropology

- Due to lack of appropriate awareness about the nature, scope and subject matter of the discipline, different misconceptions are held about anthropology.
- Area of its study
- Only study the rural people and rural areas.
- The study/analysis of fossil evidences of the proto-humans
- Purpose of anthropology is to study in order to keep and preserve communities

The Contributions of anthropology

- Lead us to the conclusion that our culture is just one way of life among many found in the world and that it represents one way (among many possible ways) to adapt to a particular set of environmental conditions.
- Helps us better understand ourselves or our own ways of life.
- Helps to understand the logic and justification behind group behavior and cultural practices.
- Used as a tool for development. Paying attention to local conditions, is crucial to solve community problems.