

Chapter one

Introduction to Anthropology

1.1. Definition and Concepts in Anthropology

To begin with its etymology/*the development in meaning*, the term anthropology is a compound of two Greek words, '**Anthropos**' and '**logos**', which can be translated as 'human being/mankind' and 'reason/study/Science' respectively. So,

- Anthropology means 'reason about humans' or 'the study or science of humankind or humanity'. Moreover, man has two important characteristics: **biological** and **cultural**. It is very important to understand that the biological and the cultural characteristics are inseparable elements. Culture influences human physical structures and the vise-versa.

Hence, if we take it literally, **anthropology** is the study of humans. In one sense, this is an accurate description to the extent that anthropology raises a wide variety of questions about the human condition. Yet, this literal definition is not particularly illuminating; because a number of other academic disciplines including sociology, biology, psychology, political science, economics, and history also study human beings. What is it that distinguishes anthropology from all of these disciplines?

- **Anthropology** is the study of people their origins, their development, and contemporary variations, wherever and whenever they have been found on the earth. 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.

In more specific terms, anthropology is the 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.).
- 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. Anthropology 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. The ultimate goal of anthropology 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?

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 practitioners to explore, compare, understand and solve societal problems.

1.1.2 The Historical Development of Anthropology

Like the other social sciences, anthropology is a fairly recent discipline. It was given its present shape during the twentieth century, but it has important forerunners in the historiography, geography, travel writing, philosophy and jurisprudence of earlier times. There are, in any case, many ways of writing the history of anthropology, just as, in any given society, there may exist competing versions of national history or origin myths, promoted by groups or individuals with diverging interests. History is not primarily a product of the past itself, but it is rather shaped by the concerns of the present. As these concerns change, past events and persons shift between foreground and background, and will be understood and evaluated in new ways.

If we restrict ourselves to anthropology as a scientific discipline, some would trace its roots back to the European Enlightenment, during the eighteenth century; others would claim that anthropology did not arise as a science until the 1850s; yet others would argue that anthropological research in its present-day sense only commenced after the First World War. Never can we avoid such ambiguities.

It is beyond doubt, however, that anthropology, considered as the science of humanity, originated in the region we commonly call 'the West', notably in three or four 'Western' countries: France, Great Britain, the USA and, Germany. Historically speaking, this is a European discipline, and its practitioners, like those of all European sciences, occasionally like to trace its roots back to the ancient Greeks.

The present academic anthropology has its roots in the works and ideas of the great ancient and Medieval Greek, Roman, and Hebrew philosophers and social thinkers. These people were interested in the nature, origin and destiny of man, and the morality and ethics of human relationships. While the roots of anthropology can be generally traced through the history of western culture as far back as ancient Greek social philosophical thinking, the discipline did not emerge as a distinct field of study until the mid-nineteenth century.

Generally speaking, anthropology as an academic discipline was born during the 19th century, out of the intellectual atmosphere of **Enlightenment**, which is the eighteenth century social and philosophical movement that emphasized human progress and the power of reason, and based on the **Darwinian Theory of Evolution**. By the late 1870s, anthropology was beginning to emerge as a profession. A major impetus for its growth was the expansion of western colonial powers and their consequent desire to better understand the peoples living under colonial domination.

During its formative years, anthropology became a profession primarily in museums. In this regard, in the 1870s and 1880s many museums devoted to the study of humankind were found in Europe, North America and South America.

Early anthropologists mainly studied small communities who were technologically simple societies. Such societies are often called by various names, such as, "traditional", "non-industrialized and/or simple societies". Anthropologists of the early 1900s emphasized the study of social and cultural differences among human groups. Here, many of the indigenous peoples of non-western world and their social and cultural features were studied in detail and documented.

This approach is called **ethnography**. By the mid-1900, however, anthropologists attempted to discover universal human patterns and the common bio-psychological traits that bind all human beings. This approach is called **ethnology**. Ethnology aims at the comparative understanding and analysis of different ethnic groups across time and space.

In Ethiopia, professional anthropologists have been studying culture and society on a more intensive level only since the late 1950s. Almost inevitably, the initial emphasis was on ethnography, the description of specific customs, cultures and ways of life.

1.3 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 Mega polis to hunting gathering areas. The discipline covers all aspects of human ways of life experiences and existence, as humans live in a social group.

Anthropology touches upon all aspect of human conditions as far as there is a relation between human beings themselves, and humans and natural environment. Anthropology not only tries to account for the social and cultural variations in the world, but a crucial part of the anthropological project also consists in conceptualizing and understanding similarities and differences between social systems and human relationships. As one of the foremost anthropologists of the twentieth century, Claude Lévi-Strauss, has expressed: '**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**' (1983: 49). In other words, anthropology studies humanity with its all aspects of existence, and in its all means of

differences (diversities) and similarities (commonalities). Wherever human beings live, there is always anthropology.

The discipline also accounts 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. One may, therefore, say that anthropology asks large questions, while, at the same time, it draws its most important insights from small places. Although anthropologists have wide-ranging and frequently highly specialized interests, they all share a common concern in trying to understand both connections *within* societies and connections *between* societies.

Such focus areas of investigation and the stated aims of the discipline convey that the areas covered by anthropology are diverse and enormous. Anthropologists strive for an understanding of the biological and cultural origins and evolutionary development of the species. They are concerned with all humans, both past and present, as well as their behavior patterns, thought systems, and material possessions. In short, anthropology aims to describe, in the broadest sense, what it means to be human (Peacock, 1986).

1.4 Unique Features of Anthropology

There are several distinguishing characteristics that identify anthropology from other disciplines. 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". It is interested in many different aspects of humans, including their phenotypic characteristics, family lives, marriages, political systems, economic lives, technology, belief systems, health care systems, personality types, and languages. No place or time is too

remote to escape the anthropologist's notice. No dimension of human kind, from genes to art styles, is outside the anthropologist's attention. Indeed, Anthropology is the broad study of human kind, around the world and throughout time.

- The second important feature is its **approach**. In its approach anthropology is *holistic, relativistic, and focused* one. Holistic, in a sense, means 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 that adapt to their environments through a complex interaction of biology and culture.

The concept of **relativism** is highly appreciated in anthological studies. Anthropology tries to study and explain a certain belief, practice or institution or a group of people in its own context. It does not make value judgment, i.e., it does not hold the position that a given belief or practice is 'good' or 'bad'. **Anthropology's comparative** perspective helps to understand differences and similarities among human beings 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 behaviour or cultural practices. This is what anthropologists call an **emic** perspective. It helps to understand the logic and justification behind group behavior and cultural practices.

- Another important unique feature of anthropology 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 change and continuities in human societies. **Ethnographic fieldwork** is an important strategy which normally requires spending 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 they are interested to study.
- Focusing more on the **local than the big social processes** has been another exclusive approach in the discipline. Paying great attention to local or micro-social processes certainly helps us to better understand big changes in societies. A detailed account of an event or a phenomenon discovers multiple realities in a community.

1.5 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. One misconception about anthropology is related to the area of its study. It is said that anthropology is limited to the study of "primitive" societies. Indeed, most of the works done by anthropologists during early periods focused on isolated, so called "primitive", small scale societies. However, anthropologists nowadays study most advanced and most complex societies as well.

Another misconception is that anthropologists only study the rural people and rural areas. As a matter of fact, most of the studies conducted during the formative years (when it was undergoing a process of development to become a separate fields of study) of the discipline focused on rural areas.

But now, anthropologists are also interested in the study of urban people and urban areas. There is a distinct sub-discipline devoted to the study of urban societies Called-**Urban Anthropology**-which focuses on urban areas and complex cities.

It is also wrongly misconceived that anthropology is the study/analysis of fossil evidences of the proto-humans like that of **Lucy/Dinkinesh**. It is true that anthropology is interested in the question of the origin of modern human beings. However, this does not mean that anthropology is all about the study of human evolution. It studies both the biological and the cultural aspects of humans and examines the existing human physical and biological variations and cultural diversity.

It is also misconceived that the purpose of anthropology is to study and preserve communities far from development and obsolete cultural practices in museums. Rather, anthropologists' duties are to support those communities' capacity to empower themselves in development processes. They assist peoples' initiatives instead of imposed policies and ideas coming from outside and play active roles in bringing about positive change and development in their own lives.

1.6 The Relationship between Anthropology and Other Disciplines

Anthropology is similar with other social sciences such as sociology, psychology, political sciences, economics, history, etc. Anthropology greatly overlaps with these disciplines that study human society. However, anthropology differs from other social sciences and the humanities by its **broad scope, unique approach, perspective, unit of analysis and methods used**. In its **scope**, anthropology studies humankind in its entirety. In its **approach**, anthropology studies and analyzes human ways of *life holistically, comparatively* and in a *relativistic manner*. In its **perspective**, anthropology approaches and locates dimensions of people's individual and communal lived experiences, their thoughts and their

feelings in terms of how these dimensions are interconnected and interrelated to one another, yet not necessarily constrained or very orderly, whole. The perspective is also fundamentally ***empirical, naturalistic*** and ***ideographic*** [particularising] than ***nomothetic*** [universalising] one.

In its **method of research**, it is unique in that it undertakes *extended fieldwork* among the study community and develops intimate knowledge of the life and social worlds of its study group/society through employing those ethnographic data collection techniques such as participant observation, key informant interview and focus group discussions.

1.7 Contributions of Anthropology

The philosophical underpinning is that since we are human beings, we have to know our civilization. Anthropology has established for itself the task of examining all aspects of humanity for all periods of time and for all parts of the globe. Because of the enormity of this task, anthropologists must draw on theories and data from a number of other disciplines in the humanities, the social sciences, and the physical sciences. Accordingly, its contributions are immense. By studying anthropology, we get the following benefits, among others.

First, the anthropological perspective, with its emphasis on the comparative study of cultures, should 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. Through the process of contrasting and comparing, we gain a fuller understanding of other cultures and our own.

Anthropology also helps us better understand ourselves or our own ways of life. As a mirror of human life, by studying others, we can better understand ourselves. Hence, it gives an opportunity to understand and to be critical about the ways of lives of our own community.

Second, anthropology gives us an insight into different ways and modes of life of human society (social and cultural diversity), which helps to understand the logic and justification behind group behavior and cultural practices. Knowledge about the rest of the world is particularly important today because the world has become increasingly interconnected. So, today it is important that we not only know something about other peoples of the world, but also grasp how our everyday decisions are influencing them in a multitude of ways and how others' decisions are also influencing ours.

Through its distinctive methodology of long-term, intensive, participant-observation research, cultural anthropology offers a unique perspective on how local cultural groups are engaging with the processes of globalization. Although many pundits discuss the consequences of globalization by talking to only government and business leaders, cultural anthropologists are more likely to see what is actually occurring on the ground and how the local people themselves talk about their life experiences in a time of rapid globalization.

Because of its *relativistic approach*, anthropology helps us to be more sensitive to and appreciative of cultural diversity and variability. It helps us to avoid some of the misunderstandings that commonly arise when individuals of different cultural traditions come into contact. Anthropology helps us fight against prejudice and discriminations. It helps us fight against **ethnocentrism**: the belief that one's own culture and one's own way of life is superior to others' cultural, social and material lives. This arises from ignorance about other ethnic groups and their ways of lives.

Anthropology, in its applied perspective, is also used as a tool for development. Paying attention to local conditions is crucial to solve community problems. The application of anthropological knowledge and research results has become important element to ensure people's rights in development and to be able to sustain a project's life. Anthropologists are

better equipped with the knowledge, skills and methods of identifying the needs and interests of local people for the betterment and change of their lived experiences. It recognizes the advantages of consulting local people to design a culturally appropriate and socially sensitive change, and protect local people from harmful policies and projects that threaten them. In general, anthropology is able to suggest sound solutions to all things human. For example, it is often applied in areas of *Environmental Change, Health and Nutrition, Globalization, Social Justice and Human Rights, cultural resource management (CRM) and Cultural Dimensions of Civil and Religious Conflicts*.