

Sociology 4 Anthropological thought unit I

MEANING AND SIGNIFICANCE OF ANTHROPOLOGY

The term anthropology comes from the Greek *Anthropos* for "man, human" and *logos* for "study." Anthropologists seek answers to an enormous variety of questions about humans. They are interested in both universals and differences in human populations. They want to discover when, where and why humans appeared on the earth, how and why they have changed since then, and how and why modern human populations vary in their biological and cultural features. Anthropology has a practical side too. Applied and practicing anthropologists put anthropological methods, information, and results to use, in efforts to solve practical problems. Defining anthropology as the study of human beings is not complete for such a definition would appear to incorporate a whole catalogue of disciplines: sociology, psychology, political science, economics, history, human biology, and even the humanistic disciplines of philosophy and literature. There must be something unique about anthropology for its having developed as a separate discipline and for its having retained a separate identity over the last 100 years.

The Scope of Anthropology -----Anthropologists are often thought of as individuals who travel to little-known corners of the world to study exotic peoples or who dig deep into the earth to uncover the fossil remains or the tools and pots of people who lived long ago. These views do indicate how anthropology differs from other disciplines concerned with humans. Anthropology is broader in scope, both geographically and historically. Anthropology is concerned explicitly and directly with all varieties of people throughout the world, not just those close at hand. Anthropologists are also interested in people of all periods. Beginning with the immediate ancestors

of humans, who lived a few million years ago, anthropology traces the development of humans until the present. Anthropologists have not always been as global and comprehensive in their concerns as they are today. Traditionally, they concentrated on non-Western cultures and left the study of Western civilization to other disciplines. In recent years, this division of labour among the disciplines has begun to disappear. Now anthropologists work in their own and other complex societies. What induces anthropologists to study humans so broadly that, they are motivated by the belief that any suggested generalization about human beings should be shown to apply to many times and places of human existence. If a generalization does not prove to apply widely, anthropologists are entitled or even obliged to be sceptical about it. The sceptical attitude, in the absence of persuasive evidence, is our best protection against accepting invalid ideas about humans. For example, when American educators discovered in the 1960s that African American schoolchildren rarely drank milk, they assumed that lack of money or education was the cause. But evidence from anthropology suggested a different explanation. Anthropologists had known for years that people do not drink fresh milk in many parts of the world where milking animals are kept; rather, they sour it before they drink it, or they make it into cheese. Why they do so is now clear. Many people lack the enzyme lactase that is necessary for breaking down lactose, the sugar in milk. When such people drink regular milk, it actually interferes with digestion. Not only is the lactose in milk not digested, but other nutrients are less likely to be digested as well; in many cases, drinking milk will cause cramps, stomach gas, diarrhoea, and nausea.¹ Milk intolerance is common in adulthood among Asians, southern Europeans, Arabs and Jews, West Africans, North and South American native peoples, as well as African Americans. Because anthropologists are acquainted with human life in an enormous variety of

geographic and historical settings, they are often able to correct mistaken beliefs about different groups of people.

Fields of Anthropology Different anthropologists concentrate on different characteristics of societies. Some are concerned primarily with biological or physical characteristics of human populations; others are interested principally in what we call cultural characteristics. Hence, there are two broad classifications of subject matter in anthropology: biological (physical) anthropology and cultural anthropology. Biological anthropology is one major field of anthropology.

Cultural anthropology is divided into three major subfields: archaeology, linguistics, and ethnology. Ethnology, the study of recent cultures, is now usually referred to by the parent name, cultural anthropology. Crosscutting these four fields is a fifth, applied or practicing a Cultural Anthropology. Cultural anthropology is concerned with how and why cultures vary or are similar in the past and present.

what is culture----- the term culture refers to the customary ways that a particular population or society thinks and behaves. The culture of a social group includes many things-from the language that people speak, the way children are brought up, the roles assigned to males and females, religious beliefs and practices, and preferences in music. Anthropologists are interested in all of these and other learned behaviours and ideas that have come to be widely shared or customary in the group. The three main branches of cultural anthropology are archaeology (the study of past cultures, primarily through their material remains), anthropological linguistics (the anthropological study of languages), and ethnology (the study of existing and recent cultures), now usually referred to by the parent name, cultural anthropology.

Archaeology Archaeologists seek not only to reconstruct the daily life and customs of peoples who lived in the past but also to trace cultural changes and to offer possible explanations for those changes. This concern is similar to that of historians, but archaeologists reach much farther back in time. Historians deal only with societies that left written records and are therefore limited to the last 5,000 years of human history. Human societies, however, have existed for more than a million years, and only a small proportion in the last 5,000 years had writing. Lacking written records for study, archaeologists must try to reconstruct history from the remains of human cultures. Some of these remains are as grand as the Mayan temples discovered at Chichen Itza in Yucatan, Mexico. More often, they are as ordinary as bits of broken pottery, stone tools, and garbage heaps. To collect the data they need to understand how and why ways of life have changed through time in different parts of the world, archaeologists use techniques and findings borrowed from other disciplines, as well as what they can infer from anthropological studies of recent and contemporary cultures. For example, to guess where to dig for evidence of early tool making, archaeologists rely on geology to tell them where sites of early human occupation are likely to be found, because of erosion and uplifting, near the surface of the earth. To infer when agriculture first developed, archaeologists date the relevant excavated materials by a process originally developed by chemical scientists. To try to understand why cities first emerged, archaeologists may use information from historians, geographers, and others about how recent and contemporary cities are related economically and politically to their hinterlands. If we can discover what recent and contemporary cities have in common, we can speculate on why cities developed originally. Thus, archaeologists use information from the present and recent past in trying to understand the distant past.

Anthropological Linguistics Anthropological linguistics is another branch of cultural anthropology.

Linguistics, or the study of languages, is a somewhat older discipline than anthropology, but the early linguists concentrated on the study of languages that had been written for a long time-languages such as English that had been written for nearly a thousand years. Anthropological linguists began to do fieldwork in places where the language was not yet written. This meant that anthropologists could not consult a dictionary or grammar to help them learn the language. Instead, they first had to construct a dictionary and grammar. Then they could study the structure and history of the language. Like biological anthropologists, linguists study changes that have taken place over time, as well as contemporary variation. Some anthropological linguists are concerned with the emergence of language and also with the divergence of languages over thousands of years. The study of how languages change over time and how they may be related is known as historical linguistics. Anthropological linguists are also interested in how contemporary languages differ, especially in their construction. This focus of linguistics is generally called descriptive (structural) linguistics. The study of how language is used in social contexts is called sociolinguistics. In contrast with human palaeontologists and archaeologists, who have physical remains to help them reconstruct change over time, historical linguists deal only with languages- and usually unwritten ones at that. (Remember that writing is only about 5,000 years old, and most languages since then have not been written.) Because unwritten languages must be heard to be studied, they do not leave any trace once speakers have died. Linguists interested in reconstructing the history of unwritten languages must begin in the present, with comparisons of contemporary languages. On the basis of these comparisons, they draw inferences about the kinds of change in language that may have occurred in

the past and that may account for similarities and differences of peoples observed in the present. Historical linguists typically ask such questions as these: Did two or more contemporary languages diverge from a common ancestral language? If they are more distantly related, how far back in time did they begin to differ? Unlike historical linguists, descriptive (or structural) linguists are typically concerned with discovering and recording the principles that determine how sounds and words are put together in records for in speech. For example, a structural description of a particular language might tell us that the sounds t and k are interchangeable in a word without causing a difference in meaning. In Samoa, one could say Tutuila or Kukuila as the name of the largest island, and everyone, except perhaps newly arrived anthropologists who know little yet about the Samoan language, would understand that the same island was being mentioned. Sociolinguists are interested in the social aspects of language, including what people speak and contend about and how they interact conversationally, their attitudes toward speakers of other dialects or languages, and how people speak differently in different social contexts.

The term anthropology, that appeared in European languages during the 17th century, is self-explanatory: it is a compound of the Greek words *anthrōpos* meaning human being, and *logia* meaning study, discourse about. Anthropology is the science that studies human beings and humankind, and therefore cultures and societies. It is indeed an accepted fact that both culture and sociality are a fundamental and essential component of being human. Anthropologists as well as sociologists have long questioned the meaning, definition and proper use of the words culture and society. [Society is something that precedes the individual and so is culture].

Anyone who either cannot lead the common life or is so self-sufficient as not to need to, and therefore does not partake of society, is either a beast or a god. The extremely wide object of research that has just been sketched as pertaining to Cultural Anthropology, is further broadened by the fact that the discipline studies human beings from their yet unclear origin to the present day. In fact, the American Anthropological Association defines this branch of science quite simply as the discipline that study humans, in the past and present. The widely accepted and traditional – yet not universal – classification in human sciences that distinguishes Cultural Anthropology from Physical (or Biological) Anthropology, helps partially in narrowing the fields of investigation. According to this distinction, Physical (or Biological) Anthropology focuses on the study of corporeal and biological aspects of human beings, while Cultural Anthropology analyzes the many other, non-corporeal, aspects of being human (e.g. religion, societies, kinship, languages classification in human sciences, one that is especially popular in northern American universities and is the founding principle in the establishment of departments in some of the most renowned universities of the USA and Canada, divides Anthropology into three (or eventually four) branches: Archaeology, Biological Anthropology, Sociocultural Anthropology, recognizing Linguistic Anthropology as a fourth branch in many cases. In this volume, Archaeology will not be treated for two reasons: on the one hand, it has been analyzed in depth in other volumes of this encyclopaedia, such as *The Foundations of Archaeology*, *The Archaeology of Life Support Systems and Preserving Archaeological Sites and Monuments*. On the other hand, it won't be treated because, although Archaeology is a well established and highly respectable discipline, from the perspective of Cultural Anthropology the study of material culture from the past is functional and preparatory to the study of human beings.

Physical/Biological Anthropology

Physical or Biological Anthropology studies are developed due to development of knowledge and technologies, measurement studies, such as for instance craniometry (i.e. the measurement of skulls) or the study and measurement of skeletons, or new methods to measure skin color based on spectrophotometry, represent just one among a number of possible analyses and tests that are conducted on humans. They were highly regarded techniques and among the most advanced toward the end of the 19th century. It is especially during the 19th century, and well until the middle of the twentieth, that physical anthropology was heavily involved in and responsible for the consequences of racial classification. In the whole nineteenth century and way into the twentieth, Physical Anthropology was focused to a great extent on this perspective that was based on wrong premises and led to disastrous results. For too long, anthropologists forced social and cultural groups into racial taxonomies that assumed a linear and progressive evolution of cultures. At the basis there was the wrong assumption that genetic and cultural traits are co-dependent or strictly related. This perspective, that developed also together with the imperialistic expansion of many European nations and had the political and ideological objective of asserting a superiority of European ethnic groups at that top of a taxonomic pyramid, as the most accomplished and civilized groups, has been proved completely wrong by anthropologists and scientists.

Physical Anthropology has undergone great changes since its appearance during the nineteenth century. For ex, today it investigates aspects such as the genetics, the ecology, and the demography of human beings that were overlooked or totally ignored until a few decades ago.
