INTRODUCTION

ANTHROPOLOGY AND CULTURE

These sculptures of Ghana signify the dynamics of cultures in Africa (Photo by author)
Anthropology is a discipline that seeks to study and understand human beings by using comparative techniques, theories, and processes of research to delve into human origins, human diversity, human cultures, and behavioral patterns across space and time. Among many others, the discipline of anthropology also explores the ancestral links between humans and primates through the subfield of primatology. The original objective of anthropology, which developed in Europe in the nineteenth century, was to understand the lifeways of non-Western exotic people. However, the discourse and practice of the discipline has evolved to integrate the study of all people and societies around the globe. In order to holistically broaden our understanding of the nature of individuals, populations, cultures, societies, and nation-states, anthropologists forged a four subfield approach to produce scientific and cultural information about human origins and societies from a cross-cultural comparative perspective. The four subfields include sociocultural anthropology, physical/biological anthropology, archaeological anthropology, and linguistic anthropology. A fifth subfield, applied anthropology, is a new field in anthropology that integrates different approaches in understanding and providing solutions to our common human problems.

This book explores the five subfields in the ensuing chapters in a thematic format to reap anthropology’s holistic emphasis. Anthropology is a uniquely comparative holistic science because it studies the entirety of the human condition and has a global perspective. It focuses on the analysis of the biological, environmental, psychological, economic, historical, social, political, religious, and cultural dimensions of human behavior in the past, present, and future. It is multidisciplinary in approach in the sense that it encourages a collaborative study among the various specialists in the four subfields. It also uses a multivariate methodology, for example, ethnography, archival research, excavations, and visual methods in its investigations. Above all, anthropologists collaborate with indigenous groups in research and in searching for solutions to our common problems.

HOW ANTHROPOLOGY BECAME A DISCIPLINE OF STUDY

Anthropology as a discipline is derived from historical traditions that can be tracked back to the study of human behavior by social thinkers and philosophers of ancient Greece and the civilizations of the Middle East. Before the fall of the Roman Empire in the fifth century C.E., the focus of thinkers was on the discourse of man [humans] and society. Personalities like Herodotus (484–425 B.C.E.), viewed as the father of Greek history and ethnography, is credited with extensive travels across Europe and North Africa. During his travels he observed, described, and recorded the varied populations, their languages, marriage systems, material cultures, religions, traditions, and
customs. He formulated the idea that all people were ethnocentric; that is, people consider their own way of life superior to all others, and most times they judge other lifestyles in terms of the norms and values of their own.

Aristotle (384–322 B.C.E.) is believed to have first used the label anthropologist when he philosophized about the social life and the cultural needs of man [humans] in society. After the fall of Rome and during the rise of Christendom, medieval scholars were no longer interested in the detailed study of human beings in the Middle Ages. For about 1,000 years (between 500 C.E.–1500 C.E.), Western scholars were more interested in learning about God’s creation and the divine order of things on Earth. Though most of the prevailing scholarship on humans and society was couched in accepted religious belief, a few medieval scholars tried to offer secular explanations. In his book *Comparative Studies of Man and Culture*, Roger Bacon (1214–1294 C.E.), an Oxford University scholar, advocated for the scientific approach using observations and empirical methods in studying the manners and customs of humans and society.

The fifteenth-century Renaissance period in Europe brought in a rediscovery of treasures of classical learning. This renewed emphasis on scholarship led to the investigations and understanding of the natural environment as well as human societies. Renaissance and Enlightenment projects led to European expansion, exploration, missionization, and colonization of the globe. Documented descriptions, accounts, and records on various nates of non-Western societies by travelers, missionaries, and explorers revealed a lot of information about these societies, which they viewed as exotic. They documented and reported marriage practices, trade exchanges, architectural styles, burial systems and rites of passage, food habits, dress codes, items of trade, and social and political customs of the people and societies they came into contact with. Most of these records became of much interest to European “arm-chair scholars.” These scholars attempted to study the populations by comparing and contrasting their cultures, traditions, and behaviors in books (ethnology). These efforts, in most cases, were meant to prove and justify the superiority of the European society over the so-called “primitive” populations and cultures studied.

From the seventeenth century and beyond, renewed efforts were implemented for making the field of anthropology more systematic. Philosophers, social thinkers, and academicians (e.g., Frances Bacon, Rene Descartes, Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, Montesquieu, Voltaire, David Hume, Immanuel Kant, Karl Marx, Auguste Comte) wrote their exposés, and theorized and formulated studies about human nature, authority, culture, and society within the frameworks of history, philosophy, and the science of humankind. Anthropology became a specialized discipline after 1850 when it split from the other social sciences (e.g., psychology, sociology, political science). Scholars of anthropology, philosophy, and other social and hard sciences continued to formulate divergent opinions on human origins and development behavior and societies to create theoretical frameworks for understanding culture and the diversity of human biology (Jha 2007). The development of these frameworks are explored in the ensuing chapters.

**THE SCIENTIFIC METHOD**

The world is full of things that need explaining. We might wonder about the behavior of a bird, the chemical composition of a star in the night, the identity of a fossil skeleton, the social interaction of students in a college classroom, or the rituals of a society in the Kalahari Desert of southern Africa. As people, we strive to understand such phenomena, to know why and how these things occur as they do. As scientists, we must try to answer these questions according to a special set of rules—the scientific method.

The scientific method involves a cycle of steps, and in reality, we may begin anywhere in the cycle. The most basic step is taking the questions we wish to answer or describing the observed facts we wish to explain. We look for patterns, connections, and associations so we can generate a possible explanation, or hypothesis. In other words, we try to formulate a general explanatory principle that will account for the specific pieces of real data we have observed and want to explain. This process of reasoning is called induction. Next comes the essence—indeed the defining characteristics—of science. We must attempt to either support or refute our hypothesis by testing it. Tests may take many forms, depending on what we are trying to explain, but basically, we reverse the process of induction and go from the general back to the specific by making predictions: if our
general hypothesis is correct, then what other specific things should we observe? This is called deduction. For example, we look for:

1. **Repetition:** Does the same phenomenon occur over and over?
2. **Universality:** Does the phenomenon occur under all conditions? If we vary some aspect of the situation, will the phenomenon still occur? How might different situations change the phenomenon?
3. **Explanations for exceptions:** Can we account for cases where the phenomenon doesn’t appear to occur?
4. **New data:** Does new information support or contradict our hypothesis?

If we find one piece of evidence that conclusively refutes our hypothesis, we consider it disproved. But if it passes every test we come up with, we elevate it to a working hypothesis and use it as a basis for further induction and testing. Good science is skeptical, always looking for new evidence, always open to and, indeed, inviting change. The best we should honestly say about most hypotheses is that, so far, no evidence has been found that disproves them. When, through this process, we have generated an integrated body of ideas forming a general concept that coordinates, explains, and interprets a wide range of factual patterns in a given area, we refer to this body of ideas as a **theory**. In science, theory is a positive term. The theories of gravity, relativity, and evolution are called theories because they are general ideas that explain a large number of phenomena and are themselves made up of interacting and well-supported hypotheses. All the facts of biology, for instance, make sense within the general theory of evolution—that all life has a common ancestry and that living forms change over time and give rise to new forms by various natural processes. We don’t stop when we have developed a theory. However no theory is complete. The theory of gravity establishes that some force we call gravity exists, and we know a great deal about its effects, but we still don’t know how it originated in the early history of the universe or exactly how it works. In other words, we still have questions to answer and observations to explain. Scientists continue to test hypotheses that attempt to explain the origin, nature, and operation of gravity (Park 2008: 22, 23).

**ANTHROPOLOGY AS A SCIENCE**

Given anthropology’s wide range of topics, including such abstract areas as human culture and cultural systems, some may wonder how anthropology can be defined as a science. Some facets of our field, of course, are clearly scientific. Less clearly scientific at first glance are other areas of anthropology. Many anthropologists deal with the past. Some biological anthropologists study extinct species and premodern forms of humans, and archaeologists study past human societies and cultural systems. How can we examine something that we can’t directly observe and can’t replicate? As noted earlier we can still collect data related to those things past and extinct. The fieldwork that collects such data is itself a scientific endeavor. These data come from various sources: fossils of extinct species, often found in datable layers of soil; comparative studies of the anatomy and genetics of living species that have descended from previous forms; the material remains of past cultures, sometimes complete and well preserved enough to present us with a picture frozen in time; and our knowledge of how living people exist and create and use material culture.

We also look for repeated patterns in our evidence from the past. For example, we might note some similarities among the cultures that first began to grow food instead of collecting it. From these similarities, we can generate ideas to explain why people made this transition. All these sorts of data, and more, can be used to deductively test the hypotheses we have generated to explain the past. It is really no different from our ability to scientifically examine things we cannot see directly, like gravity or subatomic particles. We know they exist, and we know a lot about them because we can observe the results of their existence (Park 2008: 28, 29).

Anthropology is a science and a **humanistic** endeavor. Postmodernists place the discipline of anthropology in the humanities rather than in the sciences. A humanistic view focuses on the uniqueness of each individual and on individual creativity within the confines of society and culture. This means that ethnographers must look to individual informants and record their voices and perspectives. It also means that the postmodern approach downplays the comparative method and quantitative analysis. Postmodernism is considered a theoretical perspective with different meanings to different people (see Fisher 1997; Kuper 1999; Marcus and Fisher 1986). Basically
anthropologists with this theoretical perspective question the use of the scientific method in anthropology. They view culture as an abstraction. Further, they argue that it is impossible to be objective when studying other cultures. They focus on the premise that ethnographer objectivity is not possible because observers are always influenced by their own culture, gender, and social position, as well as by their feeling about what they observe. Therefore postmodernists claim that most theoretical constructs are not valid. Although the postmodern movement is controversial, it has influenced anthropologists to be sensitive to issues such as power (as in when the ethnographer comes from a powerful culture and the native person being interviewed does not). It has also contributed to advocacy for a more vigorous representation of the native viewpoint. Many ethnographers, both those who use a scientific approach and those who use a postmodernist approach, now request that natives read and comment on their ethnographic data before they are published (Lenkeit 2009: 21–22).
THE FIVE-FIELD APPROACH IN ANTHROPOLOGY

Sociocultural anthropology, physical/biological anthropology, archaeological anthropology, linguistic anthropology, and applied anthropology are the five subfields of anthropology explored in this book.

**Sociocultural anthropology** studies contemporary cultures, human behavior, societies, and human institutions. Sociocultural anthropologists tend to focus on craft production, ethnicity, poverty, violence, human rights, gender studies, migration, and migrant communities. They engage in fieldwork or ethnographic research to collect data, to describe, analyze, and interpret cultural and social phenomena through space and recent time. Most of their ethnographies or reports are used to influence social policies to better the lot of these communities or groups.

**Physical/biological anthropology** deals with the study of human biological variation in time and space through fossil records and human genetics. Physical anthropologists also map the human genome and trace human ancestry and migration history. They try to understand the life histories of skeletal remains by looking at, for example, the age, sex, disease patterns, and associated grave goods. Other subfields or specializations include paleontology, paleoanthropology, primatology, medical, molecular, and forensic anthropology.

**Archaeological anthropology** focuses on the study of past human forms, lifeways, and behavioral patterns based on inference from finds (artifacts) and studies of living societies. Archaeologists excavate, describe, analyze, interpret, and reconstruct social systems, human behavior, and cultural patterns to answer questions about ancient economies, paleoecology, and cultural transformations in prehistoric and historic times. Some specializations in archaeology include zooarchaeology, archaeobotany, underwater archaeology, experimental archaeology, historical archaeology, prehistoric archaeology, ethnoarchaeology, museum conservation, and curation.

**Linguistic anthropology** concentrates on the study of languages in their social and cultural contexts. Anthropological linguists focus on how different speakers (across space) use a given language. There are two specializations in linguistic anthropology: sociolinguistics/ethno-linguistics and historical linguistics. Sociolinguists investigate the relationship between social and linguistic variation and communication by assessing regional dialects, accents, and idiolects. Historical linguists study similarities and diversities among languages by looking at how languages have evolved or developed through time. They also salvage endangered languages.

![People dancing to Kpando borborbor dance music at a durbar of queen mothers’](image)
Applied anthropology is a burgeoning field in anthropology that focuses on applying all the findings from the four subfields of anthropology, defined earlier, to provide solutions to some of our common human problems and the sanity of our environment and climate. Some specializations in applied anthropology include development anthropology, political anthropology, environmental anthropology, medical and ethnomedicinal anthropology, visual anthropology, and anthropology of tourism and museum conservation. All these subfields of anthropology are explored in detail in the ensuing chapters.

WHAT IS CULTURE?

The definition of culture is diverse. First, culture is a label that describes the tangible and the intangible things and ideas that humans have constructed, developed, or practice to ensure their survival on Earth and in space. I encourage you to construct your own definition of what culture means to you after reading this section.

In his book *Primitive Culture* (Tylor 1871/1958), Sir Edward Tylor defines culture as “that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, arts, morals, laws, customs, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man [humans] as a member of society” (cited in Kottak 2010: 27). This is a classic definition that reveals the various components of culture. Humans process ideas cognitively by thinking, learning, experiencing, or by perception. This cognitive process results in various human cultural behaviors (e.g., the way we eat, greet, form relationships, dispose of the dead) and in the construction of material objects of culture (e.g., tools, religion, architecture). Repeated practices of these tangible and intangible components of culture result in cultural habits, norms, and traditions. These norms or traditions vary from one culture or society to another.

Through cultural advancement in science, inventions, and discoveries, we have been able to overcome many natural limitations. But cultural advances cannot compete with natural disasters such as hurricanes, floods, and earthquakes. Even though humans have been able to invent gadgets that can warn or predict environmental changes, nature strikes back at humans and their so-called advance technologies with impunity.

All humans have an identity or identities based on their constructed culture or cultures. First they identify themselves as humans. The next level of identity is based on identity inheritance based on parentage or ancestry; hence people can identify themselves by a family name. A person’s identity is also determined by his or her culture and language. People have multiple cultures and languages, and therefore, multiple identities. People also identify themselves based on their nationality (country of origin) or by their tribe or ethnic group. In some cases, humans have identity crises because they do not know their heritage or where they belong. Identities can be imposed or ascribed on people. Such individuals or groups uphold and pass on their identity to future generations. Thus cultural identities can be inherited, constructed, ascribed, and stolen.

Culture is not a thing like a chemical in a test tube or an electron or even an ancient fossil. Culture is the result of the decisions and actions of people. Are there scientific theories to account for the behavior of groups of people any more than there are scientific theories for our own personal behavior? Some actions of groups of people have obvious explanations. People, for example, have certain direct responses to their natural environments. They eat what foods their environments provide, and they build their shelters from available materials in designs that make sense for a given set of climatic conditions. But many aspects of culture are related to something other than the natural environment. People living in Beijing and Philadelphia, for example, have very different cultures despite living at the same latitude and having similar climates. Languages, beliefs, clothing styles, political systems, family organizations, and so on obviously require complex explanations. Such complexity may lead us to wonder if any scientific explanation is possible at all. Theories of culture may be more elusive than theories about concrete entities such as fossils and genes. This does not mean, however, that we should not try. Remember that an important step in the scientific method is to look for patterns, associations, and repetitions. We do find these when we gather data about cultural systems—a process called ethnography—to generate hypothesis. We can test our general hypothesis by seeing if all cases show the same association or, if there are exceptions, seeing if we can make sense of the exceptions in terms of our hypothesis.
Now, we may discover—at least for some aspect of culture—that such hypotheses don’t pan out, that no overall idea explains all cases and exceptions. A cultural system, after all, is an incredibly complex web of relationships. Moreover, this web is the creation, conscious and unconscious, of real people making decisions, responses, and actions for all the complex reasons people do such things. But when we do find generalizations, we consequently learn more about our own behavior and the behavior of other societies and are able to at least make educated predictions that might help us cope with all the changes and challenges that the modern world imposes on human societies and their ways of life. This is true if we never achieve any overall theory of culture (Park 2008: 29–31).

THE NATURE OF CULTURE

Culture manifests in various forms as a result, there are a number of cross-cultural characteristics of culture. A few of them have been explained below.

a. **Culture is learned.** Even though animals or our close nonhuman primates learn from their group or from their experiences in nature, humans have a more elaborate capacity to learn new ways of life and culture. The nineteenth-century doctrine of the psychic unity of man is based on the view that regardless of people’s color, nature, or background, they can learn each other’s cultural traditions. Enculturation is the process by which humans learn culture traits in particular traditions, either consciously or unconsciously, through teaching, observation or by experience to determine what is good or bad for them. Enculturation ensures transmission of culture from one generation to the next.
b. **Culture can be particular or general.** Cultural particularity is a cultural pattern or set of traits that exist in only a few societies and not in others. These particular traits may make such cultures unique from the others. A general culture is a cultural pattern or traits that exist in many cultures or are universally practiced in every culture even though the way they are practiced may vary in different societies.

c. **Culture is shared.** Culture is shared by members of a group and among groups in a society. People in a society share beliefs, values, memories, and expectations. The practice of sharing among humans strengthens their bonds. Culture is the glue that binds us together as humans; however, birds of the same plumage also flock together.

d. **Culture can be homogeneous or heterogeneous.** Homogeneous cultures are small cultural groups (subcultures) that share similar customs, ideas, values, knowledge, behavior, and material products by most of their members. Heterogeneous cultures are usually large complex cultures with varied subcultures that do not practice or share all but a few values or customs. For example, the people of a country may share similar citizenship, patriotism, government, and national aspirations but may also speak different languages and practice different traditions.

e. **Culture is symbolic.** Clifford Geertz (1973: 44), a cultural anthropologist, defines culture as “ideas based on cultural learning and symbols which govern behavior.” Symbols are meaningful and are used in both verbal and nonverbal communication. For example, national flags signify countries and the cross signifies the Christian faith. For a cultural anthropologist like Leslie White (1959: 3), “culture originated when our ancestors acquired the ability to use symbols to originate and to bestow meaning on a thing, idea or event and to appreciate such meanings.”

f. **Culture is integrated and all-encompassing.** Cultures are not disorganized assortments of customs and beliefs. They are in most cases integrated sets of values, ideas, symbols, and judgments that operate as a system or a network. Changes in one part of a culture are usually felt in another part or within the whole culture. For example, increases in fuel prices affect people’s subsistence, health care, and education.

g. **Culture is adaptive and maladaptive.** Humans are very ingenious in adapting to the environment and life situations. They invent or construct new cultural practices and technology to adapt or cope with social, cultural, and environmental stresses. Culture becomes maladaptive when such cultural traits, behavior, and inventions are used by members of the group to threaten group survival and human reproductive ability. Cultural inventions may have unintended maladaptive consequences. For example, fuel is used to power machinery for productivity and human sustenance; however, they cause negative gas emissions and pollute the environment with consequences on our health.

h. **Culture shocks and clashes.** People use culture actively and creatively. Sometimes we experience culture shocks when we are exposed to new cultures that are different from what we are used to. Differences in cultural ideas, values, goals, and beliefs are contested by different groups in society. Such struggles lead to culture clashes. For example, the world is rife with ideological clashes between Islamic extremists and Christians.

i. **Culture is culturally and socially constructed.** Even though animals may inherit and practice instinctual behavior, culture is not biological or genetically inherited. All culture is constructed or formed by humans as a way of adapting to environmental conditions or life situations.

j. **Culture is not static.** A culture is always in a state of flux; as a result, no culture is monolithic or unchanging. The day-to-day actions and practices of people form and transform cultures and traditions.

k. **Culture can be ideal and real.** Ideal culture is a customary practice in which people are expected to behave in a certain way or practice certain required norms, regulations, and customs. *Real culture* on the other hand refers to actual practices or behaviors in reality. Most people in a culture do not conform to the norms of the society. The real practices of people are what an anthropologist observes in society (Kottak 2010).
MECHANISMS OF CULTURE CHANGE:  
HOW DO CULTURES CHANGE?

Cultures change through various processes shaped by nature and humans. Some of the human mechanisms include

a. **Agency.** This is the action that individuals (men, women, and children) take or practice, either alone or in groups, to form, transform, and destroy culture (agents of change).

b. **Independent invention/innovation.** Inventions are brought about by individuals or groups through their innovations and creativity to find solutions to common human problems or to make life more comfortable.

c. **Diffusion or borrowing of traits between cultures.** Cultural items and ideas are transmitted (diffused or borrowed) from one place to another by humans or by various means of communication, trade, and exchange.

d. **Acculturation** is the process of exchange of cultural traits that results when groups have continuous firsthand contact. Parts of the group’s culture may change, but each group’s traditions or identities remain intact.

e. **Cultural assimilation** is a process of prolonged integration whereby members of an ethnic-cultural group—for example, immigrants or other minority groups—are “absorbed” into a larger community. This sometimes leads to loss of many original or traditional characteristics, language, or identity features such as dress codes or mannerisms. For example, the Native American Indians were assimilated into the Euro-American way of life beginning in the nineteenth century.
Summary

Anthropology is a dynamic discipline with multiple specializations. The five subfields of anthropology offer a social scientific way of understanding our human ancestry, our relationship with other nonhuman primates and human behavioral patterns, and lifeways from the past until now. Anthropology enables us to delve into the issues of culture by problematizing how cultures are formed, transformed, and destroyed by human cultural ingenuity and disingenuity. The discipline is still evolving with novel ways of applying the anthropological findings to solving our common human problems.

References

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What is your understanding of anthropology, and why is it a uniquely comparative and holistic science?

2. Briefly describe and discuss the origins of anthropology as a social science discipline.

3. Define the main five subfields of anthropology, and discuss their interrelationship.

4. What is culture? Discuss five attributes of culture and four mechanisms of culture change.

5. Differentiate between ideal culture and real culture.

6. List four eighteenth- and nineteenth-century scholars, and discuss their contribution to the development of the comparative method and evolutionary theories of anthropology and social science.