

# Anthropology of Religion

Anth 116w  
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# Anthropological Perspectives

Anthropology of Religion

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# What is Anthropology?



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## What is Anthropology?

- *Anthropos* (Greek): Human
- *-logy* (Greek): Science, theory, study of

Study of *humankind* past and present and all around the world.

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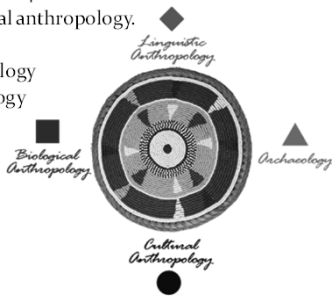
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## American Cultural Anthropology

- Anthropology includes 4 sub-fields:
  - Biological or Physical anthropology
  - Archaeology
  - Linguistic anthropology
  - Cultural Anthropology
    - Ethnography
    - The Research
    - The Published Results



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## Socio-cultural Anthropology

- Social Anthropology
  - British
    - emphasis on social structure and institutions
- Cultural Anthropology
  - American
    - Practices
    - Expression
    - shared meaning-making.



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## Ethnographic Method

- Participant Observation
  - Develop rapport and gain acceptance
- Intensive fieldwork (long stays/over time)
  - Learn language
  - Learn customs, behavior, norms, cultural rules
- Gather information
  - Observation
  - Participation
  - Interviews
  - life histories, etc.
- Collect concrete data over a wide range of facts
- Take field notes
- Record, chronicle or document the fieldwork experience

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## How to *DO* Ethnography



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## The Field

- Not just among non-Western societies
  - Anthropologists *can* also study their own society
- New social and cultural worlds
  - Scientists
  - Business
  - global migration
  - media and popular culture
  - effects of nation-state government policies and practices
  - etc.
- Multi-sited fieldwork

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## Field Research/Ethnography



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## Anthropological Perspectives

- Aims of Anthropological Research (Boas)
- The Concept of Culture (Kroeber)
- Anthropology as a dynamic discipline

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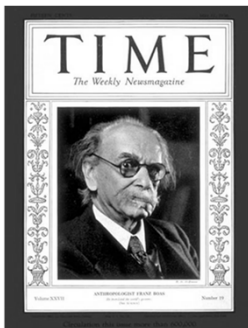
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## Franz Boas



- Father of "American Cultural Anthropology"
- "Aims of Anthropological Research" (1932)
- Anthropology must be a historical science
  - Discover all varieties of human behavior that are common to all mankind.
- Study of the universality and variety of cultures, may help shape the future course of mankind.

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## Understanding Diversity

- Anthropologists classify race based on a variety of traits (morphology)
- no more than descriptive value unless genetic significance can be established.
- Consider for example the great variation in phenotype among members of one "race".



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## Understanding Diversity



- No relationship between racial type (morphology, phenotype) and culture.
- Every culture strongly influenced by environment.
- Cultural phenomena is produced by the interaction of individuals and society:
  - not by "race"
  - not reduced to geography, environment, or economics, etc.

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## Reconstructing cultural history

- What material exists for us to study the culture of past human societies?
- What doesn't always appear in the historical or archaeological record?

## Holistic view

- Anthropology views the complex whole of society.
- Distinguishes anthropology from other fields of study that separate...
  - Politics
  - Economics
  - Religion
  - Language
  - etc.

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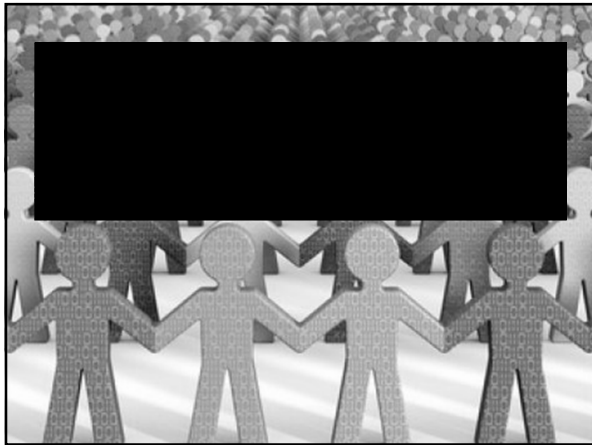
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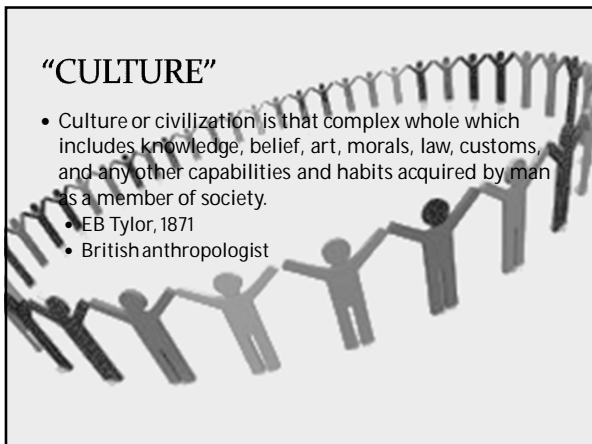
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## “CULTURE”

- Culture or civilization is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, customs, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.
  - EB Tylor, 1871
  - British anthropologist



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## The Nature of Culture [1948]

- Alfred Kroeber
  - US Anthropologist
  - Culture is...
    - Learned:
      - Acquired
      - Shared
      - passed on (transmitted)
    - Superorganic (not biological) and superindividual (shared by other members of society)



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## The Nature of Culture [1948]

- Alfred Kroeber
  - Culture is... (continued)
    - Integrated
      - parts fit into a whole
    - Ideational
      - gives meaning
      - involves abstract, symbolic thought
    - Adaptive, not static; can and does change
    - Embedded in relations of power
      - Conflict
      - Hierarchy
      - Inequality



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## Major Ideas

a brief introduction to the major ideas that have shaped anthropology

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## Unilinear Cultural Evolution:

- Mid- to late-1800s
- Influenced by the natural sciences (evolution).
  - Developed stages that each culture went through in their development
  - Created a ladder of social/cultural hierarchy towards 'civilization'
- Critique:
  - Ethnocentric
  - Assumed all societies were on the same path with the same goals
  - Equated civilization with material culture
    - technology, cities, etc.

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## Cultural Relativism

- Franz Boas
- Early 1900s
- Should not rank different societies or culture
  - view them/value them on their own terms
- Differences in peoples are the result of historical, social and geographic conditions.
- All populations have complete and equally developed culture.



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## Historical Particularism



- Franz Boas
- 1920s
- Each society has a unique history and one should not assume universal laws govern their history or how they operate.
- Focuses directly on an event itself and accounts for this event by tying it in some way to environmental and historical factors that could explain the creation of the cultural variables.

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## Structural-Functionalism



- A. R. Radcliffe-Brown and B. Malinowski
  - British
  - 1930-50s
- Society as a living organism
- Focused on social structure and institutions as functioning primarily for basic human biological needs
- Major critique
  - Included the idea of unchanging societies existing in a state of equilibrium.
  - Compare to the understanding that societies are dynamic and changing.



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## Structuralism (French School)

- Claude Levi-Strauss
  - 1970s -
- Analyze culture as a linguist analyzes language
  - Study the grammar or structure of a culture
  - Elements of culture must be seen in relationship to one another
- Focus on cognitive systems
  - kinship structure
  - Art
  - Mythology
  - Ritual
  - Ceremony
- Major critique
  - assumes universal structures for all societies—analysis ahistorical.



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## Symbolic or Interpretive Anthropology



- Clifford Geertz
  - 1980s - forward
- Discover meaning
  - Analyze culture as a system of symbols
  - Translate layers of meaning: 'Thick description'
- Major critique
  - focus on deep layers of meaning often left out the bigger picture...for example, often did not address the political and economic conditions or other power dynamics of society

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## Postmodernism in anthropology

- 1980s – Forward
- Emphasizes Anthropology's tie to the Humanities
- Critical self-reflection on the practice of anthropology—
  - sees limits to any 'objective' recording of fieldwork experience
- Challenges generalization
  - strives to capture the uniqueness of each cultural situation.
- Emphasis is on dialogue vs. observation

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## Postmodernism in anthropology

- Ethnographic fieldwork is a process of *meaning making*
- Contested views of society exist within any given society
  - must acknowledge variety of points of view
- Categories of science are themselves cultural products
- Critique
  - Extremes contradict the social science goals and objectives of much anthropological research, namely the systematic gathering of data, its analysis, and its generalization.

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## Sub-field Specialization

- Traditional sub-fields:
  - Archaeology
  - Biological Anthropology
  - Ethnography/Socio-cultural Anthropology
  - Linguistic Anthropology
- Within socio-cultural anthropology there is greater specialization
  - Medical Anthropology (Prof. Rebhun)
  - Political Anthropology (Prof. DeLugan)
  - Environmental Anthropology
  - Economic Anthropology
  - Applied/Engaged Anthropology
  - Etc...

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Etic v. Etic

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