

## **NATURE, OBJECTS, AND SCOPE OF CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY, ETHNOLOGY AND ETHNOGRAPHY**

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### **Summary**

This chapter gives a broad view of the discipline of Cultural Anthropology: the study of human beings from the perspective of their cultures and societies, both from a synchronic and a diachronic standpoint. Cultural Anthropology is one of the three (or four) major branches of the broader field of Anthropology, and this chapter discusses its nature, objects and scope also in relation in the wider anthropological context, including an analysis of the concept of Ethnology – a synonym of Anthropology as well as a sub-branch dealing with division of human beings into groups, distribution, relations and characteristics. This chapter also analyzes the sub-branch of Ethnography, i.e. the scientific description of specific cultures, sub-cultures, cultural environments or cultural productions on which anthropological theories, analysis and conceptualizations are based. In this way it ushers the reader into the chapters that follow in this volume for deeper aspects of the subjects. The volume, in fact, is organized in order to sketch a panoramic view of the methods employed in, and of the main subject treated by, Cultural Anthropology.

### **1. Introduction**

Cultural Anthropology studies human beings, their cultures and societies, both in a synchronic and diachronic perspective. The features and attributes defining humans, or inextricably related to them, are extremely numerous and variegated. Equally abundant and multifaceted are the characteristics defining – and the entities falling under the definition of – culture and society. Consequently, the objects under analysis when studying human beings and cultures, the methodologies employed, as well as the modes of data collecting, the analytical perspectives adopted (e.g. historical or contemporary) and the theoretical constructions related to them, are abundant and multifaceted. This makes Cultural Anthropology one of the most varied and multi-disciplinary, yet arguably coherent, scientific discipline, where a number of approaches, methodologies

and independent disciplines are all related by the object of investigation – human beings – and cooperate to its understanding. As a result of this very nature, Cultural Anthropology branches out in a number of sub-disciplines. Moreover, it shares methods and objects of analysis with other, related yet independent, scientific fields, as for instance Physical Anthropology, Sociology or Linguistics. It also borrows research methods from other sciences such as Geography, Botany or Geology, just to name three out of many. It is a well established and independent field of scientific research, with its own (although varied) analytical tools and analytical scopes, rich with schools of thought and theories, taught in universities around the world and main theme of countless exhibitions and museums.

This volume is intended as an introduction to its methods, scopes and sub-disciplines, as well as to its most recurrent themes, to its distinctive areas of investigation and to its state-of-the-art.

## 2. What is Cultural Anthropology?

The term anthropology, that appeared in European languages during the 17<sup>th</sup> century, is self-explanatory: it is a compound of the Greek words *anthrōpos* (ἄνθρωπος), meaning human being, and *-logia* (-λογία), 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: further on in this chapter there is a brief introduction to their uses in Cultural Anthropology. For the time being, it is enough to adapt Aristotle's view on this: *man is by nature a social [and cultural] animal; an individual who is unsocial naturally and not accidentally is either beneath our notice or more than human. 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 etc.), as well as most of the other material features that characterize humanity but are not part of the human body (e.g. writing, arts, technology etc.). Today Physical Anthropology is generally referred to as Biological Anthropology, although there are few scholars who make a distinction between the two terms. Another widely spread

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: Archeology, Biological Anthropology, Sociocultural Anthropology, recognizing Linguistic Anthropology as a fourth branch in many cases. In this volume, Archeology will not be treated for two reasons: on the one hand, it has been analyzed in depth in other volumes of this encyclopedia, 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 Archeology 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.

## **2.1. Physical/Biological Anthropology**

Three chapters of this volume are dedicated to different aspects of Physical Anthropology, and its relationship with Cultural Anthropology. Even if this volume is not devoted to Biological Anthropology, it is important to discuss briefly its objects of study and methods of analysis because it gives a better definition of Cultural Anthropology through comparison and differentiation, acknowledging at the same time their wide common area of investigation. In fact, although distinct, the two disciplines are deeply interrelated, because they share methods of research (e.g. Archeology or DNA analysis) but above all because they have in common the same object of investigation (human beings) and therefore, as a consequence, fundamental questions and methods.

Generally speaking, Physical or Biological Anthropology studies humans from a biological standpoint, in a historical perspective from their origin to the present day, as well as in a synchronic perspective, i.e. analyzing different individuals or groups in a same historical period. This means that the discipline engages, more often and more deeply than Cultural Anthropology, in the anatomical, biological and ethological study of animals, with the main aim of understanding humans in a comparative perspective. Consequently, Biological Anthropology is almost as wide a field of research as its cultural counterpart. In fact, physical (or biological) anthropologists have undertaken research in a great number of directions. They have, for instance, compared physical or genetic features of human groups and individuals in a specific historical period, or their evolution; they have analyzed, and compared, genetic and physiological patterns and variations in one specific human group, or among different societies, or between humans and animals, and especially between human and primates. Examples of popular fields of investigation among physical and biological anthropologists are evolution, and two important fields of research related to it: evolutionary theory and evolutionary biology; the relationship between non-human primates and humans; the comparative study of primates' and humans' anatomy, social behavior, environment(s) and /or biology; the study of the relationship between humans and their environment; anatomic and genetic characteristics of hominids. For the readers who are new to the field and are looking for a better understanding of Biological Anthropology, we strongly encourage the reading of the chapter in this volume on *Genetic Anthropology* by a team of experts from Lisbon University under the direction of doctor Alves-Cardoso, both as a

relatively short introduction to the field, and for a better understanding of its state-of-the-art. As a further survey, it may be useful to refer to textbooks used in universities such as the *Introduction to Physical Anthropology* (Jurmain et al, 2014).

Due to the complexity and variety of its interests, Physical Anthropology branches out in a number of sub-disciplines. One of the most well-established and renowned sub-fields is Primatology, the discipline devoted to the scientific, biological, ethological, comparative and historical study of the non-human species belonging to the order of the primates, including hominids, apes, monkeys and prosimians. Another major and well-established sub-discipline is Paleoanthropology, the discipline that studies human evolution, especially as revealed in the fossils records, therefore in a diachronic perspective, focusing on the analysis of the extinct species of hominids, questioning who are the biological ancestors of human beings and of contemporary primates and who are the relatives and ancestors of contemporary humans. Today Thousands of specimens of human ancestors (mostly fragmentary) are (...) kept in research collections. Taken together, these fossils span about 7 million years of human prehistory; and although incomplete, they provide us with significantly more knowledge than was available just 15 years ago. It is the ultimate goal of paleoanthropological research to identify the various early hominid species, establish a chronological sequence of relationships among them, and gain insights into their adaptation and behavior. Only then will we have a clear picture of how and when humankind came into being. (Jurmain et al, 2007, p. 8). Strictly related to Primatology and to Paleoanthropology there is the discipline known as Primate paleontology. Moreover, there are also recently-appeared research directions that are growing in popularity and in analytical efforts, and that may become independent and broadly recognized subfields in the near future. One of them is Human Behavioral Ecology that focuses on the study of behavioral adaptations of human beings (and their ancestors) from evolutionary and ecologic perspectives. Two other prominent sub-disciplines of Physical Anthropology are Osteology, i.e. the discipline that focuses on the study of the skeleton; and Paleopathology, the field involved in the study of disease and trauma in antiquity, starting from the analysis of skeletons (and when possible on other elements) from archaeological sites.

Physical Anthropology has undergone great changes since its appearance during the nineteenth century. For instance, 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. In fact, at its origin Physical Anthropology was greatly focused on the purely morphological and anatomic approach, and it relied heavily on the measurement of the anatomical features of human beings (known as anthropometry) and primates. Another example of a measurement system that was fairly popular in the past, although abandoned today, is the Von Luschan's chromatic scale, a method of classifying skin color named after its inventor, the Austrian physician, explorer and anthropologist Felix Ritter von Luschan (1854 – 1924).

Today, also thanks to the 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. However, they were highly regarded techniques – and among the most advanced – toward the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It is especially during the 19<sup>th</sup> 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 fact, throughout the whole nineteenth century and way into the twentieth, Physical Anthropology was focused to a great extent on this – now abandoned – perspective that was based on wrong premises and led to disastrous results. For too long, in fact, 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.

On this issue, in 1998 the Executive Board of the American Anthropological Association adopted the following statement that represents generally the contemporary thinking and scholarly positions of a majority of anthropologists. (...) With the vast expansion of scientific knowledge in the 20<sup>th</sup> century (...) it has become clear that human populations are not unambiguous, clearly demarcated, biologically distinct groups (i.e. races). Evidence from the analysis of genetics (...) indicates that most physical variation, about 94%, lies within so-called racial groups. Conventional geographic racial groupings differ from one another only in about 6% of their genes. This means that there is greater variation within racial groups than between them. In neighboring populations there is much overlapping of genes and their phenotypic (physical) expressions. Throughout history whenever different groups have come into contact, they have interbred. The continued sharing of genetic materials has maintained all of humankind as a single species. Physical variations in any given trait tend to occur gradually rather than abruptly over geographic areas. And because physical traits are inherited independently of one another, knowing the range of one trait does not predict the presence of others. For example, skin color varies largely from light in the temperate areas in the north to dark in the tropical areas in the south; its intensity is not related to nose shape or hair texture. Dark skin may be associated with frizzy or kinky hair or curly or wavy or straight hair, all of which are found among different indigenous peoples in tropical regions. These facts render any attempt to establish lines of division among biological populations both arbitrary and subjective. (American Anthropological Association, 1998). We strongly invite the reader to read Sussmann's chapter in this volume, entitled *A History of Race in Europe and the United States*, for a better understanding of the wrong premises, of the responsibilities of anthropologists and of the political consequences (including, for instance, eugenics) of the now-abandoned racist theories and analysis. The idea of race survived in some form and in some circles through the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as outlined in an interesting article by Cartmill (1998). Generalizing, it can be said that the assumption that the history of human beings could be described as made of stages of cultural evolution, and the association of these stages with anatomical features, was a major and unforgiving mistake made by many Physical and Cultural anthropologists during the 19<sup>th</sup> and well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when the two disciplines were less distinguished than they are today. Another widespread mistake of

that time was the over-simplification of anatomic traits, leading to an assumed ethnic homogeneity of groups based on few anatomical traits.

Especially since the 1950s, the improvements of our knowledge of biology, chemistry (especially organic chemistry) and the improvements in analytical tools, including for instance carbon dating and the related accelerator mass spectrometry (AMS), as well as DNA analysis, gave a great impetus to the research in Physical Anthropology. It is also because of these new approaches, and because of the fresh and wider perspectives that they brought about, that anthropologists today prefer the label of Biological Anthropology. The new knowledge, perspectives and technologies permitted the development of new fields, such as Bioarchaeology, that is focused on the understanding of past cultures through the analysis of human remains recovered in an archaeological context. The impressive analytical improvement since the 1950s also greatly helped the advancement of other fields, such as Paleopathology. But above all, it allowed a deeper understanding of human history and existence, while showing the mistakes of the past and overcoming the erroneous racial theories, embedded with social and ethnic Darwinism, that had dominated and influenced the field for over a century. For a better understanding of the history of Physical Anthropology, the works of the American physical anthropologist and historian of science Franck Spencer (1941-1999), such as the encyclopedic *History of Physical Anthropology* (1997) or the one-volume *History of American Physical Anthropology 1930-1980* (1982), are a good starting point.

## **2.2. Physical/Biological Anthropology and Cultural Anthropology**

Biological or Physical Anthropology share a great deal of history, of analytical techniques and of research objects with Cultural Anthropology. That is particularly true in regard to the study of the past. For instance, physical and genetic evidences are widely used, although their results can be controversial, when trying to understand questions about the emergence or definition of specifically human characteristics (e.g. music or dance), when trying to identify migration paths in prehistory, or when trying to relate extinct languages to archaeological findings.

A classical example is the controversy over the appearance of language. Language is clearly a fundamental feature of human beings. It is also obviously not recorded until the arrival of writing, and therefore cultural anthropologists as well as linguists necessarily have to confront themselves with the work of physical anthropologists and archaeologists who, on their part, are also deeply interested in the question. In turn, they inevitably have to compare their results and theories with those produced by socio-cultural anthropologists. In other words, knowledge and scientific research are interdisciplinary and are the result of a collective effort.

Human language implies very specific characteristics, both physical and cognitive. On the one hand, it needs a specialized phonatory system that is absent in any other primate. However, it is difficult to establish when the phonatory system appeared among Homins, since the remains of human beings and their ancestors from the past are skeletons or bones with few if any traces of soft tissues. On the other hand, the eventual existence of a well-enough phonatory system does not imply the cognitive ability of

human speech, while on the contrary, its absence doesn't imply the absence of symbolic thinking or of (non-verbal yet symbolic) communication of some kind. As a consequence, physical and sociocultural anthropologists are intellectually inclined and ethically obliged to share research results and hypothesis to solve this issue, although the results are far from being exhaustive. In fact, some researchers place the appearance of languages at around 200,000 years BCE, basing their theories on physical features of human fossils as well as on comparative studies with primates' communicative capabilities. On the other hand, the majority of the Anthropologists today – across different anthropological fields – estimate that human language came into existence somewhere between 50,000 and 20,000 years ago, with the appearance of the *Homo sapiens*, basing their evaluations on findings in linguistics, physical and cultural anthropology. Needless to say, all the investigations and the opinions on this matter cut across disciplines (Linguistics and many branches of Anthropology as well as cognitive sciences).

Another example of the intersection between Physical and Cultural Anthropology are DNA analysis employed when trying to identify migration paths and more generally the (pre-)history of human beings. Although it is not always conclusive, DNA analysis can support, integrate or discredit theories built on other sources, such as written records or archaeological findings. An example is the study of the origin of the Etruscans, an advanced civilization that populated, the part of central Italy where nowadays are situated the regions of Tuscany, Lazio and Umbria, at least between 700 BCE and 300 CE. Its unique, isolated language, and its rich culture does not seem to be related to any other in the Italian peninsula. Ancient scholars – such as Herodotus (circa 484 – 425 BCE) or Dionysius of Halicarnassus (circa 60 BCE – after 7 BCE) – passed on conflicting theories on the origin of the Etruscans, citing different sources and myths. Accordingly, modern scholars have been divided on the reconstruction of the settlement patterns of this population in the Italian peninsula. Today, anthropologists and historians are still divided on two main possibilities: the Anatolian or eastern origin and the Italic or indigenous one. Studies conducted on the DNA of inhabitants of contemporary Tuscany and Anatolia, on bodies from Etruscans necropolis, as well as the DNA examination of a local breed of cows, have not been conclusive, since they show results that may support either of the two different theories (Beekes, 2003; Palmucci, 2007). Another classical example, on a greater scale, of the intersection of – and collaboration between – Biological and Cultural Anthropology when trying to reconstruct migrations and histories, is the well-known case of the Austronesian. The Austronesian is a linguistic family shared by populations in a very wide area across the Indian and the Pacific Oceans. These populations settled as far west as Madagascar and as far east as Easter Island, as far north as the Hawaii and as far south as New Zealand. They reached the shores of Peru and made the journey back, and share not only a common ancestral language, but also some DNA traits as well as many cultural traits. There are today two main competing models of their history, on their origin and migration path. One is the so-called out of Taiwan model, essentially based on linguistic observations. The other, built on linguistic, biological and anthropological data, locate their ancestral starting point in the Malaysian region (Greenhill and Gray, 2005; Thomas, 2011).

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## Biographical Sketch

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