

# **History of Anthropology**

## **A. Origins**

Anthropology traces its roots to ancient Greek historical and philosophical writings about human nature and the organization of human society. Anthropologists generally regard Herodotus, a Greek historian who lived in the 400s bc, as the first thinker to write widely on concepts that would later become central to anthropology. In the book *History*, Herodotus described the cultures of various peoples of the Persian Empire, which the Greeks conquered during the first half of the 400s bc. He referred to Greece as the dominant culture of the West and Persia as the dominant culture of the East. This type of division, between white people of European descent and other peoples, established the mode that most anthropological writing would later adopt.

The Arab historian Ibn Khaldun, who lived in the 14th century ad, was another early writer of ideas relevant to anthropology. Khaldun examined the environmental, sociological, psychological, and economic factors that affected the development and the rise and fall of civilizations. Both Khaldun and Herodotus produced remarkably objective, analytic, ethnographic descriptions of the diverse cultures in the Mediterranean world, but they also often used secondhand information.

## **C.2. Anthropological Evolutionary Theories**

During the late 1800s many anthropologists promoted their own models of social and biological evolution. Their writings portrayed people of European descent as biologically and culturally superior to all other peoples. The most influential anthropological presentation of this viewpoint appeared in *Ancient Society*, published in 1877 by American anthropologist Lewis Henry Morgan.

Morgan argued that European civilization was the pinnacle of human evolutionary progress, representing humanity's highest biological, moral, and technological achievement. According to Morgan, human societies had evolved to civilization through earlier conditions, or stages, which he called Savagery and Barbarism. Morgan believed these stages occurred over many thousands of years and compared them to geological ages. But Morgan attributed cultural evolution to moral and mental improvements, which he proposed were, in turn, related to improvements in the ways that people produced food and to increases in brain size.

Morgan also examined the material basis of cultural development. He believed that under Savagery and Barbarism people owned property communally, as groups. Civilizations and political states, he said, developed together with the private ownership of property. States thus protected people's rights to own property. Morgan's theories coincided

with and influenced those of German political theorists Friedrich Engels and Karl Marx. Engels and Marx, using a model like Morgan's, predicted the demise of state-supported capitalism. They saw communism, a new political and economic system based on the ideals of communality, as the next evolutionary stage for human society.

Like Morgan, Sir Edward Tylor, a founder of British anthropology, also promoted the theories of cultural evolution in the late 1800s. Tylor attempted to describe the development of particular kinds of customs and beliefs found across many cultures. For example, he proposed a sequence of stages for the evolution of religion—from animism (the belief in spirits), through polytheism (the belief in many gods), to monotheism (the belief in one god).

In 1871 Tylor also wrote a still widely quoted definition of culture, describing it as “that complex whole that includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of a society.” This definition formed the basis for the modern anthropological concept of culture.

#### **D. New Directions in Theory and Research**

Anthropology emerged as a serious professional and scientific discipline beginning in the 1920s. The focus and practice of anthropological research developed in different ways in the United States and Europe.

## **D.1. The Influence of Boas**

In the 1920s and 1930s anthropology assumed its present form as a four-field academic profession in the United States under the influence of German-born American anthropologist Franz Boas. Boas wanted anthropology to be a well-respected science. He was interested in all areas of anthropological research and had done highly regarded fieldwork in all areas except archaeology. As a professor at Columbia University in New York City from 1899 until his retirement in 1937, he helped define the discipline and trained many of the most prominent American anthropologists of the 20th century. Many of his students—including Alfred Kroeber, Ruth Benedict, and Margaret Mead—went on to establish anthropology departments at universities throughout the country.

Boas stressed the importance of anthropologists conducting original fieldwork to get firsthand experiences with the cultures they wished to describe. He also opposed racist and ethnocentric evolutionary theories. Based on his own studies, including his measurement of the heads of people from many cultures, Boas argued that genetic differences among human populations could not explain cultural variation.

Boas urged anthropologists to do detailed research on particular cultures and their histories, rather than attempt to construct grand evolutionary

stages for all of humankind in the tradition of Morgan and Tylor. Boas's theoretical approach became known as historical particularism, and it forms the basis for the fundamental anthropological concept of cultural relativism.

## **D.2. Functionalism**

Many other anthropologists working in Boas's time, mostly in Europe, based their research on the theories of 19th-century French sociologist Émile Durkheim. Like Sir Edward Tylor, Durkheim was interested in religions across cultures. But he was not interested in the evolution of religion. Durkheim instead proposed that religious beliefs and rituals functioned to integrate people in groups and to maintain the smooth functioning of societies.

Durkheim's ideas were expanded upon by Bronislaw Malinowski and A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, two major figures in the development of modern British anthropology beginning in the 1920s and 1930s. Their approach to understanding culture was known as structural functionalism, or simply functionalism.

A typical functionalist study analyzed how cultural institutions kept a society in working order. For example, many studies examined rites of passage, such as initiation ceremonies. Through a series of such ceremonies, groups of children of the same age would be initiated into

new roles and take on new responsibilities as they grew into adults. According to functionalists, any unique characteristics of the rites of passage of a particular society had to do with how initiation ceremonies worked in the function of that society.

Functionalists based their approach to doing fieldwork on their theories. They lived for long periods with the people they studied, carefully recording even very small details about a people's culture and social life. The resulting ethnographies portrayed all aspects of culture and social life as interdependent parts of a complex model. Functionalist research methods became the blueprint for much anthropological research throughout the 20th century.

During the first half of the 20th century, many anthropologists conducted functionalist ethnographic studies in the service of colonial governments. This research allowed colonial administrators to predict what would happen to an entire society in response to particular colonial policies. Administrators might want to know, for instance, what would happen if they imposed taxes on households or on individuals.

### **D.3. Structuralism**

In the 1950s French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss developed an anthropological theory and analytic method known as structuralism. He was influenced by the theories of Durkheim and one of Durkheim's

collaborators, French anthropologist Marcel Mauss. Lévi-Strauss proposed that many common cultural patterns—such as those found in myth, ritual, and language—are rooted in basic structures of the mind.

He wrote, for instance, about the universal tendency of the human mind to sort things into sets of opposing concepts, such as day and night, black and white, or male and female. Lévi-Strauss believed such basic conceptual patterns became elaborated through culture. For example, many societies divide themselves into contrasting but complementary groups, known as moieties (from the French word for “half”). Each moiety traces its descent through one line to a common ancestor. In addition to many shared ritual functions, moieties create a system for controlling sex and marriage. A person from one moiety may only marry or have sexual relations with a person from the other moiety.