

General Introduction

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Anthropology has often been called ‘the most humanistic of the sciences, and the most scientific of the humanities’. If you are encountering the subject for the first time, whether as a student or out of general interest and curiosity, you will quickly discover two things about it. The first is that the broad term ‘anthropology’ embraces an enormous range of topics and approaches, whose common factor is that they all relate to how we think about living as a human being in society. The second is that at the root of all this diversity and detail, anthropology asks some fundamental general questions: what is it to be human? How do we come to be as we are? What do we have in common as human beings? And in what ways do we differ from one place, time or cultural setting to another?

This Reader aims to provide a sample of original writings drawn from different areas of anthropology and different periods of time to illustrate the enormous scope and range of the discipline. In selecting and presenting the content, the editors have had two purposes equally in view. The first is to make original writings available in an easily accessible form to support teachers and students of anthropology at pre-university level. The design therefore follows the broad format of a General Certificate of Education Advanced Level (pre-university) course now being taught in the U.K. The second is to bring together extracts from original work chosen to appeal to all readers, including those who may be new to anthropology and want to find out more about it.

The material is organised around themes that follow the broad structure of the A Level course. Each section of the reader corresponds to a unit of the A Level course. In Section I ‘Being Human: Unity and Diversity’, we look at the body and how it is interpreted in anthropology; at ways of thinking and communicating; at how social relations are organised; and at ways of engaging with nature, the environment and human-made objects. Section II, ‘Becoming a Person: Identity and Belonging’, illustrates anthropologists’ ideas about personhood as socially constituted, and ways of defining social boundaries and groups. Sections III and IV of the Reader correspond to the third and fourth units of the course and include material on the themes of globalisation (local and global processes); the practice of anthropology; and anthropological ethics, methods and investigations. A specially written book, *Anthropology: A Beginners’ Guide* (Hendry and Underdown, 2012) also follows the broad structure of the anthropology A level course, and is a valuable resource for students and others.

If you approach the Reader by skimming the titles and contents of the extracts, your first reaction will probably be one of bewilderment at the sheer diversity of the topics we touch on – from nature conservation campaigns to witchcraft beliefs, from

human evolution to fashion and style, and from the repatriation of indigenous human remains to research on literacy. This eclecticism is deliberate. Like any contemporary discipline, anthropology has roots in the history of ideas, but there is no single 'story of anthropology.' Anthropology as now understood and practised has its origins in a number of intellectual traditions. These reach back to the ancient Greeks, and continue through the European Enlightenment of the eighteenth century and the nineteenth-century debates over evolution, 'man's place in nature,' and the impacts of colonial expansion. In recent years, views about human life that come from outside the Western tradition of thought have asserted themselves within anthropology, which is in consequence becoming more like a set of dialogues between world traditions. You can read more about this intellectual history in a number of good books, such as T.H. Eriksen's *A History of Anthropology* (Eriksen 2001). Further information about the scope of anthropology can be found on the dedicated website of the Royal Anthropological Institute's educational outreach programme (www.discoveranthropology.org.uk).

One result of these many influences on the development of anthropology has been the emergence of specialisms and divisions within the discipline, of which the most important has been that between biological anthropology (broadly, the study of human evolution and physical variation) and social and cultural anthropology (broadly, the comparative, in-depth study of contemporary societies and cultures). For much of the twentieth century – and more so in the U.K. and continental Europe than in the U.S. where a more integrated approach prevailed – there was a tendency for these main branches of anthropology to go their separate ways, and intellectual communication across the biological-cultural divide tended to be limited. In recent years, and especially since the beginning of this century, we are seeing more sharing of ideas and findings among anthropologists across the divisions, and as a result new insights are beginning to emerge in answer to the fundamental anthropological question: what is it to be human?

In reading some of the extracts we have included, you will notice signs of these differences of approach. Again this is deliberate. The intention is to show, through the writings included here, that there is no single 'voice of anthropology' to answer all the questions the subject throws up. Rather, we suggest you think of a series of conversations – sometimes of debates – between different anthropological interpretations of the themes we touch on.

We hope that, in using the Reader, you do not take the themes we have selected as rigidly circumscribed or self-contained. There are many connections between them, as you will quickly find. To give just two examples: we include material on ways of thinking about race and ethnicity which bears on all our themes – and many others we could have chosen. We include passages from different writers in these fields and we also include a selection from a book that deals more with the literary representations of such themes in popular fiction that might raise echoes for many readers today. Similarly, the passages by Judith Okely on a girls' boarding school in 1950s England, and by Daniel Miller on how to wear a sari, powerfully illuminate both the ways in which social forces discipline the body, and how dress is used to express social and spiritual meanings and distinctions. If you are following a formal

course of study in anthropology, you will find it valuable to return time and again to material included in the Reader as your knowledge deepens of the themes and their interconnections.

One further thing you will notice in the Reader is that anthropology is concerned both with events and processes in the distant evolutionary past that have shaped our humanity, and with the realities of human life in the here and now. Many people, if you ask them what they think anthropologists study, will answer in terms of either bones and fossils, or exotic customs among supposedly 'primitive' peoples remote from the Western mainstream. This impression is reinforced by a great deal of what you will see in the media and in films and on television. It is of course true that anthropologists are interested in the physical evidence of human origins. And a rapidly developing specialism – forensic anthropology – can tell us much about more recent remains, including those of victims of present-day crimes and genocides. Equally, social anthropologists have created a rich record based on the in-depth study of small-scale, sometimes pre-literate societies across the world. Many of these societies were under colonial rule at the time that now classic studies were carried out. But it is quite wrong to assume, as the Victorians routinely did, that these small-scale societies are 'relics' of earlier periods of human development. Indeed, the best of the classic studies (some examples of which are included here) have yielded insights that are of universal relevance to understanding the human condition. Equally, contemporary anthropologists are interested in the social dynamics of the present-day industrial and post-industrial world – including the cyber-world of online networks and relationships. The Reader as a whole should convince you that anthropology is a thoroughly up-to-date subject with much to tell us about all the worlds we live in. As the extracts show, an anthropological approach can shed as much light on (for example) attitudes to 'nature' as revealed in topical controversies over Japanese whaling, species conservation and badger-culling in Wales, as on the equally significant (to the community concerned) traditional ritual practices of an African people such as the Ndembu.

The Reader is divided into four sections, each of which is prefaced with brief signposts to help you navigate through the material. Other 'landmarks' will be found in the linking passages that introduce each extract.

A final word to the user: we are very aware that our themes and selections do not by any means cover the whole of anthropology. Indeed, we realise that huge areas of anthropological enquiry are not covered or even mentioned throughout the Reader. Rather, we hope in these selections to offer you just a glimpse of the subject, and give some hints to help you venture more deeply into the field. We hope that through these selected extracts we have succeeded in awakening your interest, and that as a result you might want to follow up other directions for yourself.

References

- Eriksen, T.H. *A History of Anthropology* (London: Pluto Press, 2001).
Hendry, J. and S. Underdown. *Anthropology: A Beginners' Guide* (Oxford: Oneworld Books, 2011).