CHAPTER 1

ANTHROPOLOGY AND THE CONCEPT OF CULTURE

The nature and scope of anthropology and the role of culture within it

The ancient Greek scholar **Herodotus** (484–425 B.C.E.) traveled to distant lands, recording habits of different peoples, comparing these customs to one another and to those of his own society. Remarkably for his time, he provided fairly objective descriptions and commentary. He also made the following apt observation which he recorded in his *Histories*, Book 3; chapter 38): "If anyone… were given the chance to choose from among all nations the set of beliefs which he thought best, he would inevitably choose—after careful consideration of their relative merits—that of his own country." With justification, Herodotus is widely considered a Father of Anthropology. In broad terms anthropology is the study of cultural similarities and differences. It seeks to determine what is true of all human groups (what themes tie us together as a species) and what differs among groups in time and space (or what are the variations on these themes). It strives also to account for the similarities and variations. It attempts to answer the following kinds of questions.

1. Do all human groups have religion? If so, why?
2. Have all human cultures engaged in warfare?
3. Are any human groups truly egalitarian?
4. What is the origin of human socioeconomic inequality?

5. How varied are human practices in religion, marriage, sex, or artistic expression and what accounts for the variation?

Anthropology raises these and other interesting questions, even though anthropologists may not always agree on the answers.

Culture guides human behavior and thought, often in ways that seem mysterious or about which we are entirely unaware. Anthropology seeks to unlock this mystery, to make explicit what has been hidden. Anthropologists often say that through encounters with another culture we see our own culture thrown into relief; we become aware of how our culture influences us. For many North Americans, it is only when they encounter cultures where humans eat dogs or horses that they become fully and acutely aware of their own cultural attitudes towards these animals. It is only when they see the strong respect shown to elders in other cultures that they become sharply aware of the attitudes and practices concerning the elderly in their own society. Through systematic exposure to different cultures, anthropology can bring about a new sort of self-knowledge or self-awareness.

For a long stretch of human history, a heightened sense of cross-cultural awareness or skills of cross-cultural understanding were not so important for our individual or social well-being. This is no longer the case. With modern transportation, migration, and communication the world has shrunk. Today, our families, our neighborhoods, our schools, and our places of work, leisure, and worship are becoming more and more multicultural. Our negotiating this world and finding our place within it depend on our comprehending cultures other than our own. Increasingly, our jobs, careers, and success in other life opportunities depend on our ability to communicate effectively across cultural boundaries.

And yet, while the relevance of cultural and cross-cultural knowledge increases, so too do popular misperceptions of what culture is and how it works. These common misconceptions considerably impede our ability to appreciate and navigate the multicultural world around us. To counter this trend, this book introduces the field of cultural anthropology through focusing directly on these popular "myths of human culture." Each chapter lays out a set of common myths at the beginning, addresses these within the body of the chapter and then returns to them in the chapter summaries. As students learn about the field of anthropology and its subject, culture, the myths are dispelled.

This opening chapter of the book is an overview of the field of anthropology and the concept of culture. It pays special attention to the following myths:

Common Myths of Culture

Myth #1 Anthropology is the study of "exotic" cultures.

Myth #2 Because the word "culture" can refer to elite forms of expression, art, and entertainment (like ballet and classical music), not all human groups have culture.

Myth #3 There are no characteristics shared by all human groups, and so no way of making general statements about human culture.

Myth #4 Some cultures are superior to others.

Among academic disciplines on college and university campuses, anthropology is probably one of the least understood. Most people know what history and psychology are, and they have an idea about what chemists do, even though they may not know much chemistry. The term "anthropology" might conjure up visions of lone adventurers traipsing through jungles, dodging cannibals, or finding hidden temples of gold, but these images are hardly realistic. Anthropology *is* an exciting field and sometimes full of adventure, but what is it really all about? What is it that anthropologists actually do?

Anthropology Defined

Some anthropologists think of themselves as scientists, while others align themselves more with the humanities.[1] Yet most anthropologists will agree that whether they focus on child-rearing practices, language change, religious ritual, or the manufacture of stone tools, they use many of the techniques and approaches of science. These include a systematic approach to collecting and analyzing information; the construction and testing of **hypotheses** (provisional statements about the ways in which specific causes and effects are related); and a consensus about standards for assessing the validity of conclusions. There are many other valuable and legitimate ways of exploring the world other than science, of course. Poets, novelists, painters, sculptors, and philosophers, for example, all have distinctive ways of seeing humans and their situations. But anthropologists have carved out their own corner of the intellectual world, and in general it differs considerably from that of artists and more resembles that of scientists.

Anthropology is usually classified as a *social science*, along with sociology, political science, psychology, and history. What all of these disciplines

have in common is that they are systematic attempts to understand humans, or the human condition. The focus of each one, however, is different. To understand the focus of anthropology, it is helpful to construct a more precise definition of the discipline. There are almost as many of these definitions as there are anthropologists, and those of us who teach anthropology usually start our introductory courses with our own definitions. Here is the one that we will use in this text:

> **Anthropology is the empirically based, comparative study of humans through time and space, focusing on the central concept of culture and informed by the principle of cultural relativism.**

This definition is useful only if all the terms are clearly understood. So let us consider the most important terms and phrases one by one, and explore what they mean.

1. empirically based Anthropological information is based on direct experience, rather than on speculation. Thus, instead of speculating as to what *might* be true about other peoples' ways of life, anthropologists go into the **field** (the communities of the people they wish to study) to find out how these people *actually* live (or used to live, in the case of archaeologists). An example involves the **!Kung** people (also called the **Ju/'hoansi**), hunters and foragers of the Kalahari Desert in Botswana and Namibia. Instead of speculating on what life *might* be like for them, anthropologists like Richard B. Lee and Marjorie Shostak, to name just two, have told us what life is *actually* like for them. These anthropologists were able to do this because they, themselves, lived with the !Kung people, and participated in their daily lives. Lee is well known to students of anthropology for his comprehensive **ethnography**, or cultural description, of the !Kung, while Shostak has fascinated thousands of readers with her life history, *Nisa, Autobiography of a !Kung Woman* (the symbols, "/," "'," and "!," represent consonants in the !Kung language). Without works like these on the !Kung, we might still believe, as the English philosopher, Thomas Hobbes, did in the seventeenth century, that before the advent of urban-based society, there were "No arts, no letters, no society; and which is worst of all, continual fear and danger of violent death; and the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short" (Hobbes, 1958 [1651]). This book covers anthropological accounts of the lives of hunter-gatherers in Chapters 4 and 5, where quite a different picture is presented.

2. comparative To determine what characteristics are universal to humans and what characteristics are distinctive to certain cultural groups, it is essential to *compare* different systems. This is what anthropologists refer to as "cross-cultural" comparison. Because of cross-cultural comparison, we know, for example, that not all peoples of the world live in nuclear families, with mother, father, and their young children together in one house. We know about groups in highland New Guinea where women and their children live in their own houses and are visited by their husbands (who may have several wives), while their husbands, as well as their adolescent sons, live together with other men in a men's house.

While showing us this kind of variation, cross-cultural comparison has also taught us that there are virtually no societies in the world that do not have some system of marriage. This is important, because a few centuries ago Europeans thought that some people elsewhere in the world were too "primitive" to have the institution of marriage. But thanks to cross-cultural comparative studies, we now know that whether a group believes marriage involves only one man and one woman (at a time), one man and several women, one woman and several men, several men and several women, two men, or two women, *every group* has a marriage system, and all these systems have specific rules. In some societies, under some circumstances, women may take other women as spouses, and men may take other men as spouses. This, in fact, is increasingly true in the United States. Without the comparative approach fostered by anthropology, we would have a very limited and unrealistic notion of what is considered acceptable or "normal" within human societies, or even what systems actually exist.

3. human Anthropologists look at *all* human groups. All organisms designated *Homo sapiens* are human, and anthropology examines humans with both a cultural focus (see below for a definition of this) and a biological one. Thus, in addition to considering the language a human group speaks, its religious convictions, and its prehistory, anthropology also examines the distinctive biological characteristics of a group's members. Though there are numerous biological traits by which individual human groups vary, including hair form, blood type, and skin color, it is clear that, like any other species, *Homo sapiens* is marked by far more biological uniformity than diversity. Anthropologists examine not only biologically modern humans, but also their extinct ancestors and their living cousins, the nonhuman primates, to provide information about how humans evolved into what they are today.

4. through time and space Anthropology covers all human groups in all places and at all times. Obviously, no single anthropologist can be equally expert about all times and places, but every anthropologist contributes to the fund of knowledge upon which we all draw. Usually, cultural anthropologists (whom we will discuss shortly) concentrate on one geographical location, or on two or three, at most. And archaeologists (whom we will also discuss in a few pages) are likely to concentrate not only on a particular geographical location, but on a general time period, as well.

When anthropology began in the nineteenth century, the general focus was on exotic cultures that were little known to the Europeans and Euro-Americans who were the first anthropologists. Although part of the reason for this early research was to facilitate colonialism, these early anthropological studies did provide valuable information about hitherto unknown or poorly understood human groups. In addition, these early anthropologists often developed an appreciation for the groups they studied and a sense of responsibility toward them.

Today, anthropologists also examine groups who may be more familiar to them, including participants in their own culture. This is increasingly the case for cultural anthropologists and archaeologists. So, for example, although many archaeologists from the United States still labor in the shadows of the Egyptian pyramids, others explore the garbage discarded by contemporary people. One such study asks an important question: in times of economic recession, how do middle class Americans *actually* modify their consumption? Archaeologists can give us an idea, by examining the contents of contemporary garbage cans, as archaeologist William Rathje and his students did in Tucson, Arizona (Rathje, 2001). In the end, what is important about anthropology is not where the work is done, or who the objects of study are, but whether the studies are carried out according to anthropological concepts and concerns. What defines anthropology is the questions it asks and the way its work is done.

5. culture We will explore the idea of culture in greater detail as this chapter goes on. But because culture is so central to anthropology, we need to get a jump start with a working definition. Basically, anthropologists use the term "culture" to refer both to the rules and beliefs that organize the way people behave, as well as to their practices. So we can say that one's culture determines how many spouses to whom anyone can be married at one time, or whether men must tie strips of colored cloth around their necks when they engage in formal activities. Within any cultural system, some cultural rules are explicit, or clearly and formally laid out, while others are implicit, or simply

generally understood and taken for granted. American culture explicitly says that a person can have only one spouse at a time; in fact, the United States has codified laws governing this behavior. But in many other situations our culture has only *implicit* rules about acceptable behavior, for example about when men need to tie those strips of cloth around their necks. While there are no necktie laws on the books, we seem to be able to guess which situations warrant the donning of this piece of symbolic clothing. If we guess wrong, mostly we just feel foolish, but occasionally a fancy restaurant will make us wear one of their spares. And of course, this implicit rule applies only to men.

6. cultural relativism Cultural relativism is the idea that it is intellectually unproductive and unsound to make value judgments about cultural systems and practices simply because they differ from one's own. Thus, anthropologists, whether female or male, do not make negative value judgments about the veiling and seclusion of women in conservative Islamic societies, or about the arranged marriages of children in a variety of African and Asian societies. It is not the task of the anthropologist to judge cultures, but to study them. Anthropology is an attempt to understand a culture in the context of the ideas, beliefs, and values of *that* culture; to observe cultural practices integrated into a cultural system that allows its participants to live and reproduce; and to analyze the perspectives of that system. We will return to the concept of cultural relativism and some issues it raises at the end of this chapter.

Having now defined anthropology, it is important also to note a particular characteristic of the field that distinguishes it from other social sciences. Anthropology is a discipline that takes a **holistic** approach in its study of humans. This means that it looks at all aspects of the lives of humans; it is inclusive. Anthropology's holistic approach draws from a wide variety of techniques and bodies of knowledge which it attempts to organize into an integrated whole. And though individual anthropologists usually concentrate on one aspect of human experience at a time (economic, religious, political, and so on), they take pains to demonstrate how the aspect they focus on is related to other aspects of life.

THE SUBDISCIPLINES OF ANTHROPOLOGY IN THE UNITED STATES

As colleges and universities vary from country to country, so do academic disciplines, and anthropology is no exception. What anthropologists in the

United States consider subdivisions of anthropology are in some other countries housed in separate academic departments and maintain separate identities. But in the United States, anthropology is considered to be made up of four **subdisciplines.** These are **cultural anthropology, linguistics, physical anthropology,** and **archaeology.** Many American anthropologists, including the authors of this text, would also include **applied anthropology** as a subdiscipline of anthropology. The authors of this text are both cultural anthropologists; McKee is also a linguist, and Stone has worked as an applied anthropologist. Alhough this book is primarily focused on cultural anthropology, this subdiscipline is best understood in terms of its place within the whole of anthropology.

Cultural Anthropology

Cultural anthropology is also referred to as socio-cultural anthropology, social anthropology (especially in Britain), and **ethnology**. Its focus is on existing cultural systems, their similarities and differences, the ways in which cultural traits are related within and across societies, and the kinds of circumstances in which certain cultural traits develop and change. To acquire this information, cultural anthropologists usually collect data through a distinctive anthropological technique called participant observation (see Chapter 2). This process involves anthropologists living in the communities they are studying and participating as much as possible in the community's daily activities.

Through participant observation and other methods of collecting information about communities, anthropologists put together a description and analysis of the cultural system that organizes the community they are studying. To build this picture, anthropologists usually break the cultural system into several constituent parts. This process helps to make the resulting **ethnography**, or cultural description, easier to compare with other ethnographies. Some of the traditional categories cultural anthropologists use for their ethnographies include the following:

Subsistence (how people make a living)

Social organization (how people organize themselves to take care of necessary tasks and allocate power and authority)

Kinship (how people calculate the ways in which they are related to each other and decide what rights and obligations these relationships entail)

Marriage (how people decide whom to marry, when to marry, how many people to marry, and what rights and obligations marriage entails)

Gender (how people assess human identity based on maleness, femaleness, or a combination of these qualities)

Religion (how people understand the spiritual world and interact with it)

Art (how people create, use, and define—or do not define—the specialized activities, skills, and creation of visual, verbal, and musical productions according to culturally-approved patterns)

If you examine the table of contents of this book, you will see that the chapters cover all of these categories of cultural anthropology except gender. In this book gender is a category discussed within several chapters.

Linguistics

Linguistics is a subdiscipline that, even in the United States, is likely to exist either as part of another academic department (such as English, foreign languages, or education), or as a separate department altogether. Linguistics covers a variety of endeavors, including the study of the properties of language; analysis of the social, symbolic, and psychological roles of language; the study of the "genetic" relationships among languages; and the study of the development of language over time. Chapter 7 of this text discusses those aspects of linguistics that are most closely related to other aspects of cultural anthropology.

Physical Anthropology

Physical anthropology is the study of humans as biological creatures. To do this, physical anthropologists study living human groups to determine the biological adaptations they have developed to cope with their surroundings. For example, the trait that produces sickle cell anemia, a serious disease that can kill those who have it, also provides limited protection from malaria, a very widespread disease that can also kill those who suffer from it. How do these two disorders interact, and how do they affect the survival of the people who have them? Physical anthropologists as well as medical doctors are involved in this research.

Virtually all contemporary anthropologists base their understanding of humans along with their productions and capabilities on the results of biological evolution—that is, the development of one species from another as a result of natural selection. Natural selection is the principle that those organisms best suited to their environments are likely to survive in larger numbers and more likely to pass their genetic characteristics on to their offspring than organisms that are less well adapted. These adaptive traits are thus transmitted to succeeding generations, whereas maladaptive traits are likely to be reproduced in smaller numbers or to die out altogether.

Some physical anthropologists, as noted earlier, examine the fossil remains of our evolutionary ancestors to study human evolution (see Chapter 3). Others (primatologists) observe our existing cousins. Today's monkeys and apes are not our ancestors, but they are *descended from our ancestors*, and they can tell us a great deal about how our ancestors behaved and what their physical bodies were like. To study human evolution, observation of our living cousins can be combined with information, especially fossilized bones, derived directly from creatures who actually *were* our ancient ancestors and other relatives.

Archaeology

Archaeology is the study of past societies and their cultural characteristics through the systematic examination of the material remains their participants have left behind. Another way to think about it is to say that archaeology is the cultural anthropology of dead people. Because the people are dead, we cannot participate in their societies or observe their subsistence activities or religious rituals. Instead, we have to look at what is left after the participants in the culture have died, and their culture, itself, has radically changed or even become extinct. The material remnants of a culture include buildings, tools, cooking and storage pots, grave goods, animal and human bones, and even remnants of animal and vegetable foodstuffs.

Many archaeologists focus on societies that did not have a written language, but this is not always the case. Most of us are familiar with archaeology done in Egypt, Mesopotamia, and elsewhere in the Near East, Europe, and Asia. Many of these societies *did* have written language, although some of the writing systems could not at first be decoded. Even after many of these writing systems have been deciphered, archaeology continues to be a rich source of information about the lives of ancient peoples.

There are some groups, like the Maya of southern Mexico, Guatemala, and Belize, whose carved inscriptions were not believed by many scholars to be

genuine writing systems until after World War II. But since that time, archaeologists from several countries, including the United States and the former Soviet Union, have come to realize that the Maya in fact *did* have a full-fledged system of writing, and their inscriptions can now be read. Other groups, like the ancient residents of the Indus Valley in what is now Pakistan, or the Etruscans, northern neighbors of the ancient Romans, had writing systems that have never been deciphered. We must therefore rely almost exclusively on traditional archaeological remains for our information about these peoples.

There is also a special division of archaeology referred to as "historical archaeology." This study focuses on the material remains of contemporary or relatively recent societies, aiming to determine what these remains can tell us about human culture that written records do not. Historical archaeology can tell us, for example, how the early Pilgrims actually lived in the Plymouth Colony in what is now Massachusetts.

Finally, there are two aspects of archaeology that make it a bit different from cultural anthropology, in addition to the fact that its informants are things rather than people. One is the focus on technical methods necessary to extract as much information as possible from the silent stones, bones, and artifacts (human-made items) that are the primary sources of archaeological information. The second is the great time depth that archaeology can cover. This time depth permits archaeologists to make comprehensive statements about regularities in the development of cultural systems.

One final category of anthropology is **applied anthropology,** which is covered in the last chapter of this book. It is the application, or use, of the principles and findings of anthropology whether these are in cultural anthropology, physical anthropology, archaeology or linguistics. Applied anthropologists work in a variety of contexts, including criminal investigation, global health, government policy, and institutional planning. While the findings of academic anthropology form the basis of applied anthropology, insights from the practical work of applied anthropology have also enriched academic anthropology.

THE CONCEPT OF CULTURE

As noted earlier, anthropology draws from a broad range of intellectual and methodological traditions. But however varied the interests of anthropologists, and however divergent the subdisciplinary paths they follow, most anthropologists would agree that the single most important concept that binds us all together and unifies anthropology as a discipline is the concept of **culture**.

The term "culture" is derived from the Latin word *cultura,* which referred to the "cultivated" lifeways or practices of a group of people. It was not a technical or learned term for the Romans, and people did not worry much about defining it. As the word developed in English and other modern Western languages, it was increasingly used, as it had been by the Romans, to distinguish the practices of one's own group from those of others. Distinctions were (and often still are) made between people like *us* (whoever *we* may be), who are cultured or have culture, and people like *them* (whoever *they* may be), who are uncultured or have no culture. This is *not* what anthropologists mean when they use the term "culture." Of course, we now know that *all* people have culture. It is one of the consequences of the biological makeup of modern humans (*Homo sapiens sapiens*), and of our human and protohuman ancestors for several million years.

Another common use of the term "culture" has to do with the activities of high-status groups or elite individuals. According to this usage, ballet, classical music, Renaissance paintings, and novels whose authors win prizes are part of "culture," but dancing in clubs, hip hop music, graffiti, and romance novels are not. To distinguish this way of using the term "culture" from the way anthropologists use it, some people prefer to talk about "high" culture when they are discussing high status artistic endeavors.

Figure 1.1 (left): Luciano Pavarotti (1935–2007). A renowned Italian operatic tenor, Pavarotti's dress and demeanor demonstrate and reinforce the appeal of opera as a primarily high status musical form. (right): Singers in the rock band Kiss. Their appearance is calculated to critique conventional cultural norms and appeal to young people.

Having spent some time discussing what anthropologists do *not* mean by the term "culture," let us now turn to an exploration of what they *do* mean. As you can well imagine for a term of such central importance to the discipline of anthropology, there have been many definitions proposed. In 1952 Alfred L. Kroeber and another distinguished anthropologist, Clyde Kluckhohn, published a critical review of 166 definitions of "culture," and of course, other definitions have been developed in the half century since then. But the definition that has been the most influential, and that continues to provide an excellent jumping-off point for a discussion of culture is the definition devised by British anthropologist E. B. Tylor in his 1871 book, *The Origins of Culture*. Many anthropologists writing and teaching today learned Tylor's definition while they were in school, and many of us can still recite the definition word for word. Tylor's first-ever anthropological definition of culture stated that culture is

> that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.

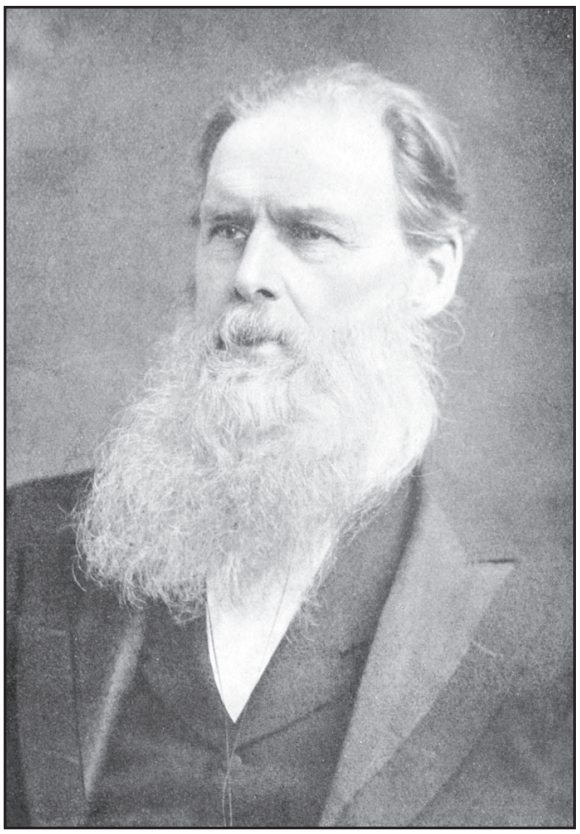

Figure 1.2 Edward B. Tylor (1832–1917). English anthropologist.

There are two noteworthy elements of Tylor's definition. First, it refers to culture as a "complex whole," or in today's terminology, an integrated system. That is, Tylor viewed the various aspects of culture as encompassing all the beliefs and practices of a particular social group, and as being related to each other, rather than merely happening to occur together. Second, Tylor tells us that the elements of culture are "acquired by man as a member of society." That

is, culture is *learned*, rather than "naturally" or genetically encoded. Humans acquire particular cultural practices and beliefs as a result of growing up in a society with those practices and beliefs, a process referred to as **enculturation**. Through enculturation Navajo children learn that it is rude to look people in the face when speaking to them, and Euro-American children learn that it is polite to do so. Enculturation allows women in some parts of Mali (Africa) to walk comfortably around their villages as they do daily chores, dressed in an ankle length skirt with no blouse. These same women would never dream of displaying their legs, like American women, whose enculturation has allowed them to go to class or the supermarket in shorts, but prevents them from displaying their naked breasts in public. People do *not* develop these specific traits simply because they are biologically Navajo, Euro-American, or Malian.

Figure 1.3 (left) Tahitian woman in long skirt. Her uncovered breasts but covered legs illustrates a conception of modesty different from that in contemporary metropolitan societies. Painting by John Webber (1751–1793). (right) Miniskirt. Note that her uncovered legs but covered breasts conform to contemporary metropolitan notions of female modesty (as long as the legs are not too uncovered).

Author: Ed Uthman. Wikipedia CC by –SA 2.0

They develop the traits because they are **enculturated** to particular beliefs and practices; they acquire them as members of their societies.

Today, especially in an age of transnational adoptions, the notion that culture is learned rather than genetically encoded does not seem strange to most of us. But in Tylor's time most Europeans and Euro-Americans believed that there was some "natural" tendency for people to develop into practitioners of their native culture, regardless of how they were raised. So, according to this line of reasoning, a Euro-American baby girl kidnapped in a raid by "savage" Indians and raised with other tribal children to adulthood (something that did occasionally occur), was believed by many people to retain her "natural" sense of "civilized" decorum and physical "modesty." And an infant from a non-European group who was raised to adulthood as a European (something that happened more frequently) was believed to retain something of his or her original "primitive" culture, though she or he had never had any contact with it.

These beliefs are completely false, though they were once staples of popular fiction. The belief that specific cultural traits were biologically encoded in individuals was for centuries quite strong. It was not uncommon for people to talk unselfconsciously about the lazy, drunken Irish, for example, or the money-loving Jews, to mention just two Western ethnic groups. Such beliefs were once so strong that many people also believed that some cultural traits were genetically encoded into the members of **subcultural** groups (distinctive divisions that exist within a single, complex culture) based on such phenomena as wealth, occupation, or social class. There was also at one time considerable discussion, especially in the nineteenth century, of "criminal culture," which was often believed to be genetically transmitted from generation to generation. This kind of erroneous thinking, which has sometimes been accompanied by pseudoscientific "evidence," is part of what gave rise to genocidal atrocities such as those of the Nazis.

It is easy to see, then, that Tylor's statement that culture is "acquired by man as a member of society" was very important, even revolutionary, at the time in which it first appeared. And if it disturbs us in the twenty-first century that Tylor said "man" instead of "humans," we should remember that *he* was a member of *his* own culture, which by today's standards was seriously male-oriented and male-dominant.

Tylor's statement that culture is *learned*, not *biologically encoded,* actually took many decades to be generally accepted, even by scholars. However educated they were, and however they appreciated universal qualities inherent in all humans, many anthropologists in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, simply could not shake off their value judgments, and never quite

lost the belief that there was something inherently superior about their own culture that was linked to some (usually unspecified) feature of biological superiority.

Culture as Abstraction

Most anthropologists tend to think of culture, itself, as an abstraction. According to this view, concrete material culture, religious rituals, and so on are perceptible expressions of culture, but culture itself is abstract. This abstraction is a complex web of conscious, semiconscious, and unconscious rules that all normal adults carry around in their heads to direct their actions and their interpretations. Infants start out with none of these rules, but they begin very quickly to acquire them. As children, we are all enculturated to the rules of our own societies, sometimes simply by example (whom to smile at and when, for example), and at other times by explicit teaching (how to milk a goat or weave clothes, or when to wear a necktie). Still other cultural lessons are absorbed in a variety of ways that may be less specific.

Anthropologists talk about the **worldview**, or ***Weltanschauung*** (the German word for the same term) that participants in a society absorb as an important part of their culture. In the United States, for example, it is generally believed that the universe is a relatively predictable place (and in some people's view, governed by a loving and all-powerful god). Most middle class Americans are oriented toward the future and change rather than the past and tradition. They tend to see themselves as apart from and in command over nature. They believe that, with effort, all people can better their socioeconomic situation. And they feel deeply that the interests and aspirations of the individual should take precedence over those of the group as a whole. How do people in the United States acquire this worldview? It is the result of conscious teaching on the part of parents and other elders; it is the result of the stories in books, movies, and even the songs of popular culture; and it results from being rewarded for "good" behavior and punished for "bad" by parents and others who share this particular worldview.

Of course, culture is enacted slightly differently by all of its practitioners. For example, women may have some different beliefs, practices and perspectives on life from those of men, and generally in any culture, older people have views somewhat different from those of young people. But however much variation there is within each group, what transcends these differences to bind the group together and provide its members with a coherent, integrated, and meaningful view of the universe is their culture. North Americans go through

their daily lives in particular ways and understand the significance of their activities and those of others because of the cultural blueprint they carry around in their heads, just as residents of New Guinea do, only the blueprints are different. And though these blueprints result in concrete phenomena—from what to eat and what not to eat, to structures built to house religious rituals, and to whom one should and should not marry—the complete set of blueprints for any society, that is, the complete cultural system, is an abstraction.

The idea that culture is an abstraction may make some people uncomfortable, as though if culture is an abstraction, it cannot then be "real." But flash yourself back through time to your high school geometry class. Remember all those theorems that had to do with circles and triangles, and all those postulates and axioms having to do with the nature of a point (which has position but no length or breadth) or of a line (which has length but no breadth). What **Euclid,** the Greek mathematician-philosopher who developed geometry, was talking about was a whole collection of *abstractions.* In actual practice, no one can generate a point that has no length or breadth, any more than someone can produce a line that has no breadth. But these abstractions are necessary to build Euclid's system of geometry. With this geometry, we can understand some aspects of the universe into which we would otherwise have no insight. In addition, an understanding of geometry is essential to engage in a lot of practical activities, like building a temple that does not fall down or a surveying a field accurately.

There are many cultural rules that are as likely not to be followed as they are to be followed, but the participants in the culture still consider them rules, as do anthropologists. This is rather like the point and the line, which in real life actually *do* have dimensions their abstract definitions say they do not have. Take, for example, the cultural rule in many Arab societies that says that people should marry their **patrilateral parallel cousins** (that is, their father's brother's child). This is an example of what is called "preferential marriage," (discussed in Chapter 6). Like most preferential marriage patterns, the Arab system is followed in under half of all Arab marriages for a variety of reasons, mostly the lack of an appropriate candidate. But even when a person does not marry a patrilateral parallel cousin, he or she is likely to marry another close patrilateral relative about whom the family is well informed. This will ensure that the bride can expect good care from her husband, the husband can expect a virtuous wife who will protect his honor and that of his family, and the family's property will not be broken up. The point here is that whether or not a specific cultural rule is followed in the same way by all of a society's participants, the construction of a generalized pattern of a culture—in effect,

an abstraction—is meaningful to participants and can illuminate important cultural principles and patterns to anthropologists. Without this process of abstraction, it would be difficult to see the significant structural outlines of a culture, just as without Euclid's abstract definitions of geometric elements and shapes it would have been difficult or impossible to create the philosophy (as the Greeks called it) of geometry.

Culture, like a Euclidean line or a perfect isosceles triangle, is an abstraction. But does this mean it is unreal? No more than those Euclidean geometric figures can be said to be unreal. Though they may not exist in their pristine forms in everyday life, their **heuristic** (illuminating or teaching) value is inestimable. One might almost say that they are *more* real that what occurs in nature. Similarly, though no specific culture exists in its "classic" or "perfect" form, the blueprints that participants of every culture carry around in their heads (and that anthropologists describe) may seem to members of a culture to be *more* real than the actual human institutions and behaviors.

The Emic/Etic Distinction

In its analysis of cultural systems, one of the more valuable of anthropology's contributions to this endeavor is the distinction between **emic** and **etic** perspectives. *Emic* refers to the view of a culture from within—that is, how a particular culture's practices, customs, beliefs and so on look from the perspective of its inside members. *Etic* refers to the perspective of an outside observer and analyst of the culture; etic is (or seeks to be) a scientific perspective. This emic/etic distinction in cultural anthropology was introduced by linguist Kenneth Pike (1967), who drew a comparison between culture and language. The term phon*etic* refers to the full range of speech sounds that humans make in their languages. There is a limited number of these sounds (in all, around 107 basic consonants and vowels, along with some modifications) and they can be scientifically described and measured according to how they are made (see Chapter 7). Each particular language uses only a subset of these sounds to form its words. The term phon*emic* refers to those sounds relevant within a particular language (and to rules governing their occurrence). So, for example, the French language uses a particular "u" sound (as in "*rue*" [street]) not found in English. We would say, then, that this phonetic "u" sound is phonemically relevant in French but phonemically irrelevant in English (it has no use in creating meaning within the English language). A reverse example of a phonetic unit that is phonemically relevant in English but not in French would be the "th" sound (as in the word "those").

The extension of this distinction from linguistics to the realm of culture was ingenious on Pike's part and useful to anthropologists (although, as we will see, it carries some problems of its own). Examples are endless. Medical science classifies and diagnoses human ailments scientifically; this is etic. Cultural groups whose members suffer from these very same afflictions might classify and diagnose them in a different way—along with ideas compatible with a belief system they may understand these afflictions in terms of, say, witchcraft, or bad air. This is emic. All human groups recognize relatives (etic) but the way in which they understand, classify and relate to these relationships varies considerably cross-culturally (emic). Indeed, even the simplest acts or gestures can reveal an emic/ etic distinction. For example, a public hug (an etically describable act) between an unrelated man and woman is in some cultures (as in North America) understood emically as an affectionate greeting or farewell gesture. In some other cultures (for example among Orthodox Jewish people in Israel) the same act would be interpreted emically as a flagrantly sexual encounter or possibly a sexual assault of the women by the man.

Thus emic refers to the internal interpretation or meaning of any element within a cultural system; and it is a strong tenet among many anthropologists that to truly understand another culture, one must try to understand it emically, from within. Emic and etic refer to different angles from which to understand phenomena—internal and external. They are different perspectives and not necessarily in conflict. They can both provide explanations of phenomena. An emic explanation of a cultural practice is the reason given for it by cultural members (e.g. "we do this to please our ancestors"). An etic explanation may invoke economic or ecological considerations, psychosocial motives or any number of other factors to give an explanation of human cultural behavior and throught, often referring to factors of which inside culture members are unaware. Both kinds of explanation may be simultaneously relevant.

One value of the emic/etic distinction is that it helps us to avoid unwarranted misinterpretations of others' cultural beliefs and practices. Most people will easily misinterpret another's cultural belief or practice by naively assuming that their own emic view of a situation (the view from within *their* own culture) is a credible etic (scientific) view. For example, a North American observer might see in a particular culture (in Nepal or Mexico for example) a man take a broom and strike his wife with it. This observer might quickly, as a gut reaction, interpret the situation as a clear case of domestic abuse because that is what it would be in the observer's own culture, that is, from the observer's emic perspective. But after a few discussions with local people this outsider would learn that emically in the observed culture the man with the broom

is trying to "sweep out" an illness in his wife (using a broom infused with healing properties by a local healer). The man is trying to cure his wife, not punish or hurt her. In this case the outside observer has elevated his or her emic view to an etic level, holding that his or her own cultural view is the correct, real, or scientific one.

Of course, the analogy between culture and language is imperfect. We can very well classify and precisely define every possible human speech sound in linguistics, but we cannot know the full range of possible human cultural behaviors and beliefs. We can also see exactly how different human speech sounds operate inside languages, but we cannot always know so well what different cultural behaviors and ideas really mean inside a culture. In addition to this, some anthropologists contend that a true etic level does not exist because, they maintain, science itself is a cultural construction, an emic in its own right. They claim that scientific objectivity is not possible in the study of culture, or, for some, the study of anything. These issues aside, the emic/etic distinction in anthropology is a handy tool with which to begin a fresh, new look at human culture and the distinction between an insider's view of a cultural practice or perspective and an outsider's view, as will be apparent throughout this book.

ETHNOCENTRISM

Earlier in this chapter we placed the principle of cultural relativism within our definition of anthropology. **Ethnocentrism** is the reverse of cultural relativism. It is the notion that one's own culture is the correct one, the normal one, the yardstick by which all other cultures should be judged. Ethnocentrism is the viewing of another culture through the lens of one's own cultural system. Ethnocentric observers are inclined to consider other cultures as "weird" or "disgusting." Ethnocentric people usually find it hard to believe that members of other societies actually *like* their cultural systems, and they tend to believe that *if* people in other societies *do* like their own cultures, it is only because they "don't know any better."

All societies, from the largest to the smallest, are ethnocentric to some extent. We are all aware of offensive terms that some people in our own society apply to other ethnic groups. We can see the same phenomenon when we observe that many tribal peoples refer to themselves alone as "people," while they attach another, sometimes pejorative, term to outsiders. The group Euro-Americans call "Navajo" refer to themselves as *Dine,* which means "people," while all other people can be referred to as *anaa***,** or "enemy." Many examples

of ethnocentric thinking concern food practices. So, for example, Americans generally believe it is wrong, cruel, and disgusting to eat dog, while South Asian Hindus, especially high **caste** Hindus (those who have the highest status and condition of ritual purity) believe it is immoral to eat cattle. Some Americans used to refer to Germans as "krauts" (cabbages), because of a supposed German fondness for eating cabbages. French people were sometimes referred to as "frogs," from a real or imagined French liking for frogs' legs. And Catholics were sometimes called "mackerel snappers" because until the 1960s they were required to avoid eating meat on Fridays.

It is easy enough to understand ethnocentrism (and to counter it with cultural relativism) when the specific examples have to do with food or names for groups. But other more far-reaching issues concern fundamental morality or universal human decency. If we look, for example, at issues of crime and punishment, especially capital punishment and torture, we see an illustration of the complexity of ethnocentrism and its power to involve the deepest human emotions.

Today, in the early twenty-first century, there is probably more diversity of cultural opinion about crime and punishment than at any time in the recent past. Most significantly, people in the United States have split with their European cousins over the issue of capital punishment. Though 14 states and the District of Columbia do not practice execution of criminals, 36 states do. This stands in sharp contrast to countries that are members of the European Union (and some others, like Mexico), all of which are opposed to capital punishment and will not even extradite criminal suspects to countries (like the United States) where they may be liable to execution. There is a striking difference between the cultural outlook of those countries that permit capital punishment and those that do not. On the one hand there is the widespread belief within the United States that capital punishment is sometimes morally justified (or even required); that it is beneficial to society as a whole; and that the vengeance it offers the survivors of murder victims is a legitimate function of the penalty.

On the other hand, there is the belief among the members of the European Union that capital punishment is simply immoral and unacceptable. And yet even people in the United States who accept capital punishment can be appalled at the way the penalty is carried out in some conservative Islamic countries, where beheading and stoning are employed, and for behaviors, like adultery or homosexual activity, that in the United States not only would not merit capital punishment, but are not even considered criminal. What is common to people from all cultures when it comes to such deeply felt issues as crime and punishment is that the majority of them believe their own cultural

practices are not only appropriate for themselves, but profoundly correct for the whole of humanity. People, as Herodotus noted, are generally convinced that the way they do things is the right way to do them, but only with respect to some issues is this felt so deeply and with such strong moral force.

Since the nineteenth century, anthropologists in the United States have felt a particular obligation to struggle against ethnocentrism. Part of this was undoubtedly due to the character of early American anthropologists, especially Franz Boas, a German Jewish immigrant who advocated cultural relativity and who is considered the founder of American anthropology. Part of it was due to the fact that some early anthropologists, like Boas, had experienced ethnic prejudice, themselves. Another reason is that many early American anthropologists worked closely with American Indian peoples for whom they developed empathy. These anthropologists often had a marked sense of the moral difficulty of their situation as members of the group that now controlled former Indian lands. All of these factors may have moderated ethnocentric tendencies among these researchers, but eventually, these anthropologists simply came to realize that ethnocentrism got in the way of "doing anthropology." That is, they came to see that if anthropologists haul along with them the idea that the assumptions, practices, and institutions of their own culture are the "normal," "natural," "correct," or intellectually or psychologically most "advanced" ones, they would blind themselves to the cultural realities of the very societies they aimed to explore and understand.

Anthropology offers the perspective of cultural relativism as a pathway to countering ethnocentrism. But, one may ask, are there *no* limits to cultural relativism? Perhaps we can agree not to make negative judgments about groups who advocate hallucinogenic religious rituals, like the Yanomamo people of the Amazon basin, or others who required men to practice **subincision**, which involves slicing the underside of the penis lengthwise, as some Australian Aborigines used to do. After all, it is *their* brains and *their* penises. But do we also have to agree that if a culture says that entire ethnic groups should be destroyed, this is fine if it works for the people who practice it? This is actually a good question, and a hard one to answer.

What about, then, the cultural practice of genocide, the destruction of a particular category of people simply because its members belong to that group? To most of us the best known example of genocide occurred in the 1930s and 1940s, when Adolf Hitler preached the destruction of Jews, Gypsies, Slavs, and other groups (including homosexuals and the handicapped) on the grounds that they were intrinsically, "naturally," evil and/or genetically inferior. According to Hitler's argument, the Jews' inherent evil had resulted

in numerous economic and political disasters in Germany, and the salvation of the country was to a great extent dependent upon the total annihilation of the Jewish people. Because Germany had been humiliated by its defeat in the First World War and was still paying the economic price for this disaster, many Germans eagerly sought a scapegoat, some easily identifiable group to blame for their loss.

Yes, there are limits to cultural relativism, and genocide is certainly one of them. But, then, is there a difference between Hitler's genocide (and there have certainly been others) and the practice of arranged child marriage in India? Most anthropologists would say yes to this question. On the other hand, were we to ask about female genital mutilation as practiced in some societies (and which threatens the health and reproductive abilities of women) we would see a divergence of opinion among anthropologists. Though the general principle of cultural relativism is important and should be preserved, there are limits beyond which cultural relativism ceases to be tolerance of variation and

Figure 1.4 The limits of cultural relativity: Nazi concentration camp. Prisoners in Mauthausen concentration camp (Austria, 1945), liberated by US troops.
Source: National Archives and Records Administration.

becomes intolerable inhumanity. The dividing line, however, may be blurry and subject to disagreement.

Of course, anthropologists are not the only people who have ever had the idea that understanding other peoples requires a certain amount of energy in suspending the application of one's own values, expectations, and behaviors. We all know the saying "When in Rome, do as the Romans do." Another relevant quote we might consider is far less well known. It comes, ironically, from an involuntary immigrant to ancient Rome. Publius Terentius Afer (ca. 190–158 B.C.E.), whom we know today as **Terence**, was a North African slave whose brilliance as a playwright won him his freedom at an early age. Though few people read Terence's plays today, a single one of his quotations is widely remembered: "*Homo sum; humani nil a me alienum puto*" (I am a man; I think nothing human foreign to me). It is an insightful thought, and one that should be engraved over the entrance to every anthropology department!

SUMMARY

Anthropology is the empirical study of humans, both living and dead, both contemporary and extinct. Whatever the subdiscipline of anthropology (physical anthropology, archaeology, linguistics, cultural anthropology, or applied anthropology), the central unifying focus is the concept of culture. Having discussed the discipline of anthropology and the nature of culture, we are now in a position to review the five myths that began this chapter.

Myth #1 Anthropology is the study of "exotic" cultures.

As we have seen from the examples cited in this chapter, anthropology examines all kinds of cultures. Certainly, anthropology began as the study of nonwestern societies. But in the more than a century and a half in which anthropology has existed, it has come to be distinguished not only by the groups it studies, but even more by the way in which it studies communities, and the kinds of questions it asks. As we have seen, anthropology is now as likely to turn its eye to communities in London or New York as to societies in the South Pacific, Africa, or Asia. And not only does anthropology examine communities all over the world, it also compares the information from all of these societies.

Myth #2 Because the word "culture" can refer to elite forms of expression, art, and entertainment (like ballet and classical music), not all human groups have culture.

While it is true that activities like ballet and classical music are part of Western culture, so are rap music, professional football, and, in the United States, having a turkey dinner on Thanksgiving. The problem with the term stems primarily from the fact that the word "culture" is used in different ways by different people and in different circumstances. When anthropologists use the term "culture," it refers to the whole collection of values, beliefs, and practices that a society shares. Culture is a characteristic of all human groups. No human society is devoid of culture, however different its beliefs and practices may be from those of another group. Though humans are not *born* with culture, they are all born with the capacity to create and participate in it.

Myth #3 There are no characteristics shared by all human groups, and so no way of making general statements about human cultural systems.

Certainly, human societies display a tremendous amount of variation. Some permit men to have multiple wives at a time, while others do not. Some believe that women who display their breasts in public are immoral, while others assume that this is a perfectly sensible way to dress. But all societies have rules about whom one can and should marry, and all societies have rules about what kind of presentation of oneself is decent. The more we come to know about different societies as we meet them in subsequent chapters of this book, the more we will not only come to understand why certain cultural practices exist in particular societies, but also we will come to understand that many apparently very different practices have powerful underlying similarities. We will ultimately come to understand the organizing principle of anthropology, that though cultural systems are different everywhere, the people whose lives they guide are profoundly the same.

Myth #4 Some cultures are inherently superior to others**.**

After going through a lengthy discussion of cultural relativism, it seems unlikely that any reader of this text would try to argue for the inherent superiority of any one culture over others. The only exceptions to this anthropo-

logical principle are societies in which there is systematic cruelty practiced against a specific segment of the populations simply because they belong to that category. In considering this issue, we need to remember to distinguish those actions and institutions that make us uncomfortable or that we would find painful to live with, from those that are simply and obviously cruel by any standard external to the societies that practices them. People in other societies may find comfort, meaning, and security in practices that outsiders would find intolerable, but no slave or member of a persecuted category would defend slavery or persecution.

QUESTIONS FOR THOUGHT AND REFLECTION

1. Sometimes anthropologists (including the authors of this book) become a little sloppy with their language and use the words "culture" and "society" interchangeably. But there is an important difference between the two. How would you describe the distinction?
2. We state in this chapter that culture is an abstraction rather than a concrete set of behaviors, institutions, or artifacts. Not all anthropologists find the notion of culture as an abstraction to be particularly useful. What do you think? Construct an argument for culture as an abstraction and then for culture as a concrete phenomenon. What do you see as the strengths and weaknesses of each approach?
3. Suppose that the move to extend the school year and school day in the United States gained steam, and politicians and school administrators across the country decided to lengthen daily instruction by two hours a day and the months of instruction by six weeks a year. This is an example of culture change to which there would be very strong reactions. Describe the responses to this change, both pro and con. What groups would be in favor of the change and why? What groups would be opposed to the change, and why? What basic cultural values would this change be based on, and what basic cultural values would it disrupt?
4. Select from a society other than your own a cultural practice about which most people in the United States would feel very uncomfortable. Describe it, and explain why these North Americans would be uncomfortable about it. How do you think a member of the society that has this cultural practice would defend it?

5. In most societies there are distinct differences of opinion between young people and old about some cultural practices. In some societies these differences are expressed fairly straightforwardly, as they are in the United States In other societies, the differences are much more repressed, as young people must always acknowledge the superior authority of their elders. Why do you think these differences of opinion are so likely to exist? Can you make a general statement about the nature of these intergenerational disagreements? What are two or three intergenerational cultural disagreements that persist in the United States? What do you think accounts for them?
6. What was your idea of anthropology before you began this class? How has it changed since you learned more about the discipline? In most colleges and universities there are fewer anthropologists than there are professors in other social sciences. Why do you think this is true?

ENDNOTES

[1]At the same time, by the 1990s anthropology, like many other disciplines, had become engulfed in a wave of postmodernism. For the social sciences, postmodernism is an intellectual movement that asserts that objective knowledge of the world is not possible. It opposes itself to the "modernist" vision that, since the Enlightenment, has been governed by notions of scientific detachment and rationalism, which were considered capable of bringing forth progress and, ultimately, the betterment of humanity.

By contrast, postmodernism rejects all claims to truth and, in its more extreme forms, is anti-science. Because with postmodernism, claims to objectivity and knowledge are not possible, no one mode of knowing, or subjectivity, has any claim to superiority over another. The postmodern movement continues to inspire strong debate within anthropology. For a critique of postmodernism in anthropology see D'Andrade (2000).

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