Anthropology (Anth101)
Credit Hours: 3

Unit One
1. Introducing Anthropology and its Subject Matter
1.1 Definition, Scope and Subject Matter of Anthropology
1.1.1. Concepts in Anthropology

- The term anthropology is a compound of two Greek words, ‘anthropos’ and ‘logos’, which can be translated as ‘human being/mankind’ and ‘reason/study/science’, respectively.
- So, anthropology means ‘reason about

What distinguishes anthropology from other disciplines?

- Anthropology is the study of people—their origins, their development, and contemporary variations, wherever and whenever they have been found.

- It is a broad scientific discipline dedicated to the comparative study of humans as a group, from its first appearance on earth to its present stage of development.

- Of all the disciplines that study humans, anthropology is by far the broadest in scope.

In more specific terms, anthropology is a science which:

- Investigates the strategies for living that are learned and shared by people as members of human social groups;

- Examines the characteristics that human beings share as members of one species (homo sapiens) and the diverse ways that people live in different environments;

- Analyses the products of social groups - material objects (material cultures) and non-material creations (religion/beliefs, social

As a matter of simplicity and brevity, anthropology primarily offers two kinds of insight:

- First, the discipline produces knowledge about the actual biological and cultural variations in the world;

- second, anthropology offers methods and theoretical perspectives enabling the practitioner to explore, compare, understand and solve these varied expressions of the human condition.

1.1.2. The Historical Development of Anthropology

- Like the other social sciences, anthropology is a fairly recent discipline. It was given its present shape during the twentieth century.

- If we restrict ourselves to anthropology as a scientific discipline, some would trace its roots back to the European Enlightenment, during the eighteenth century;

- Others would claim that anthropology did not arise as a science until the 1850s.

- Yet others would argue that anthropological research in its present-day sense only

- It is beyond doubt, however, that anthropology, considered as the science of humanity, originated in the region we commonly but inaccurately call ‘the West’, notably in three or four ‘Western’ countries: France, Great Britain, the USA and, until the Second World War, Germany.

- Historically speaking, this is a European discipline, and its practitioners, like those of all European sciences, occasionally like to trace its roots back to the ancient Greeks.

- The present academic anthropology has its roots in the works and ideas of the great ancient and Medieval Greek, Roman, and Hebrew philosophers and social thinkers.

- These people were interested in the nature, origin

- Generally speaking, anthropology as an academic discipline was born during the 19th century, out of the intellectual atmosphere of Enlightenment.
- By the late 1870s, anthropology was beginning to emerge as a profession.
- A major impetus for its growth was the expansion of western colonial powers and their consequent desire to better understand the peoples living under colonial domination.
- Early anthropologists mainly studied small communities in technologically simple societies. Such societies are often called by various names: “traditional”, “non-industrialized &/or simple societies”.
- Anthropologists of the early 1900s emphasized the study of social & cultural differences among human groups. Here, many of the indigenous peoples of non-western world & their social & cultural features were

- By the mid-1900, however, anthropologists attempted to discover universal human patterns and the common bio psychological traits that bind all human beings.

- This approach is called ethnology. Ethnology aims at the comparative understanding and analysis of different ethnic groups across time and space.

- In Ethiopia, professional anthropologists have been studying culture and society on a more intensive level only since the late 1950s.

- Almost inevitably, the initial emphasis was on ethnography, the description of specific

1.1.3. Scope and subject matter of anthropology

- In terms of the spatial dimension, anthropology studies from Arctic to Desert, from Megapolis to hunting gathering areas. The discipline covers all aspects of human ways of life experiences and existence, as humans live in a social group.

- It touches all aspect of human conditions as far as there is a relation between human beings and natural environment and man and man.

- As one of the foremost anthropologists of the twentieth century, Claude Lévi-Strauss, has expressed it: ‘Anthropology has humanity as its object of research, but unlike the other human sciences, it tries to grasp its object through its most diverse manifestations’.

- Although anthropologists have wide-ranging and

- Anthropologists strive for an understanding of the biological and cultural origins and evolutionary development of the species.

- They are concerned with all humans, both past and present, as well as their behavior patterns, thought systems, and material possessions.

- In short, anthropology aims to describe, in the broadest sense, what it means to be human (Peacock, 1986).

1.2. Sub-fields of anthropology

- Accordingly, anthropology has often categorized into four major subfields: Physical/Biological Anthropology, Archeology, Linguistic Anthropology and Socio-Cultural Anthropology.

1.2.1. Physical/Biological Anthropology

- Physical anthropology is the branch of anthropology most closely related to the natural sciences, particularly biology; that is why it is often called biological anthropology.
- Unlike comparative biologists, physical anthropologists study how culture and

• Physical anthropology is essentially concerned with two broad areas of investigation: human evolution and genetics.

• Human evolution is the study of the gradual processes of simple forms into more differentiated structures in hominid.

• It is interested in reconstructing the evolutionary record of the human species using fossils/bones.

• Human evolution is further divided into two specialties: Paleo anthropology and Primatology.

• Palaeo anthropology (paleo meaning “old”) is the study of human biological evolution through the analysis of fossil remains from prehistoric times to determine the missing link that connect modern human

- Primatology studies about primates or recent human ancestors to explain human evolution. Primatologists study the anatomy and social behavior of such non-human primate species as gorillas and chimpanzees in an effort to gain clues about our own evolution as a species.

- Human genetics concerns to investigate how and why the physical traits of contemporary human populations vary throughout the world.

- It focuses to examine the genetic materials of an organism such as DNA and RNA.

- In addition, genetic studies are crucial in understanding –how evolution works and plays important role in identifying the genetic source of some hereditary disease like sickle cell anemia and cystic

1.2.2. Archaeological Anthropology

- Archaeological anthropology or simply archaeology studies the ways of lives of past peoples by excavating and analyzing the material culture/physical remains (arte facts, features and eco-facts) they left behind.

- Arte facts are material remains made and used by the past peoples and that can be removed from the site and taken to the laboratory for further analysis.

- Tools, ornaments, arrowheads, coins, and fragments of pottery are examples of artifacts. Features are like artifacts, are made or modified by past people, but they cannot be readily carried away from the site.

- Archaeological features include such things as house foundations, ancient buildings, fireplaces, steles, and postholes. Eco-facts are non arte factual, organic and environmental remains such as soil, animal bones, and plant remains that were not made or altered by

- Archaeology has also its own subfields or areas of specialties. The most important ones are Prehistoric Archaeology and Historical Archaeology.
- Prehistoric archaeology investigates human prehistory and prehistoric cultures. It focuses on entire period between 6,000 years ago and the time of the first stone tools (the first artifacts), around 2.5 million years ago, is called prehistory.
- Historic archaeologists help to reconstruct the cultures of people who used writing and about whom historical documents have been written. Historic archaeology takes advantage of the fact that about 6,000 years ago, some

We Ethiopian have very glorious past. Area logical findings in North, south, east and western part of the country have shown our county belonged to those countries which have old civilization.

1.2.3 Linguistic Anthropology

- Linguistic anthropology or anthropological linguistics studies human language as a cultural resource and speaking as a cultural practice in its social and cultural context, across space and time.

- Linguistic anthropology, which studies contemporary human languages as well as those of the past, is divided into four distinct branches or areas of research: Structural or Descriptive Linguistics, Historical Linguistics, Ethno-Linguistics, and Socio-linguistics.

- Structural /Descriptive Linguistics:- studies the structure of linguistic patterns. It examines sound systems, grammatical systems, and the meanings attached to words in specific languages to understand the structure and set of rules of given language.

- Ethno-linguistics (cultural linguistics):- examines the relationship between language and culture. In any language, certain cultural aspects that are emphasized (such as types of snow among the Inuit, cows among the pastoral Maasai, or automobiles in U.S. culture) are reflected in the vocabulary.

- Historical linguistics:- deals with the emergence of language in general and how specific languages have diverged over time. It focuses on the comparison and classifications of different languages to differentiate the historical links between them.

- Socio-linguistics:- investigates linguistic variation within a given language. No language is a homogeneous system in which everyone speaks just like everyone else. One reason for variation is geography, as in regional dialects and accents

1.2.4 . Socio-Cultural Anthropology

- It is also often called social anthropology or cultural anthropology. Socio-cultural anthropology is the largest sub-fields of anthropology. It deals with human society and culture.

- Society is the group of people who have similar ways of life, but culture is a way of life of a group of people. Society and culture are two sides of the same coin.

- Socio-cultural anthropology describes, analyzes, interprets, and explains social, cultural and material life of contemporary human societies.

- It studies the social (human relations), symbolic or nonmaterial (religious, language, and any other symbols) and material (all man-made objects) lives of living peoples

- Socio-cultural anthropologists engage in two aspects of study: Ethnography (based on field work) and Ethnology (based on cross-cultural comparison).

- Ethnography:- provides a comprehensive account of a particular community, society, or culture. It describes the features of specific cultures in as much detail as possible including local behavior, beliefs, customs, social life, economic activities, politics, and religion.

- Ethnology:- is the comparative study of contemporary cultures and societies, wherever they may be found. It examines, interprets, analyzes, and compares the results of ethnography the data gathered in different societies.

- Ethnologists seek to understand both why people today and in the recent past differ in terms of ideas

1.3. Unique (Basic) Features of Anthropology

- Several distinguishing characteristics that identify anthropology from other discipline. Anthropology is unique in its scope, approach, focus and method of study. Anthropology has a broad scope.

- It is interested in all human beings, whether contemporary or past, ''primitive'' or '' civilized'' and that they are interested in many different aspects of humans, including their phenotypic characteristics, family lives, marriages, political systems, economic lives, technology, belief, health care systems, personality types, and languages.

- The second important feature is its approach. In its approach anthropology is holistic, relativistic, and focused one. Holistic in a sense that it looks any phenomena from different vantage points.

- Accordingly, anthropology considers culture, history, language and biology essential to a complete understanding of society. Anthropology seeks to understand human beings as whole organisms who adapt to their environments through a complex

- Anthropology's comparative perspective helps to understand differences and similarities across time and place. Another important perspective is a way of looking at people's ideas. It considers insiders' views as a primary focus of any anthropological inquiry.

- Anthropological studies give attention to how people perceive themselves and understand their world; how a particular group of people explain about their action, or give meaning to their behavior or cultural practices.

- This is what anthropologists call emic perspective. It helps to understand the logic

- Another important unique feature is its research approach. Anthropology is highly dependent on qualitative research to understand the meaning behind any human activity.

- Extended fieldwork, participant observation, in-depth and key informant interviews and focus-group discussion are qualitative research instruments to explore information change and continuities in human societies.

- Focusing more on the local than the big social processes has been another exclusive approach in the discipline. Paying great attention to local or micro-social processes certainly help us to better understand big changes in societies. A detailed account of an event or phenomenon discovers multiple realities in a community.

1.4. Misconceptions about anthropology

- One misconception about anthropology is related to the area of its study. It is said that anthropology is limited to the study of "primitive" societies.
- Indeed, most of the works done by anthropologists during early periods focused on isolated, so called "primitive", small scale societies. However, anthropologists nowadays study most advanced and most complex societies as well.
- Another misconception is that anthropologists only study the rural people and rural areas. As a matter of fact, most of the studies conducted during the formative years (when it undergone a process of development to be developed as a separate fields of study) of the discipline focused on rural areas.
- But now, anthropologists are also interested in the study of urban people and urban areas. There is a

- It is also wrongly misconceived that anthropology is the study/analysis of fossil evidences of the proto-humans like that of Lucy/Dinkeneshe.
- It is true that anthropology is interested in the question of the origin of modern human beings. However, this doesn’t mean that anthropology is all about the study of human evolution.
- It studies both the biological and the cultural aspects of humans and examines the existing human physical and biological variations and cultural diversity.
- It is also misconceived that the purpose of anthropology is to study in order to keep and preserve communities far from development and obsolete cultural practices in museums. Rather, anthropologists’ duties are to support those communities' capacity to empower themselves in development processes. They assist peoples'

1.5. The Relationship between Anthropology and Other Disciplines

- Anthropology is similar with other social sciences such as sociology, psychology, political sciences, economics, history, etc. Anthropology greatly overlaps with these disciplines that study human society. However, anthropology differs from other social sciences and the humanities by its broad scope, unique approach, perspective, unit of analysis and methods used.

- In its scope, anthropology studies humankind in its entirety. In its approach, anthropology studies and analyzes human ways of life holistically, comparatively and in a relativistic manner.

- In its perspective, according to Richard Wilk, anthropology approaches and locates dimensions of people's individual and communal lived experiences.

- The perspective is also fundamentally empirical, naturalistic and ideographic [particularizing] than nomothetic [universalizing] one.

- In its method of research, it is unique in that it undertakes extended fieldwork among the studied community and develops intimate knowledge of the life and social worlds of its study group/society through employing those ethnographic data collection techniques such as participant observation, Key informant interview and focus group discussions.

1.6 . The Contributions of anthropology

- Anthropology has established for itself the task of examining all aspects of humanity for all periods of time and for all parts of the globe.
- Because of the enormity of this task, anthropologists must draw on theories and data from a number of other disciplines in the humanities, the social sciences, and the physical sciences.
- Accordingly, its contributions are immense. By studying anthropology, we get the following benefits, among
others.
- First, the anthropological perspective, with its emphasis on the comparative study of cultures, should lead us to the conclusion that our culture is just one way of life among many found in the world and that it represents one way (among many

- Anthropology also helps us better understand ourselves or our own ways of life. As a mirror of human life, by studying others, we can better understand ourselves. Hence, it gives opportunity to understand and to be critical about the ways of lives of our own community.

- Second, anthropology gives us an insight into different ways and modes of life of human society (social and cultural diversity), which helps to understand the logic and justification behind group behavior and cultural practices.

- Through its distinctive methodology of long-term, intensive, participant-observation research, cultural anthropology offers a unique perspective on how local cultural groups are Reflect your views on the following question. Being introduced to the general subject matter of anthropology and the approaches and

- Because of its relativistic approach, anthropology helps us to be more sensitive to and appreciative of cultural diversity and variability. Anthropology helps us fight against prejudice and discriminations.
- It helps us fight against ethnocentrism; the belief that one's own culture and one's own way of life is superior to others cultural, social and material life. This arises from ignorance about other ethnic groups and their ways of lives.
- Anthropology is also used as a tool for development. Paying attention to local conditions, is crucial to solve community problems. The application of anthropological knowledge and research results have become important element to ensure people’s rights in development and able to sustain projects' life.
- In general, anthropology is able to suggest sound solutions to all things human.For example, it is often