HSPS Tripos, Part I

PAPER GUIDE

SAN 1. SOCIAL ANTHROPOLOGY: THE COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

Paper Coordinator
Professor James Laidlaw (JAL6@cam.ac.uk)

Lecturers

Michaelmas Term
Dr Matei Candea (mc288@cam.ac.uk): Introduction to Anthropological Theory
Dr Andrea Grant (amg68@cam.ac.uk): Identity & Difference
Dr David Sneath (ds114@cam.ac.uk): Identity & Difference

Michaelmas & Lent Terms
Dr Rupert Stasch (rs839@cam.ac.uk): Ethnographic Film

Lent Term
Dr Sian Lazar (sl360@cam.ac.uk): Politics and Economic Life
Prof James Laidlaw (jal6@cam.ac.uk): The Symbolic & the Real

Easter Term
Prof Joel Robbins (jr626@cam.ac.uk): Ethnography

Paper Aims and Objectives

To provide a general introduction to the aims, scope and methods of Social Anthropology by following three complementary avenues to the comparative study of human society and culture: ethnographic description and analysis of particular societies and cultures; the comparative study of social institutions; and the different theoretical approaches involved in anthropological description, analysis, and comparison.

Syllabus

Social Anthropology addresses the really big question – what does it mean to be human? – by taking as its subject matter the full range of human social and cultural diversity. What does this diversity tell us about the fundamental bases and possibilities of human social and political life? Can it help us to comprehend how contemporary global changes manifest themselves in people’s lives across the world? In this paper you will learn how anthropologists study, analyse, and theorise about the immense variety of forms of social life they have found across the world: how such taken-for-granted categories as gender, family, sexuality, economy, and the state are subject to radical cultural variation, and how everyday matters such as food, clothing, work, and trade may be bound up with religious and other symbolic meanings. You will also learn about the main kinds of social theory developed by anthropologists in response to the challenge of understanding this diversity, and about the distinctive forms of ethnographic field research anthropologists use in order to gain close, first-hand knowledge of the societies they study.

The paper provides: (a) An introduction to the key anthropological concepts such as society and culture, examining different approaches to social and cultural analysis through empirical case studies; (b) a framework for understanding variations in social organisation, with an emphasis on politics and economic life, kinship, and symbolism; (c) an overview of the history of anthropological theory in relation to changing social contexts; (d) an introduction to the ethnographic method. These themes will be covered by separate lecture courses (there will also be (e) video classes) during the
Michaelmas and Lent Terms; they will be brought together in the Easter Term through (f) the in-depth analysis of two social groups via the ‘core’ ethnographies.

Assessment

This paper is assessed through a three-hour written examination. All topics are covered in a single undivided paper, and candidates must answer three questions from a choice of (approximately) 12. Credit will be given to students who display a wide range of ethnographic knowledge.

Structure of Teaching

In addition to attending lectures, students will receive regular supervisions, in preparation for which an essay will normally be required, covering the key topics of this course.

Supervisions are arranged by Directors of Studies, and should be distributed evenly across the three terms. A normal supervision load would be three supervisions in each of Michaelmas and Lent, and two in Easter; a small number of additional discussion/revision sessions, without requiring an essay, are usually considered helpful.

During the Michaelmas and Lent Terms there will also be video classes. Students are encouraged to incorporate material from these video classes into their regular supervisions and essays.

Core Ethnographies


The Department recommends that all students read these two books early during the year, and then return to them in the Easter Term, when they will be the subject of a course of lectures.

General Background Reading


This set of lectures provides an introduction to some key anthropological puzzles, theories and tools for thinking. How is it that social arrangements persist even as the individuals in them move on? Why do our symbolic lives present intricate patterns which no one seems to have designed or intended? Why do people do things which seem not to be in their own interest? How do inequalities get entrenched and how can these change? Can one ever accurately represent the perspective of ‘another culture'? Should one try? Given the combined weight of culture, society and history, are humans in any sense free? Over the past 150 years, anthropologists have developed fundamentally different answers to these questions, grounded in very different theories about the nature of culture and society. While many of these theories have been rightly critiqued and some aspects of them abandoned, they continue to provide useful tools for thinking about these and other pressing problems today.

These lectures have three aims. The first is to give you a critical introduction to some elements of the intellectual history of the discipline, that will then allow you to situate the books and articles you will read in SAN1 during the rest of the year. The second aim is to open up a broader conversation about how knowledge works in the social sciences and humanities. The third aim is to give you a practical guide to building your own anthropological arguments.

**Background Reading**

*Stewart, M. 1997. *The time of the Gypsies*. Oxford: Westview Press. (I recommend you read this from cover to cover – I will be using it throughout the course to demonstrate how these different schools live on in one key example.)

**Lecture 1. Introduction: puzzles and theories**

**Lecture 2. Evolutionism and its critics** How can we explain the diversity of social arrangements in different times and places? 19th century evolutionists viewed this diversity as an instance of human groups being in different 'stages' of a single development process. They imagined that by comparing accounts of the diverse customs of non-Western and Western peoples, historical and contemporary, they might be able to reconstruct a history of human progress – from ‘primitive beginnings’ to the ‘modern age’. Contemporary anthropology in its various national forms was born out of a critique of this evolutionist vision. In the US, Franz Boas called for a properly historical study of the diffusion of cultural traits and their aggregation into coherent cultural wholes. In the UK the rise of long-term fieldwork produced detailed ethnographic studies of particular groups. This richness of detail encouraged early 20th century British anthropologists to treat each society as a coherent entity on its own terms, rather than a mere token in some grand evolutionary scheme, and to seek to grasp in Malinowski's famous phrase "the native's point of view". This laid the ground for what came to be called 'the functionalist revolution'.

**Lecture 3. Functionalism: explaining stability** Individuals have different interests and perspectives, they often feel they are acting freely, and yet much of their social behaviour is repetitive, expectable and patterned. Individual humans change, grow old and die, and yet the institutions they live within persist. Anthropological functionalism (including the variant known as 'structural-functionalism') provided a powerful explanation of these puzzles, by arguing that each society could be seen as a stable, self-regulating assemblage of mutually functioning parts – rather like a giant organism. By envisaging each society as a whole, with its own stable social structures, its own logically articulated religious, legal, political arrangements, and its own broadly coherent world-view, functionalists demonstrated the possibility, efficiency, and elegance of alternative, non-Western ways of organising...
economy, politics, knowledge or family life. Aspects of this vision are still there implicitly in many contemporary anthropological analyses. But did functionalists go too far in discounting the importance of history, change and transformation? And how did their work interface with the British colonial structures within which many of these studies were conducted.

Lecture 4. Structuralism: structures of the mind Social structures might explain why human behaviour is often repetitive. But how can we explain the intricate and sophisticated patterns of human culture and symbolism which no one seems to have intended or designed, and the way these make sense to individuals even when they can’t explicitly pinpoint their logic. Why are some (but not all) wedding dresses white? Why do we not eat rotten food, unless it is cheese? While British functionalists were studying ‘social structures’, French anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss developed an interest in a radically different kind of structure: the logical structures which hold together systems of signs. Language – a structured system of sounds – is the obvious example, and Levi-Strauss developed a hugely influential theory based on the notion that culture might be a similar kind of system. By studying ritual and religious practices, kinship arrangements, and myths, structuralists provided a powerful framework for understanding both the dizzying diversity and the fundamental commonality of human cultures. But were these structures really in the minds of the people anthropologists studied, or were they merely in the mind of anthropologists – or could it be both?

Lecture 5. Interpretivism Structuralism does a good job of explaining some intricate and often unconscious symbolic patterns, but what about everything else? What about the richly layered, explicit cultural interactions and interpretations – the attitudes, motivations, the winks and nudges, the sense of appropriateness and politeness, the conventions about what might be funny, disgusting or sad – which make up people’s (always partial but nevertheless significant) sense of belonging to the same meaningful world? American interpretivist anthropologists of the second half of the 20th century developed an influential approach to these questions, which sought not to ‘explain’ cultural difference in general, but rather to model how one might understand both cultural coherence and cultural difference. The key here is seeing that ‘understanding’ is precisely what cultural actors are constantly trying to do to and with one another. Humans are forever interpreting each other’s actions and words; this ‘intersubjective’ work is what generates and sustains shared cultural words. Interpretive anthropologists such as Clifford Geertz, in turn cast themselves as experts at interpretation across cultures. Unlike structuralism’s search for deep hidden structures beneath the surface of culture, interpretivism proposed a vision of culture as a kind of publicly visible text, which the anthropologist, in Geertz’s famous phrase, “strains to read over the shoulders of those to whom they properly belong.”

Lecture 6. ‘Writing Culture’ and the politics of (anthropological) knowledge Soon however, a younger generation of anthropologists raised some questions about this interpretive vision. Were cultures really as internally coherent and externally bounded as interpretivists seemed to make out? And if so, what made anthropologists so good at interpretation? A foundational critical volume, Writing Culture, raised the contention that these visions of clearly delineated cultural worlds and omniscient anthropological interpreters were in part at least fictional constructs – results of particular writerly techniques and rhetorical strategies. In making such claims, anthropologists were drawing on postmodern critiques of scientific authority more generally, but also on a range of arguments by feminist, Marxist and postcolonial scholars, who had pointed to the political nature and political effects of scientific (including anthropological) knowledge, and raised fundamental questions about who ought or can write authoritatively about what (and for whom), within and across distinctions of class, gender, ethnicity or race. Nowhere were these questions more fraught than in the complex debates around who and in what senses might count as a ‘native anthropologist’.

Lecture 7 From Marxism to Practice Theory While some of the ‘writing culture’ discussion was in danger of getting lost in postmodern abstraction and endless reflexivity (as the joke about the postmodern anthropologist goes “But that’s enough about me, what do you think about me?”), another rising school of thought came at the enduring questions of inequality, power, historical change and identity from a different angle. “Practice Theory” combined core themes from Marxist work on ideology and political economy, with insights drawn from the various anthropological traditions we have examined so far – and a few others. Practice theory returned to some of the fundamental puzzles we have encountered so far: how can we make sense of the articulation of social stability and social change? How far do social and political structures constrain human action and under what conditions can and do individuals push back? How can we explain the powerful ways in which perspectives are grounded in and shaped by social and cultural differences? A key to resolving these puzzles lay for
practice theorists in paying attention to the human body, not as a mere natural object, but as a lived-in, cultivated, trained, material source of human "practice". And yet this seemingly all-encompassing theory still had some important blind-spots, as critics soon came to point out.

**Lecture 8. Bringing it all together** Presenting theoretical schools sequentially as we have done here is useful because it allows one to see how each school built itself in part on a critique of previous positions, or on the contrary, recuperated elements of previous positions. It allows us to see theories as moments in an ongoing conversation. But the image of a sequence of theories can be misleading if one takes it to mean that theories have a neat beginning and end, that they follow each other in a sequence of constant improvement, such that new theories are best and 'old' theories are only of historical interest. As we have seen throughout these lectures, anthropological theories are neither self-contained wholes (like the 'cultures' imagined by some interpretivists), nor stages towards scientific progress (like the 'societies' imagined by some evolutionists). Rather they are collections of arguments, perspectives and conceptual tools, some of which remain useful even when other problems with the theory have been identified. To demonstrate this, the final lecture examines the way in which all of the schools we have examined in these lectures have left traces in one single anthropological work: Michael Stewart's *The Time of the Gypsies*.

**Example supervision question:**

Why should today's anthropologists take a serious interest in old theories? Discuss with reference to one or two schools of thought.
Section 2. Identity & Difference
Michaelmas Term, weeks 5 - 8
Lecturers: Dr Andrea Grant & Dr David Sneath

‘Identity and Difference’ makes use of a wide comparative perspective to examine the sources of social difference and the factors that contribute to senses of collective solidarity and identity. The lectures present a range of anthropological work suggesting that identity and difference are socially formed rather than biologically given. By exploring the ways in which identity and difference mutually inform each other the lectures present identity formation as at once creatively individual, socially constructed and structurally imposed. This suggests that the intimate and public aspects of identity are not separate but interact and interpenetrate; and that identity is never a function of a single set of factors.

Background Reading


Lecture 1 Naturalising identity and difference I: Gender In Euro-American tradition, gender is considered to be based on ‘natural’ differences in the body, in which one is either ‘male’ or ‘female’. This essentialised view of gender, however, is not universal. Drawing on a range of ethnographic case studies and various theories of gender, this lecture demonstrates how gender is socially, culturally, and historically constructed, and associated with particular understandings of personhood, space, and work. It explores ideas about gender as social performance, and equally shows how the very idea of what is ‘natural’ – the ways in which bodies are conceived and relate to each other – varies across cultures.

Lecture 2 Naturalising identity and difference II: Ethnicity Ethnicity has become a key term in commonplace understandings of difference and identity. This lecture introduces anthropological approaches to the concept and the ways in which it has been applied, theorized and questioned since the emergence of the term as an analytical concept within the social sciences.

Lecture 3 Naturalising identity and difference III: Race If there is nothing ‘natural’ about gender, then there is equally nothing ‘natural’ about race. Instead, we might ask: how do some – and yet, crucially, not others – come to see themselves as racialized, by which kinds of relations and by which kinds of institutions? This lecture explores these questions and considers the ways in which race as a cultural marker of difference has shifted over time and is deeply embedded in relations of power. We will also consider how race has been implicated in the very production of anthropological knowledge – in ways acknowledged and in ways ignored.

Lecture 4 Identity enshrined: Nationality This lecture reviews the historical importance of nationality as an instituted form of identity and a core concept in the contemporary state. It explores the anthropological understandings of nationality and nationalism and its relationship with notions such as ‘ethnicity’, examining anthropological interest in processes of boundary maintenance, state formation, and the historical construction of social categories that have come to be seen in national terms.

Lecture 5 Identity and difference in relations: Kinship Kinship has often been considered one of anthropology’s longest-standing interests. Yet how kinship has been understood has changed over the years, moving away from an understanding based on biology and blood to one based on the concept of ‘relatedness’. Using a range of ethnographic material, we will consider the following questions: how do people define and make relationships with others? If kinship is not everywhere
based on ties of biology and blood, what other kinds of substances make kin? Can families, in some contexts, be chosen? How might kinship intersect with other aspects of identity, such as gender and race?

**Lecture 6 Difference and conflict: Enemies** This lecture explores anthropological understandings of the social construction of enemies in radically different social contexts, and the ways in which the processes of identifying and conceiving of ‘the enemy’ plays important social roles. This includes a consideration of anthropological treatments of warfare in various societies, and the ways we might think about the relationship between conflict and perceptions of difference.

**Lecture 7 The living and the dead: belonging, community, time** In this lecture we will consider how people create a sense of collective identity and belonging in various ethnographic contexts. We will do so through considering the concept of community, tracing how it has been conceptualised by anthropologists in the past decades. Is community dependent on face-to-face relations or can it be imagined or constructed symbolically? Who is able to become part of a community and who is not? Are the dead equally part of a community?

**Lecture 8 Locating difference: Status and Class** This lecture explores the ‘horizontal’ differences described by terms such as ‘status’, ‘rank’ and ‘class’ in the anthropological literature, and examines the way in which social categories of this sort have been variously treated. It goes on to examine the ways in which social stratification has been re-read in terms of the national and ethnic logic of the nation-state.

**Example Supervision Topic**

‘Identity is a performance.’ Discuss the strengths and weaknesses of this statement by reference to either (a) gender or (b) race.

**Recommended Reading:**


Section 3. Ethnographic Film

Michaelmas & Lent Terms, weeks 1 & 3; Lent Term, weeks 2 & 3
Lecturer: Dr Rupert Stasch

‘Ethnographic Film’ consists of a series of film screenings and post-film discussions intended to introduce students to the history and possibilities of ethnographic film as a medium of anthropological understanding and education. The directions of discussion are entirely open to students’ own responses to the films and curiosity about them. One concern of each viewing will be with the ethnographic ‘content’ of the films: what information have we learned as viewers, what generalizing interpretations of the shape of some people’s world have we been given by the film, and how does this content relate to what students are learning in other parts of the SAN 1 curriculum. Another concern of each viewing will be to see the film as a film. How is it put together? What are its formal properties? How does it compare to other films in the wider genre of ethnographic film, to ethnographic writing, to other kinds of documentary films, or to more popular genres of audiovisual media? How do variations in how ethnographic films have been constructed over time compare to how ethnographic writing has changed? In this way, we try to inquire not only into what anthropological knowledge can be gained through film, but also what kinds of social and cultural structures are built into activities of making and watching specific genres of visual media. We

Background Reading


Screening 1. Ongka’s Big Moka. 1974, Charlie Nairn. Ongka is a charismatic big-man of the Kawelka tribe who live scattered in the Western highlands, north of Mount Hagen, in New Guinea. The film focuses on the motivations and efforts involved in organising a big ceremonial gift-exchange or moka planned to take place sometime in 1974. Ongka has spent nearly five years preparing for this ceremonial exchange, using all his big-man skills of oratory and persuasion in order to try to assemble what he hopes will be a huge gift of 600 pigs, some cows, some cassowaries, a motorcycle, a truck and £5,500 in cash.

Screening 2. Descending with Angels. 2013, Christian Suhr. Descending with Angels explores two highly different solutions to the same problem: namely Danish Muslims who are possessed by invisible spirits, called jinn. A Palestinian refugee living in the city of Aarhus has been committed to psychiatric treatment after a severe case of jinn possession which caused him to destroy the interior of a mosque, crash several cars, and insult a number of people. He sees no point in psychotropic medication since his illness has already been treated with Quranic incantations. A psychiatrist and nurse try to understand his point of view but find that even further medication is needed. In the meantime a local imam battles a stubborn jinn-spirit of Iraqi origin and tries to explain the Muslims of Aarhus that they should stop worrying so much about jinn, magic, and other mundane affairs since nothing can harm anyone except by the permission of God. The film compares two systems of treatment that despite vast differences both share a view of healing as operating through submission of faith to an external non-human agency — namely God or biomedicine.

Screening 3. Ringtone. 2014, Jennifer Deger, Paul Gurrumuruwuy. Yolngu Aboriginal families offer glimpses into their lives and relationships through their choice of ringtones. From ancestral clan songs to 80s hip hop artists and local gospel tunes, these songs connect individuals into a world of deep and
enduring connection. And yet, simultaneously the phone opens Yolngu to new vectors of vulnerability and demand. Made collaboratively by a new media arts collective of indigenous and non-indigenous filmmakers, the film offers a beautiful and surprisingly moving meditation on the connections and intrusions brought by mobile phones to a once-remote Aboriginal community.

**Screening 4. Chronicle of a Summer (Chronique d’un été - Paris 1960).** 1961. Edgar Morin, Jean Rouch. While war rages in Algeria and pre-independence Congo seethes with violence, ethnographic filmmaker Jean Rouch and sociologist Edgar Morin send two women out into the streets of the city to interview passersby. Rouch, whose previous groundbreaking films were shot in Africa, and Morin, an academic and writer, were experimenting with a new kind of documentary film about their own society that would reveal the innermost truth of peoples' lives. From a simple starting question - Are you happy, sir? - *Chronicle of a Summer* delves deeper and deeper into the lives of its characters.

**Example Supervision Topic**

Do ethnographic films give an analysis of the human processes they depict? If so, how do films’ possible methods of analysis compare to the methods of analysis that are possible in ethnographic writing?

**Recommended Reading:**


These lectures explore how humans organise ourselves – socially, economically, politically. We will question some of the dominant stories about economics and politics that circulate today: that systems like states, the stock market, or economic exchange are not especially social or cultural; that they don’t differ that much globally except in how well they might measure up to values that everyone understands in the same way, like democracy, efficiency, profit; that you can only understand them through statistical methods or mathematical modelling; that there is a clear way that you can identify which kinds of institutions are good, well-functioning, or democratic, and thereby compare them with each other to determine which are better developed. We will also discuss how power operates in the world today, and what it is possible to learn about global processes and abstractions from deep investigation of local contexts. The first half of the course discusses economic life, the second turns to the political.

**Background Reading**


**Lecture 1. What is the economy?** We study the ways that society and markets interact to create what we understand as ‘the economy’. We explore some of the cultural and social aspects of how goods circulate, to begin to unpick how societies might contain within them both market-based systems of economic exchange and what we might call the ‘human economy’. We ask whether human beings naturally always compete with each other, whether they make rational decisions, and whether they always want to maximise profits or accumulation. We’ll use examples from hunter-gatherers in Southern Africa, caller-centre workers in India, and factory workers in Sheffield.

**Lecture 2. Exchange – gifts and commodities.** This lecture explores in more detail some of the distinctions between non-market and market-based exchange of goods, to continue with the previous lecture’s proposal that it is helpful to think of different realms of the economy. We think about what it means for an object to be a gift – what kinds of social relations does that entail? We move from the Northwest coast of the US and Canada in the 19th and early 20th Century, to the famous ‘Kula’ system of exchange in the Trobriand Islands, and Jain renouncers in India.

**Lecture 3. Things and Consumption.** This lecture follows on from the previous one, by taking the discussion of the distinction between gifts and commodities a little further. We approach the question by starting from the objects themselves, rather than the systems of exchange. This requires us to think about production and consumption as well as circulation. We use the examples of sugar, tea, fashion and clothing. Even such mundane and everyday objects have fascinating political histories.

**Lecture 4. Money.** In this lecture we examine the relationship between money, markets and crisis, to draw out the cultural, political and social aspects of money exchange. We will think about the fertility of money and how it can bring discomfort and anxiety, but also help to reproduce longer term social and cosmic orders. We use examples from the Cauca Valley in Colombia, from a bazaar in Java, and Wall Street stockbrokers. Some of the anxiety about the dangers of globalisation and money markets can have political effects, especially in times of crisis, and this lecture provides some clues to understand reactions to globalised market capitalism after 2008.
**Lecture 5. What is the political?** Like lecture 1, this lecture provides some of the groundwork for understanding how anthropologists discuss political matters. Drawing on a discussion of non-state societies, the lecture raises the question of how we should define what counts as political – especially beyond the state. Some key themes here are social order and how that relates to political order; how political units constitute themselves, fragment and consolidate again; how political systems develop and vary cross-culturally; and what constitutes political leadership. We use examples from Sudan, Myanmar, and the border region between Afghanistan and Pakistan.

**Lecture 6. The state – as an idea.** In this lecture, our attention turns to the state, and we ask what it is, and how states develop over time. The idea of the state becomes crucial to how we accept state power over us and others, but how is this so? Does it make a difference to view the state as a cultural construct that obscures many power relations which we might otherwise not accept? What is the relationship between this construct and economic inequality? We will explore how ‘the state’ is culturally produced in Paraguay, fascist Italy, and maybe a little of the US.

**Lecture 7. Everyday state practices.** This lecture argues that the state is produced through encounters, with rituals, symbols and places, but especially with bureaucracies and in collective politics. While the previous lectures focussed to an extent on coercive power, this lecture examines power in a more diffuse way. Bureaucracies are a key way that we experience the state in our everyday lives, both in how we interact with them and how we complain about them. The same goes for welfare systems, and how we can claim rights form the state through legal mechanisms. Examples here come from India, Brazil, and France.

**Lecture 8. Collective politics.** This lecture returns to modes of politics outside of the state, but not in non-state societies. We will explore how people govern themselves and how they interact with the state to make claims on the state or in the face of corporate encroachment on their territory. We think about this kind of community organisation through examples from Madagascar, Mumbai, Ecuador and Mexico, and the rise of populism in Eastern Europe.

**Example Supervision Topic**

Do you agree with Radcliffe Brown that the state is no more than ‘a fiction of the philosophers’?

*Recommended Reading:*

**Bureaucracies**
Fassin, D. 2015 *At the Heart of the State. The Moral World of Institutions*. Pluto Press (choose a chapter)
Li, D. 2017. On the travel ban. An Interview with Darryl Li, *Cultural Anthropology*

**Collective politics**
‘The Symbolic and the Real’ begins from the observation that much of what makes up people’s everyday lives, in addition to having an obvious material existence and a range of practical causes and effects, is also in various ways meaningful, expressive, imagined, or symbolic. It is natural for us to think of these as distinct, the symbolic as opposed to the real, so that to say of something that it is ‘just symbolic’ is to say that it is fake or insubstantial. (If you’re told you’re going to receive a ‘symbolic’ payment, you probably won’t plan to splash out.) But in fact, we never encounter reality other than as already mediated by systems of meaning, and what these meanings say is of far-reaching importance for how people live their lives. (So if you do receive even a ‘symbolic’ payment, that money will be worth ‘more than the paper it’s printed on’, and this is so only because it is part of a symbolic system.) Symbols don’t only say things; they also have practical effects: by saying, they also do. (‘I promise to pay the bearer on demand the sum of . . .’). The categories covered in this lecture course – food, bodies, houses, etc. – are often taken for granted, and they are undoubtedly real. The lectures show how analysis of the symbolic aspects of these phenomena can enable us to see them in a new light, and to understand their importance in social life.

**Background Reading**


**Lecture 1. Language.** In the first lecture we consider the terms in the title of the lecture series: ‘The Symbolic and the Real’. What kind of conjunction is this? What are ‘symbols’ and how do they relate to other things? Is anything not symbolic? In what senses might something being symbolic make it more or less ‘real’? Academic understanding of symbolism has relied heavily on the study of language, and we shall introduce some concepts and approaches that bring out both the meaningful and the practical aspects of language: the ways in which it may be used to say things but also to do things.

**Lecture 2. Time.** This lecture considers the social variability of understandings of time and how experience of time is mediated by social practice. We also consider the implications for our experience of time of different ways of measuring and marking it: using mechanical instruments (clocks and so on) and also rituals, such as rites of passage and rites of reversal, which are social technologies for the differentiation of time. We consider the coexistence with clock-time of conventional and symbolic time (dinner-time, donkey’s years, vintage, etc) and ask how socially or culturally variable perceptions of time really are.

**Lecture 3. Animals.** The symbolic power of animals lies in their being important sources of food, clothing, and labour power, but still more powerfully in their being both similar to and different from humans. This complementary dualism is exploited very widely in cosmologies. We begin with classic anthropological discussions of totemism and taboo, and the ways in which humans’ relations with animals are governed by both cognitive and affective considerations. Then we trace the changing status of animals through industrialization, with increased sentimental personalization especially among those whose livelihoods no longer depend directly on animals, and we end with some recent studies of human-animal interactions.

**Lecture 4. Food.** That food is subject to symbolic elaboration is evident from temporal variation (Christmas cakes, Lenten fasts, Easter buns, fixed meal-times, etc.), and also from what counts as food at all (which animals and plants are ‘edible’ etc.). Anthropologists have sought to understand the patterns that govern what may be eaten and when, how and by whom it may be prepared, and so on.
But such symbolic systems not only make sense of the world, they are also used to define social groups, police their boundaries, jockey for position, make claims to status, and pursue projects of self-transformation.

**Lecture 5. Bodies.** Like animals and food, human bodies have often been used as a system of representation. Eating, excreting, and other bodily functions draw attention to – and elicit ways of symbolizing, enforcing, and valuing – the boundaries of the body and the separations and connections between self and other. And the body is also the subject of elaboration and intervention – adorning, shaping, training, torturing, diagnosing – and an important medium through which we learn to be and shape who we are.

**Lecture 6. Houses.** Physical form, the organization of space, and the ordering of practices within houses are all underdetermined by the requirements of shelter or other practical functions. Like lived bodies, inhabited houses are screens on which cultural symbols – including vast cosmological schemata – may be projected. Metaphorical cross-referencing between the house and the body is found throughout the world. And such meanings are typically inscribed and re-inscribed, as ongoing processes, through the activities people engage in as they inhabit their houses.

**Lecture 7. Culture.** ‘Culture’ has become a key term in anthropology, and also in the world around us. Anthropologists use it to talk about how meanings and symbols are organized, and political actors claim to speak on behalf of constituencies with a distinctive ‘identity’ or ‘culture’ (hence ‘multiculturalism’), but quite what all this means can be difficult to pin down. The word’s complex history reveals ambiguities that are with us still.

**Lecture 8. Cognition.** In the final lecture we return to some of the general questions raised throughout the course, and in particular to questions of the variability in how humans perceive, classify, and understand the world. We review some of the more extreme claims as to the cultural variability of human cognition, and some responses to them. We consider the limits to the model of language, as a way of understanding meaning systems and thought in general.

**Example Supervision Topic**

‘There is a lot more to food than providing nutrition’. Discuss.

**Recommended Reading:**

Section 6: Ethnography
Easter Term, weeks 1 - 4
Lecturer: Prof Joel Robbins

Ethnographies – detailed accounts of the social life of a single society – are the one distinctively anthropological kind of writing. These lectures focus on the nature of ethnographic texts. Working in detail with the two set texts for SAN 1, the lectures explore productive ways of reading ethnographies and the best ways to take material from them to use in formulating anthropological arguments. Several lectures also take up issues of the relationship between ethnographic texts and anthropological theory. The core concern of the lectures, however, is on ways of learning about and working with ethnographic materials.

The crucial background reading for these lectures are the two set text ethnographies for SAN1:


Reading the Adam Kuper text listed below under Lecture 1 and the listed chapters from one of the two texts on kinship listed under Lecture 2 below would also be useful preparation.

Lecture 1: Introduction to Ethnography; Ethnography and Social Structure. This lecture discusses the nature and history of ethnography as a kind of writing and a way of handling the data produced by anthropological fieldwork. It also discusses the concept of social structure and suggests reasons why focusing on their presentations of data on social structure is a good way to formulate an initial reading of many ethnographies.


Lecture 2: Ethnographies of Kin-Based Societies: Kinship and Social Structure. This lecture discusses some of the basics of kinship analysis with an eye toward understanding how in some societies, including the two societies that are the focus in these lectures, kinship relations are the key building blocks of social structure. (Kinship will have been discussed in other lectures in SAN 1, but the presentation of this topic here will be somewhat different in emphasis.)

Read either: Fox, Robin (1967) Kinship and Marriage. Middlesex: Penguin Books; or Holy, Ladislav (1996) Anthropological Perspectives on Kinship. London: Pluto Press. [Holy is more recent, Fox is by now quite old and this shows in particular in its handling of gender, but it is also unusually clearly written and so it is worth consulting]. Chapters 4 and 6 in Fox’s book or Chapter 5 in Holy’s book are particularly relevant for this course, but reading one or the other in its entirety would be well worth the time.

Lectures 3 and 4: Bemba: Producing Families, Practicing Rituals. These lectures explore Bemba society in detail. The first lecture lays out their social structure and some of the key challenges it presents to Bemba people. The second lecture looks at how the Chisungu ritual helps them to address these challenges.


Lectures 5 and 6: Urapmin: Producing Moral Selves, Practicing Change. The first lecture looks in detail at Urapmin social structure and at the process of radical religious change the Urapmin people have experienced as they have converted to Christianity. The Second lecture further considers the role tensions in Urapmin social structure have played in shaping the course of Urapmin conversion to Christianity, and it explores how Christian ritual life addresses these tensions.
Lecture 7: Ethnography and Theory. This lecture considers the relationship of ethnography to theory. It looks at the relationship between Chisungu and the structural-functionalist theoretical tradition and at Becoming Sinners and its relationship to the traditions of structuralism and symbolic anthropology.


Example Supervision Topic

What is the relationship between ritual and social structure among the Bemba?

(Starred readings are crucial, choose some from amongst the others)


*Handelman, D. 1998. Models and Mirrors: Towards an Anthropology of Public Events. New York: Berghahn Books. (Chapter 1: "Introduction") (There is a long discussion of the Chisungu ritual in this chapter which you may find interesting, but it is the on the list for the broader theoretical position the author sets out.)


Sample Examination Paper

The instructions on a SAN1 exam paper are as follows:

Answer three questions.

Candidates will be expected to demonstrate a range of ethnographic knowledge in their answers, and to show a depth of knowledge of some specific ethnographic examples.

Here are the questions from the paper in June 2018.

1. ‘You have to leave some things out in order to build a successful theoretical model’. Discuss in relation to one or more of the following theoretical schools:
   (a) evolutionism
   (b) functionalism/structural-functionalism
   (c) structuralism
   (d) practice theory

2. Why should one read the classics? Discuss with reference to one or more of the following theoretical traditions:
   (a) evolutionism
   (b) functionalism
   (c) structuralism

3. How does kinship matter?

4. EITHER (a) ‘Gender is a performance’. Discuss.
   OR (b) ‘Race is a social construct’. Discuss.

5. ‘It is nationalism that engenders nations, and not the other way around’ (ERNEST GELLNER). Discuss.

6. How have anthropologists used the notion of discrete ‘cultures’ to understand aspects of everyday life such as food, bodies, houses, etc.? Why have some anthropologists preferred to avoid the ideas of ‘cultures’ in the plural?

7. How have anthropologists argued that the economy is embedded in social life?

8. ‘Anthropology studies politics at the human scale’. Discuss.

9. What is gained and what is lost when we analyse societies by asking the question of how order is maintained?

10. How have anthropologists used the notion of ‘symbolism’ to explore the similarities and differences between societies?

11. EITHER (a) ‘The relationship between social structure and ritual is central to both Chisungu and Becoming Sinners’. Discuss.
    OR (b) How do the different theoretical approaches of Audrey Richards and Joel Robbins shape their respective ethnographies, Chisungu and Becoming Sinners?

12. What are the strengths and weaknesses of ethnographic films, in comparison with ethnographic books? Have their relative merits changed over time?