

WHAT IS ANTHROPOLOGY?



Anthropology is the science that studies the origin, development and customs of human beings. The word anthropology is derived from two Greek words “anthropos” meaning humans and “logia” meaning study. Anthropology involves the study of people, both in the past and in the present day, using many methods including studying and classifying fossils and artifacts, and analyzing the behaviours, languages, and other characteristics of specific cultural groups. Because it is such a vast undertaking to try to understand people and their culture from the beginning of human history to the present, we divide this study into a number of sub-disciplines that use evidence from the social, biological, and physical sciences, as well as the Humanities. Ultimately, in order to study humans in all their complexity, past and present, we require a synthesis or combination of all four of the following sub disciplines:

- **Biological (or Physical) Anthropology**

Biological anthropologists approach the question of “Where did we come from?” in terms of human evolution and human biology. Guided by Darwinism, they place particular emphasis on questions dealing with evolutionary theory, our place in this world as homo sapiens relative to other animals, and how humans adapt and vary. To understand all of this biological anthropologists study other primates (e.g., gorillas, chimpanzees, monkeys, and lemurs), fossil records, prehistoric people and the biology and genetics of present day populations.

- **Archaeology**

This is the study of the lives and cultures of past societies by analyzing the material remains left behind by them. Using scientific excavations an archaeologist might find artifacts and other evidence of a past society, as well as architecture and different landscapes. Material evidence might include pottery, stone tools, rock art and house styles and construction methods. The data collected, however, is but a glimpse of what that past culture was really like; therefore archaeologists rely on other disciplines to provide a more complete picture of a past culture.

- **Socio-cultural Anthropology**

Socio-cultural anthropologists study cultures and societies from all around the world using methods like fieldwork and participant observation - where a researcher observes human behavior while living and working in communities. Anthropologists in this discipline are concerned with examining similarities and differences within and among societies by recording, comparing and analyzing data. They might try to explain differences between types of societies by comparing and contrasting families, politics, agriculture, health, and education and using explanations involving gender, class, and race.

- **Linguistic Anthropology**

Linguistic anthropologists study language and communication and compare different cultures in terms of how it reflects who they are and the influence it has on people’s lives and their relationships. This involves researching the origins of language, as well as comparing modern day forms of communication with those of extinct cultures. To carry out this type of research specialized methods must be developed to record and analyze languages used around the world.