

SOCI 421: Social Anthropology

Session 2 – The Nature and Scope of Social Anthropology

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Session Overview

Introduction

Students will be introduced to social anthropology. This includes what social anthropology is about and what it studies.

Objectives

At the end of the session, the student will

- Explain what social anthropology is about through its definition.
- Describe what social anthropology studies.
- Distinguish between what social anthropology studies and what it does not study.

Reading list

- Kottak, C. P. (2004), *Cultural Anthropology*, Boston, McGraw Hill Corporation.
- Kottak, C. P. (2004), *Anthropology: The Exploration of Human Diversity*, Boston, McGraw Hill Corporation.
- Mair, L. (1965, 1972), *An Introduction to Social Anthropology*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Evans-Pritchard, E. E. (1951), *Social Anthropology*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd.

Topic One: What is Social Anthropology

- Social anthropology, the course we are concerned with this semester, is one of the branches of the parent subject Anthropology.
- An alternative view as reported by Lucy Mair (1965,1999) is that social anthropology is a branch of sociology and that the other social sciences constitute its nearest neighbours.
- Paul Bohannan (1963,2007) thinks social anthropology can be likened to comparative sociology based on his definition of the subject as the study of “man as a social being” (p3).

What is Social Anthropology?

- According to Winnick, social anthropology studies social behaviour, especially from the point of view of the systematic comparative study of social forms and institutions (p. 29)
- Winnick continued that social anthropology uses inductive method for the study of society.
- This means that the social anthropologist collects primary data from the field and then looks for patterns in the generated data.
- He/She then develops theory to explain the patterns in the data

What is Social Anthropology?

- Paul Bohannan and Lucy Mair have indicated that social anthropology is a branch of sociology.
- Does that explain why social anthropology is mounted and offered as a course under sociology at University of Ghana, Legon?
- Both sociology and social anthropology study society.
- However, they have different approaches towards their subject matter – society.

What is Social Anthropology?

- Social anthropology concentrates on the study of man in relation to other human beings with whom he is in social contact.
- The discipline has to do with people that Lucy Mair describes as “people with simple technology – people who have to get on without array of modern gadgets, such as radar and mechanical transport” and in addition, “without money and writing”. People without writing are described as preliterate.
- This means they had to organize their lives differently from the lives of the Europeans from whose intellectual efforts the subject emerged.

What is Social Anthropology?

- Its concerns about people include customs, social institutions and values, and how interrelated they are.
- Included in the concerns of the discipline are also social structure, the comparative study of cultures as well as societies.
- It studying the various systems of social relations, the discipline searches generalizations and theories about human social behaviour.

The Scope of Social Anthropology

- The Scope of a discipline refers to the content it concerns itself with.
- That of social anthropology is very wide. It has the study of man as the initial concern.
- This concern has become specialized as it became clear that the discipline cannot study all about man.
- This has led to the emergence of other branches of the parent subject with social anthropology on its own although they all have overlapping contents.

The Scope of Social Anthropology

- The discipline does not only concern itself with the differences between the “technologically advanced” and “simple technological societies”; but also the differences between the “simple technological” societies themselves.
- These simple technological societies have come to be known as “simple societies”.
- These societies were once described derogatorily as primitive societies. This usage has become defunct.

The Scope of Social Anthropology

- Social anthropology does not concern itself with physical differences between people of varying societies, or environmental dissimilarities and the like.
- The concern of the discipline borders on institutional differences.
- These include rules of marriage such who marries whom, and why should some people are legally prevented from marrying from some other groups.

The Scope of Social Anthropology

- Others issues that the discipline concerns itself about are: how is membership of a group constituted, who inherits the property of a relation who dies, who has the prerogative to lead and give orders to the rest and how the leader of the group is chosen.
- The subject also examines the conception the various societies have about the nature of the world and the relationship they have with the unseen forces.

The Scope of Social Anthropology Study

- Furthermore, the subject also examines how the various societies obtain their survival needs.
- According to Lucy Mair “social anthropologists are interested in; not just the kind of things you can see people doing every day, but behind the everyday behaviour, the way they organized so as to be a society and not just a lot of people who happen to be in the same part of the world” (p. 5).
- The discipline concerns itself about the rule of behaviour.

The Scope of Social Anthropology Study

- Behaviour is directed by rules. There are several rules directing the various behaviour patterns of marriage, inheritance, leadership, production, beliefs, group membership etc.
- These rules of behaviour constitute organization of humans into society and so are *social facts*.
- Social anthropology is interested in social facts - rules of social organization or society.

The Scope of Social Anthropology Study

- Social facts cannot be explained by something other than society.
- One can equate social facts to rules of society.
- These rules of society cannot be found anywhere else apart from society.
- Emile Durkheim, the French sociologist made a great deal of influence on British Anthropologists.
- To Durkheim social facts can only be explained by the social
- One can only find out the rules of social organization from the reference in society and not from anywhere else.

The Scope of Social Anthropology

- In effect, the rules of marriage, inheritance, recruitment into kin groups etc. can only be found and explained together within the very society concerned.
- In the words of Lucy Mair (1999:5) *certain kinds of arrangement are characteristic of peoples of simple technology, or that certain inheritance rules and certain marriage rules are often found together; but it is no good going outside society for the explanations of what happens within it.*

The Scope of Social Anthropology

- Social anthropology has specialized areas considered as its subject matter.
- These are kinship studies, anthropology of religion, economic anthropology and political anthropology.
- Medical anthropology has also emerged as a subfield. It connects biological aspects of health and disease with cultural conceptualization and treatment (Keesing 1981:3).
- Ethnography and ethnology are two other areas of concern to social anthropology although cultural anthropology also lays claim to them just as it claims to have own social anthropology.

The Scope of Social Anthropology

- Ethnography and ethnology are tools for studying culture which serve as blueprint for members of social groups involving customs, knowledge, law, morals, and any other creations of the people that facilitate their everyday life.
- The social anthropologist studying any society in Ghana will, therefore, be interested in capturing how the members organize themselves along the line of the blueprint.
- This will involve the rules and regulations that govern their institutional behaviours.

The Scope of Social Anthropology

- For the instance, the social anthropologist can explore the marriage institution among the Ga, Ewe, Akan etc.
- In doing so, s/he is concerned with the rules that govern the institution in these various groups such as why are some individuals not permitted to marry others and why some individuals can have sexual contact with some category of relations but prohibited from marrying same.
- Again the social anthropologist delves into the rules and regulations governing inheritance; there are rules prescribing how the property of a deceased should be shared.
- Inheritance patterns are not the same in all societies just as the rule for recruitment into a group also differs from one jurisdiction to the other.

The Scope of Social Anthropology

- A very important area of study of social anthropology is its technique of research.
- This is called participant observation which is its main research tool.
- The anthropologist, due to his/her responsibility of producing a detailed description of the social organization of a people, resides with the subjects under investigation, learns their language, joins in their activities and follows all their everyday processes whether pleasant or unpleasant.

The Scope of Social Anthropology

- This technique of research is suitable in studying simple societies which constitute the subject matter of social anthropology.
- Although the study of complex societies is the prerogative of sociology, social anthropology has ventured into these complex societies not to study them as it does to simple societies such as villages but to investigate their individual organizations.
- The anthropologist can study organizations of complex societies such as the hospital, religious institutions, gangsters and other related single organizations by treating them as whole societies,

Conclusion

- This session defined and discussed what social anthropology is about.
- Its main focus has been simple society although segments of complex societies have become the concern of the discipline.
- Mainly, social anthropology studies the social organization of simple societies.
- In so doing it concentrates on social institutions which are endowed with regulatory capacities.
- The rules and regulations that govern the behaviour of people in simple societies are enshrined in these institutions.