

Chapter 1

Human Beings and Being Human: An Overview of Anthropology

In This Chapter

- ▶ Discovering what anthropology is and how it studies the human species
 - ▶ Exploring the Indiana Jones stuff: Physical anthropology and archaeology
 - ▶ Checking out how cultures and languages fit into anthropology
 - ▶ Finding out how modern anthropology analyzes human issues today
-

Why isn't everyone the same? Why do people worldwide have differences in skin and hair color and ways of greeting one another? Why doesn't everyone speak the same language?

Questions like these have fascinated humanity for as long as we have written records — and I'm sure people thousands and even tens of thousands of years before writing was invented asked the same things (in whatever language they used.) *Why don't those people do things the way I do? What's wrong with them, anyway?* Of course, people from that other group just on the next hilltop were scratching their heads and asking exactly the same questions.

Enter *anthropology*, the study of humanity. In this book I tell you what you need to know about anthropology, what anthropologists have discovered about humanity, and what anthropologists mean when they say that there are many ways of being human. I also tell you how anthropology works, and what anthropologists have learned about humanity, both modern and ancient.

And knowing all this is important if, as a species, we want to understand ourselves. Biologically, humanity needs to know itself if it's going to make good decisions about everything from medicine to genetically engineering food crops; that knowledge comes from anthropology. And culturally, knowledge of our past can help us understand what we are today, for better and worse; that knowledge, today, also comes from the field of anthropology. In Part I of

this book — specifically in Chapters 2 and 3 — you find out how anthropology studies humanity from these biological and cultural perspectives. Finally, Part IV of this book also shows how anthropology can help humanity deal with some real, real-world problems.

Digging Into Anthropology's History

For a long time the answers to profound questions about humanity came largely from religious texts. For example, when European explorers realized that the New World wasn't India, the Native Americans — millions of people nobody was expecting to find — were explained from a biblical perspective as remnants of the lost tribes of Israel.

But since the late 19th century AD another perspective has emerged, the scientific study of humanity called *anthropology*. At first anthropology was a quaint and pretty simple affair, studied as a sort of hobby by all kinds of Naturalists and pseudoscientists. But when people started to realize how much anthropology could teach humanity about itself, they began to take it more seriously. Anthropology became a science, the science of humanity at large.

In Chapter 2, you can get a grip on anthropology's history and how it changed over time from being a pseudoscience to today's highly technical study of human DNA and ancient fossils. In Chapter 3, you can find more detail about how anthropology has developed over time, affecting how it goes about learning about humanity in the first place.



The questions that anthropologists have asked (and ask today) are in part a reflection of the times; for example, today a lot of people are investigating the effects of climate change on ancient human populations. Knowing the potential for bias, anthropologists are careful about making assumptions.

Getting Acquainted with Anthropology's Subfields

Anthropology has a complex, colorful, and sometimes checkered history. As you find out in Chapter 2, the field has gone through several transformations, and today there are more ways of doing anthropology than you can shake a stick at.

Now, the study of humanity is a vast undertaking, so anthropologists have divvied up the task into four main subfields:

- ✓ Physical anthropology
- ✓ Archaeology
- ✓ Cultural anthropology
- ✓ Linguistics

As you study anthropology, keep in mind that to really understand humanity, anthropologists need to know about each of the subfields. For example, an archaeologist studying an ancient civilization needs to know what a physical anthropologist has to say about that people's bones, what the people ate, or how they practiced medicine. And today, cultural anthropologists can't know much about a culture unless they have a good knowledge of that culture's language system.

Physical anthropology

Physical differences between groups of humans are easily visible; mainland Europeans tend to be lighter-skinned with straight hair, and folks from Africa are typically darker-skinned with curlier hair. These are biological differences, and the goal of *physical anthropology* — the study of humanity as a biological species — is to understand how and why these variations on the human theme came about. Physical differences among living humans aren't all that physical anthropology is concerned with, but understanding human variation (especially genetic differences) worldwide and through time is an important part of the field.

In Part II of this book, I boil down the main discoveries of physical anthropology to date so that what's left is the skeleton, the essentials. This material is what physical anthropologists know today and a little about what they're studying and hoping to learn in the future. Chapter 4 introduces you to the primate order, your home in the animal kingdom. Chapters 6 and 7 take you to Africa, the cradle of humanity, to cover the fossil evidence of human evolution.

Like all anthropology, physical anthropology has its fingers in a lot of different pies, from the study of fossils, to DNA analysis, documenting and explaining differences in cold- or heat-tolerance among people worldwide, the study of disease, population genetics, and a dozen other topics. Chapter 19 introduces you to the cutting edge study of physical anthropology, focusing on the magnificent molecule called DNA.

Archaeology

It's hard to get to know someone without knowing a little about their past, and the same goes for humanity; a lot of what we do today — good and bad — is based on the acts and decisions of our ancestors. To understand humanity any further than skin deep requires looking into the past. This is the business of archaeologists.

But the past can be foggy (on a good day) because history — the written record — can only take us so far (and if you believe everything written in the ancient historical texts, well, I've got some oceanfront property in Utah you may be interested in). However well-meaning they may have been, historians have had their biases like everyone else. And, of course, the ancient historians didn't write down everything, especially if they were unaware of, say, the entire New World (North and South America).

Archaeologists are the people who try to fill in the gaps of history by studying the material remains of ancient cultures. It's archaeologists who get excited over discovering an ancient piece of pottery, not necessarily for that piece of pottery alone (though it may be beautiful) but because of what it can tell humanity about its past.



Archaeologists don't just focus on correcting or fleshing out the historical record; they also study the roughly 2.5 million years of humanity *before* writing was invented.

Chapter 5 tells you how archaeologists learn about the past, from carbon dating to meticulous excavation. Chapter 7 tells you about the spread of modern humans out of Africa and across the globe, and Chapter 8 gives some exciting examples of how humanity adapted to every environment imaginable, including the Arctic and the Pacific.

Cultural Anthropology

Humanity has more facets than just where we came from, our relations to the other primates, or how our ancient civilizations rose or fell. You also have to consider the whole original question of why people today differ worldwide. How come traditional Polynesian clothing is different from traditional clothing in the Sahara? Why do many Asian folks eat with chopsticks but others use a fork and knife? Why is it okay for a man to have several wives in one culture but not in another culture?

Unfortunately, the common sense answers are rarely right — chopsticks aren't some archaic precursor to fork and knife, they're just a different way of getting food into the mouth. Similarly, the ways in which people find marriage partners in traditional Indian society (perhaps by arranged marriages) and traditional German society are just different. Cultural anthropologists study why these variations exist in the first place, and how they're maintained as parts of cultural traditions, as elements of a given society's collective identity.

Part III of this book covers cultural anthropology, the study of living human cultures. Overall, these chapters give you the nuts and bolts of what cultural anthropologists have learned about living human cultures. Chapter 11 tells you just what culture for anthropologists really means (no, it's not the opera or stuffy wine-and-cheese parties) and how critical it is for human survival.

In Chapter 12 you see that all human cultures are basically *ethnocentric*, meaning that they typically believe that their own way of doing things — from how they eat to how they dress — is proper, right, and superior to any other way of doing things. This feeling of superiority can lead (and has led) to everything from poor intercultural relations to ethnic cleansing. Cultural anthropologists, and the knowledge and understanding they generate while studying the many different ways of being human, can help smooth out intercultural communications; how they do this is also covered in Chapter 12. It can help humans understand other perspectives.

Part III also explains why race and ethnicity can be such volatile issues (Chapter 14), how humanity organizes identity (from family groupings to gender categories) and keeps track of who's related to whom (Chapter 15), and the basic characteristics of humanity's various religious traditions and political systems (Chapter 16).

Linguistics

Depending on whom you ask, humanity as a whole speaks something like 6,000 human languages. Chapter 13 explains what language is as well as how linguistic anthropologists investigate how language evolved in the first place — one of the most fascinating questions in all of anthropology. In laying out a clear definition of language, linguistic anthropologists have had to compare human communication with the communication systems of other living things. All of what they've learned — from the fascinating study of how humans acquire language to the layers of meaning that seem to only be present in human communication — give humanity a better understanding of just how unique and precious language is.

That uniqueness is in jeopardy, though, because languages become extinct every year as more people take up just speaking just one of the handful of main languages spoken worldwide today.

Making Sense of Anthropology's Methods

Anthropology's methods also range from lab analysis of DNA to taking notes on Sicilian (or any culture's) body language. Each of these methods helps better understand the many ways of being human. The following list gives you an overview of some of these methods:

- ✓ Evolution is the foundation of modern biology, and physical anthropologists — who study humanity from a biological perspective — rely on it. Check out Chapter 3 for the lowdown on exactly what evolution is and isn't and how it helps anthropologists study humanity.
- ✓ Archaeology isn't just Indiana Jones dodging bad guys and saving priceless treasures. Chapter 5 covers the methods of archaeologists, from keeping track of where objects are found to dating them by the carbon-14 method.
- ✓ Do cultural anthropologists really get grants to go to other countries and observe human behavior? Yes, but there's a lot more to it than that! Chapter 12 covers the methods of cultural anthropology, from observation to immersion in a subject culture.
- ✓ The complexity of human language is one of the main characteristics distinguishing us from non-human animals. Chapter 13 shows you how anthropologists think about and study language.

Applied Anthropology: Using the Science in Everyday Life

Part IV of this book introduces the many ways that the lessons of anthropology are relevant in daily life. Anthropology isn't just studied by scruffy professors clothed in tweeds (although I have to admit that yes, I do have a tweed jacket, and yes, I've worn it to an anthropological conference . . . once). Anthropologists are employed by many companies and government agencies, bringing what they know of humanity to the tables of commerce, international diplomacy, and other fields as *applied anthropologists*.

Applied anthropologists help humanity get along in a very literal sense. Chapter 17 shows how the lessons of anthropology are important to understanding and preventing cultural conflict.

Anthropology also helps humanity survive. Humanity faces enormous challenges, from overpopulation to language extinction and climate change (covered in Chapter 18) and common-sense solutions to these problems just aren't working. But with a subtler understanding of why humanity is the way it is, applied anthropologists are better suited to implementing changes, particularly on the community level, than many government officials who may know a lot about high-level politics but little about cultural traditions and values in the smaller communities they govern.

Chapter 19 takes you into the lab, where anthropologists are analyzing DNA with methods that can help you find out where your genetic roots lie. This chapter shows you that they ultimately lie in the great continent of Africa.

Finally, Chapter 20 has some exciting examples of how archaeological discoveries help us flesh out the history books. The common people of the ancient world — and unless you're royalty, that means your ancestors — didn't write much, but archaeology has given them a voice. Here you can find out about the lives of common laborers of ancient Egypt, American slaves, and the vanished Greenlandic Norse.

