Compiled MA Exam Questions – Cultural

Date Compiled: Fall 2008

**Instructions:** The MA Exam is an all day exam during which students choose and answer 2 out of 3 questions in the morning (9am-12pm) and 2 out of 3 questions in the afternoon (2pm-5pm).

The MA Exam is based on 36 hours of coursework (including History, Contemporary Theory, Research Methods, Regional Ethnography, Current Lit, Data Analysis, Social Organization, and a range of elective courses) and the Cultural Anthropology Bibliography. You are likely to see some or similar questions to those listed below on your exam. Keep these questions in mind as you go through your initial course work. They will help you to structure your thinking and your preparation for the MA comprehensive exams. The faculty is aware that particular students may not have had all the required courses by the time they sit down for the exam. That will be taken in to consideration.

**METHODS**

1. Anthropologists concerned with methodology face key challenges related to issues of 1) qualitative versus quantitative data and approaches, 2) choosing the appropriate unit of analysis, 3) dealing with intra-cultural diversity, and 4) sampling from a designated research population. Identify what you consider to be the most critical challenges related to each. What are the most effective strategies in the field for dealing with these challenges (site specific examples) and how can those strategies contribute to "rigorous and systematic" methodology in field work?

2. In an essay entitled “Quanta and Qualia: What is the “Object of Ethnographic Method?” anthropologist Richard Schweder (1996) explores the tension between quantitative and qualitative modes of inquiry and analysis, observing that increasing numbers of people are asking what the problem is. He writes: “Why not just combine numbers and narratives, measurements and meanings, calculations and interpretations, magnitudes and qualities, and get on with doing better and more complete research? Such optimism, he continues, “is not surprising..... For if one focuses only on the epistemological side of science (on method and reasoning), thereby overlooking the question of the metaphysical status of the objects of the scientific inquiry, the demarcation between quantitative and qualitative research must seem either cut and dry... or threadbare.” (p176). But, Shweder argues, the tension between the two approaches is in fact quite real and significant because quanta and qualia are different kinds of intellectual objects. (p. 177) the distinction is one of ontology not method. “The kinds of properties studied in qualitative research
are the properties associated with “consciousness”. Those properties derived from the capacity of ‘qualitative’ beings to symbolize, to form concepts, to be aware, to have experiences, to want, to value, to choose__ in other words, to have a mental life.: (Shweder 1996: 179-180) Using works included on the general bibliography or those you have read in class or outside of class, discuss the relationship between quantitative and qualitative methods in anthropological research and analysis. In your own view, how should anthropology strike a between these two approaches and what are good examples of one approach or the other or of the combination of the two?

3. Some anthropologists write about the importance of cross cultural approaches in the discipline, while others emphasize the importance of long-term research in particular ethnographic settings. How do anthropologists reconcile these apparently divergent perspectives in the discipline? Give examples drawn from at least two different sub-disciplinary or regional domains (e.g., medical, urban, Latin America, Africa).

4. Anthropologists usually do intensive field research in small-scale settings rather than sample survey research in large-scale settings. What are some important implications of this approach to data gathering for our development of general cultural theories?

HISTORY AND THEORY

5. Choose three theoretical works from the attached bibliography. Discuss what issues each work addresses, what the major theoretical contribution to anthropology is (what is has added to the field) and in what ways each work has changed thinking in the discipline.

6. Anthropologists always have been concerned with the tensions between cultural norms and individual behavior in particular societies. Based on your readings of classic and recent works, discuss the arguments in favor of focusing theory and method on individuals as opposed to groups.

7. Ethnographers write about culture and behavior in particular settings. What are the problems of building universal cultural and behavioral models based on such particularistic research strategies? Give examples drawn from at least two regions of the world.

8. Numerous anthropologists and social theorists have used the term “structure” in their efforts to deal with human society. First discuss how “structure” has been theorized in the history of anthropology and assess both the contributions and limitations of structural analysis for theory-building in anthropology? Second, discuss and evaluate two ethnographic examples that operationalize a structural analysis.
9. The “postmodern turn” in anthropology has rejected the fixity of place and boundaries as well as ethnographic authority. Postmodernists reject both grand theory in anthropology and the notion of completeness in ethnographic description. They bring reflexivity to the foreground. Clearly since the 1980s postmodernism has been a major focus of debate within anthropology. Using specific works and theorists, outline the parameters of this debate. Assess the strengths and limitations of the postmodern approach in anthropology. What are its positive contributions to the field; what are its negative impacts?

10. In 1974 Michelle Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere published a book titled *Woman, Culture and Society*. The authors who contributed to this volume began to make the claim that gender is an important analytical category in the study of human society and culture. Discuss and evaluate the impact of this book, as well as subsequent works in the anthropology of gender/feminist anthropology, on the discipline. What in your view are the major contributions, both theoretical and empirical, of bringing gender into focus?

11. The concept of culture, cultural relativism, and ethnography have all been subjected to critical reevaluation in late 20th and early 21st century anthropology. Using precise examples, discuss these critiques and debates and offer us your assessment of the continuing roles of these ideas and concepts in present day anthropology.

12. Sherry Ortner has identified practice theory as an important analytical paradigm for late twentieth century (and perhaps 21st century) anthropology. Explain and evaluate the practice theory approach. Be sure to include discussion of relevant theorists as well as a discussion of the central concepts and a few precise ethnographic examples. How has practice theory enhanced and/or changed our understanding of the role of structure and agency in anthropological analysis.

13. Michel-Rolph Trouillot, invoking Arjun Appadurai’s idea about gatekeeping concepts, has written that “gatekeeping concepts are native traits mythified by theory in ways that bound the object of study. They act as theoretical simplifiers to restore the ethnographic present and protect the timeless of culture.” Thinking about the region of the world in which you plan to carry out your field research, evaluate Rolph-Trouillot’s claim by pointing to the gatekeeping concepts that have shaped anthropological research in your region and assessing critically their utility to an understanding of your region.

14. Between World War I and World War II, anthropologists in the United States and in Europe began to emphasize distinctive features of the human condition. Emerging topics of theoretical and methodological importance included *acculturation, culture areas, culture elements/traits, functionalism, history, social facts, social structure, and cultural integration*. Discuss three (3) of these topics, being sure to include information on the following: (a) definitions of the three selected topics; (b) which anthropologists are associated with those selected topics; (c) from which countries
these anthropologists came; (d) where they did their field work related to these
topics; and (e) the overall impact of the selected three topics on the development of
anthropological theory/method in Europe and/or the United States.

15. In cultural anthropology between 1920 and 1960 there were four broad ways to
conceive of culture: cultures as adaptive systems, cultures as cognitive systems,
cultures as structural systems, and cultures as symbolic systems. British and French
anthropologists were particularly involved in the latter two approaches, focusing on
the key concepts of cultures and symbols. Discuss and evaluate (contributions and
shortcomings) these two approaches, outlining the various ways in which structure
and symbol were defined and operationalized in ethnographic research. Document
your essay with specific examples. In a few final paragraphs offer an assessment of
what in these approaches might still be of use today.

16. Throughout its history, anthropology has been characterized by a tension between
description on the one hand, and efforts at comparison and generalization on the
other. Discuss how this tension manifested itself in American and European cultural
and social anthropology in the period between 1920 and 1960. Use precise examples
and be attentive to the role of key concepts in anthropological analysis.

SOCIAL ORG

17. Discuss three key questions that have been important in the study of kinship
over the course of the 20th century and how the study of kinship was refocused
and regenerated during the 1990s. Contextualize these latter changes in
relation to broader theoretical directions in the discipline. Come to a
determination of why the study of kinship/social organization is so central to
anthropology and assess whether or not it merits this centrality. Finally,
discuss briefly three issues in social organization/kinship that are most
germane to your theoretical and/or regional area of specialization

18. “Kinship in anthropology has had a long and rich, if sometimes tortured
history. Now, in the opening of the twenty-first century, kinship… is once
again at the center of research and theory. Stripped of its grounding in
Eurocentric notions of biological reproduction, kinship has absorbed and now
reflects the broader theoretical currents and contemporary areas of concern in
anthropology, especially including interests in gender, personhood, social
identities, and relationships as process, human agency in interaction with
social structures, inequalities of power, and the impact of national and
transnational political economies on local experiences” (Linda Stone, Kinship
and Family: An Anthropological Reader, p. 338). Using precise examples
from specific ethnographic/theoretical work, discuss kinship then and now.
What were the central questions throughout much of the 20th century and what
are the central questions now? What in your assessment are the major
contributions of kinship studies to anthropology?

GENERAL
19. Anthropologists are noted for working with non-Western peoples. Today, many non-Western peoples find themselves living and working in Western societies. To what extent are the methods and theories developed in earlier decades for working with non-Western peoples applicable to research among non-Western populations in Western societies?

20. The concept of “community” has been important in ethnographic writings for many decades. What are the key elements of “community” as it has been developed in anthropological theory? What are the connections between ways of doing ethnographic research and ways of thinking about community?

21. Cultural Anthropologists have a reputation for “studying down” (cf. Nader “Up the Anthropologist” reprinted Hymes, Reinventing Anthropology, 1972) rather than for studying all socioeconomic strata in particular societies. What are the consequences of failing to “study up”? Give at least two examples of ethnographic work that did pay attention to multiple socioeconomic strata in particular societies and show what advantages, if any, this approach offers.

22. The following two statements reflect distinctive positions about the work of contemporary applied anthropologists. First, discuss the principal reasons why some anthropologists argue that applied anthropology is fundamentally compatible with theory, while others see applied anthropology as essentially atheoretical and little more than “social engineering”. Finally, explain your own position regarding the role and status of applied research within anthropology as a science and as a profession.

“Like applied scientists in all fields of science, applied anthropologists systematically use theory in formulating problems for study and in developing new knowledge in the course of their work on practical problems (Eddy and Partridge, 1987, Applied Anthropology in American, Second edition, p.57)

“Applied Anthropologists don’t care about theory at all; what they care about is providing solutions to the problems that led agencies to hire them in the first instance.” (A comment overhead at a recent AAA meeting).

23. Write your own question and then answer it. It should be a question that addresses a broad theoretical concept or issue in cultural anthropology and that allows you to bring a number of specific examples to bear in answering the question.

GLOBALIZATION/DEVELOPMENT
24. Define and discuss the major processes that constitute "globalization." How have anthropologists contributed to our understanding of these processes (give three specific examples). Discuss what you consider to be the major themes in anthropological analysis of how the global is "localized" (specific examples). How have these contributions made use of theoretical debates in anthropology more broadly (e.g., in political economy, migration theory, critical medical anthropology, development anthropology, gender studies, etc.) (give specific examples from your own areas of interest)?

25. Globalization has become an important concept in a host of disciplines including anthropology. It refers to the processes of movement in population, skills, capital, technology, goods, images and ideologies. It also implies, as Inda and Rosaldo (The Anthropology of Globalization, 2202, p.5) point out “a fundamental reordering of time and space.” What in your view is the significance of globalization to the anthropological perspective and what are the most important anthropological contributions (empirical and theoretical) to the study of globalization. How has a global perspective impacted particular areas of research in anthropology and what areas have yet to be fully explored in the context of globalization. Be as specific in your answer as you can, using concrete examples of research.

26. “Globalization” is a popular term in contemporary anthropology. Yet, in the 19th century, many anthropologists also were committed to “global” analysis of cultural domains within what we now call the “classical evolutionist” approach to understanding cultures. What are some important similarities and differences between the 19th century approach and the 21st century approach to global analysis?

MEDICAL

27. Discuss the implications of the dichotomy between the “empiricist” and “interpretive” approaches for medical anthropology. Who are some notable proponents of each orientation? Are there medical anthropologists who are eclectic? How have debates between these groups affected medical anthropology as a discipline?

28. Elaborate the development of political economic theory in medical anthropology over the last ¾ century. Address both the origins of key aspects of the theory (e.g., Marxism) as well as the more recent developments of critical and critical-interpretive forms.

29. Discuss the influence of symbolic anthropology and interpretive methods on the field of medical anthropology. When and by whom have these disciplinary foci come together? Please use precise examples of ethnographic research in the development of your argument. Address briefly the positive and negative evaluations of this form of medical anthropology that occur in our field.
30. Critically evaluate and compare clinically applied medical anthropology to other (applied) pursuits within the field. In short, describe the ways in which clinicians can and have made the theories and methods of medical anthropology useful. Pay specific attention to the debates among medical anthropologists as to the purpose, responsibility, and strengths of our discipline vis-à-vis structural violence, experience-near ethnography, illness narrative work, and critical perspectives on contemporary health inequalities.

31. Why do medical anthropologists approach biomedicine as an ethnomedicine? What specific strategies, paradigms, and language are employed by medical anthropologists in this effort? Be sure to situate your discussion in its historical context, give examples of theorists and ethnographers contributing to the work, and address the ideological and epistemological assumptions on both sides of the debate. Do not neglect to address questions of power, and define all terms.

32. In what ways did medical anthropology have its roots in cultural ecological and bio-cultural perspectives? What types of work and evidence did these theoretical perspectives produce in medical anthropology of the mid-20th century? How has the field grown, both with and beyond, these two influential paradigms of thought? Give specific examples of theorists and ethnographers contributing to the work. Situate your examples within a relevant historical timeline.

33. What is Political Economic Medical Anthropology? How does it differ from Critical Interpretive Medical Anthropology? What are the strengths and weaknesses of each. Be detailed in your critique of these perspectives as well as several specific practitioners in each (and their published work).