

## Compiled MA Exam Questions – Cultural/Medical

Revised: February 3, 2014

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**Instructions:** The MA Exam is a day-long 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, 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. This will be taken in to consideration.

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### 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. 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).
3. 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?
4. Give a detailed analysis of what you consider to be the major methodological strengths and weaknesses of the "social science" approach to anthropology, and of the "humanistic/postmodern" approach to anthropology. Discuss three major studies in which these strengths/

weaknesses can be identified. Is it possible to reconcile the two approaches? How might this be done methodologically? (NEW)

## 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 it has added to the field) and in what ways each work has changed thinking in the discipline.
6. 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.
7. 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?
8. In the past three decades, numerous anthropologists have made the claim that gender is an important analytical category in the study of human society and culture. Using precise examples, discuss and evaluate the impact of this concept of gender on the discipline of anthropology over time. What in your view are the major contributions, both theoretical and empirical, of bringing gender into focus? Note that you may draw on literature in medical anthropology, globalization, or a region to address this question.
9. The concept of culture, cultural relativism, and ethnography have all been subjected to critical reevaluation in late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> 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.
10. Sherry Ortner has identified three major shifts in anthropological theory during the latter decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century; the power shift, the historic turn, and the reinterpretation of culture. Discuss and evaluate these trends

and their impact on the field. Be sure to identify precisely and discuss particular theorists and their work as part of your essay.

11. 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 timelessness 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.
12. In 20<sup>th</sup> century cultural anthropology, 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. Discuss and evaluate (approach, contributions, shortcomings) two of these approaches, outlining the ways in which culture was operationalized and examined. Document your essay with specific examples of key anthropologists who contributed to each approach and key monographs/articles. In a few final paragraphs, offer an assessment of what in these approaches might still be of use today.
13. Reflect on the key issues that anthropologists have raised and debated about the centrality of the practice of writing and representation to the discipline's forms of knowledge production. Discuss at least three central moments or debates in the development of anthropological writing over the past two decades. In your answer, be sure to 1) include examples of 3 key scholars involved in shaping the conversation about writing in our field (and their seminal works); 2) indicate how we have moved beyond the postmodern turn in anthropology; and 3) address current conversations about and forms of anthropological writing (e.g. public anthropology, anthropology of the contemporary, feminist anthropology, life history, ethnographic representations) that reflect the contemporary moment.

## SOCIAL ORG

14. Discuss and evaluate the central role of the study of kinship/social organization in anthropology. Compare and contrast the kinds of questions that were posed by anthropologists focused on this topic during the first half of the twentieth century with those that have emerged in the latter decades of the twentieth century. Finally, discuss briefly three issues in social organization/kinship that are most germane to your theoretical and/or regional area of specialization.

15. “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 20<sup>th</sup> century and what are the central questions now? What in your assessment are the major contributions of kinship studies to anthropology?
16. Many anthropologists discuss dimensions of social organization in their work even when the central problem that they are addressing is not defined as a study of kinship or other forms of social relatedness. Using three specific examples of ethnographies drawn from the general MA bibliography, discuss the dimensions of social organization that are manifest in the work and how these relate to other aspects of social and cultural life that are discussed and analyzed in the ethnography. (NEW)

#### GENERAL

17. 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? What impact have the diasporas of the colonial period(s) and post-colonial modernity had on how anthropologists do their work?
18. Numerous anthropologists and social theorists have used the terms “structure” and “agency” in their efforts to deal with human society. First, discuss how “structure” and “agency” have been theorized in the history of anthropology and assess their contributions and limitations. Second, discuss and evaluate two ethnographic examples that explore the relationship between structure and agency.
19. How have anthropologists contributed to our understanding of global processes in relation to issues of concern to medical anthropology, the study of migration and ethnicity, development, or applied anthropology? Choose one of these areas to focus on in your answer. Outline how these global processes have been described and theorized and document your discussion with well-chosen and precise ethnographic examples.

20. 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. (continued)

“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).

#### GLOBALIZATION/DEVELOPMENT

21. 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.
22. 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 Inchausti and Rosaldo (*The Anthropology of Globalization, 2002, 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.
23. “Globalization” is a popular term in contemporary anthropology. Yet, in the 19<sup>th</sup> 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 19<sup>th</sup> century approach and the 21<sup>st</sup> century approach to global analysis?

24. Defining what is meant by “development” is difficult because any definition will reflect the political agendas and value systems of the group/society doing the defining. How would neoliberals (e.g. IMF, World Bank, USAID) define it? Whom do they consider to be the key stakeholders and what do they consider to be the critical issues in development? How do anthropologists generally define it, and whom do they identify as stakeholders? What are the central issues anthropologists examine? Anthropologists working in development often focus on the role that expanding migration, primary healthcare, and environmental protection play in promoting “development.” What are the pros and cons of each of these approaches for improving the lives and well-being of people in the developing world?

## MEDICAL

25. 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?
26. Elaborate the development of political economic theory in medical anthropology over the last three-quarters of a 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 medical anthropology.
27. What do medical anthropologists mean when they describe biomedicine as a cultural system? How do different stakeholders (e.g. clinicians, patients, family members, public health officials, etc.) become socialized into, participate in, experience, and/or resist biomedical cultures? What specific strategies, theoretical paradigms, and language are employed by medical anthropologists whose research examines and critiques the cultures of biomedicine? Be sure to situate your discussion in historical context, give examples of key theorists, and address their ideological and epistemological assumptions as well as their key contributions. Be sure to define all terms.
28. 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.

29. 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? And how has the field grown since then, both with and beyond these two influential paradigms of thought? Give specific examples of theorists and ethnographers contributing to bio-cultural approaches in medical anthropology in the last two decades.
30. How are dynamics of power studied by medical anthropologists? What key theorists inform contemporary studies of biomedicine and other ethnomedical systems within the global system? Give two examples of contemporary work which consider the positional nature of patients and healers, and the power dynamics that inform their interactions. (NEW)