

Engaging with ethnography

International Baccalaureate · IB Diploma · Social and Cultural Anthropology · HL

IB Diploma Programme Social and Cultural Anthropology HL (first assessed in 2019; 2017 guide). This topic covers the **areas of inquiry** and how to read and use **ethnographic material**: the books and articles anthropologists write after fieldwork. It is examined in Paper 2 (2 hours 30 minutes, 45% at HL; 1 hour 30 minutes, 40% at SL).

In the Trobriand Islands, Malinowski watched men sail for days across open sea in canoes, risking storms, to give away necklaces made of red shell. In return, months later, they received armbands of white shell. Nobody kept the objects: after a time, each one was passed on to the next partner. To a European economist this looked mad. Why risk your life for an object you cannot keep or use? Malinowski's answer, in *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922), was that the **kula** exchange is not about the objects. It builds partnerships between islands, and a man becomes famous by having held famous shells and giving them away generously.

Must-know for engaging with ethnography:

Area	Key content
areas of inquiry	nine areas in three groups; SL studies three, HL four
ethnographic material	who, where, when, how, with which concepts
exchange	the kula ring; Mauss's gift; Yan's Chinese village
comparison	similar practices, different meanings
Paper 2	Section A: concept + area of inquiry + real-world issue; Section B: SL one question, HL two

The nine areas of inquiry

The course groups its nine areas of inquiry in three groups. SL students study one area from each group; HL students study a fourth from any group.



SL takes one area from each group; HL adds a fourth.

For each area you need ethnographic material from at least one real study, with the details that make it real: the anthropologist, the place, the time and the methods.

Reading ethnographic material

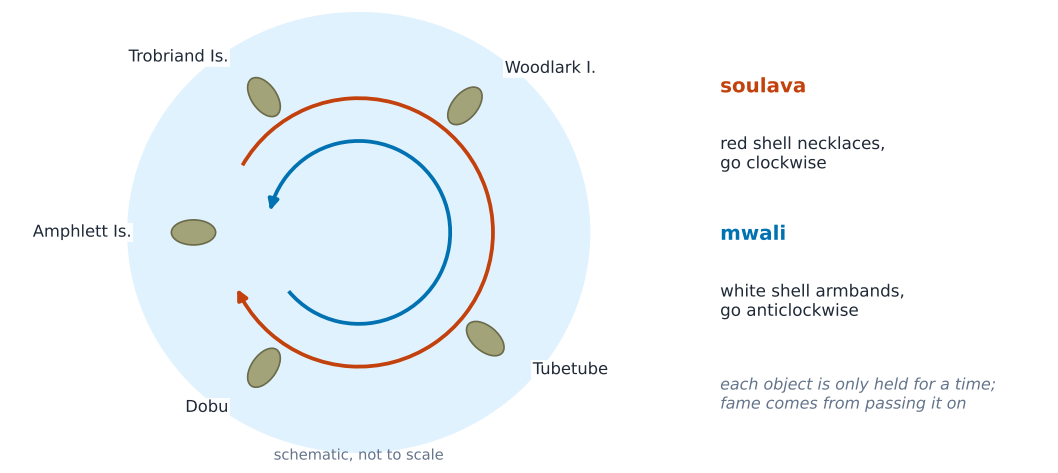
Ask five questions of every ethnography:

Question	Example: Yunxiang Yan, <i>The Flow of Gifts</i> (1996)
who is the anthropologist, and what is their position?	Yan grew up in China and had lived in the village as a young man, so he was partly an insider
where and when?	Xiajia, a village in Heilongjiang, north-east China; fieldwork in 1989 and 1991
how? (methods)	participant observation; interviews; families' own gift lists, which record who gave what at weddings and other events
what does it show?	gifts build and keep guanxi; many gifts flow upwards, from villagers to cadres, without being returned
which concepts?	social relations, power, materiality

Yan's material is useful because it can test a theory. The French scholar **Marcel Mauss** argued in *The Gift* (1925) that a gift creates three duties: to give, to receive and to **reciprocate** (give back). The giver gains **prestige**, and the receiver is in **debt**. Yan found that in Xiajia, gifts to people of higher rank often went one way: the receiver did not give back and did not lose status. Here gifts followed **hierarchy** instead of creating it.

Exchange compared

Exchange is part of the area *production, exchange and consumption*. Compare two ethnographies:



In the kula ring, necklaces and armbands travel in opposite directions; partners never keep them.

	Kula, Trobriand Islands (Malinowski)	Gifts in Xiajia (Yan)
what is given	shell necklaces and armbands	money and goods at weddings, births and funerals
who gives	trading partners on different islands	relatives, friends, neighbours, villagers to cadres
what it does	builds lasting partnerships and fame	keeps guanxi; shows and builds rank
concept	symbolism (the shells' histories)	social relations and power

Same: in both places, giving creates relationships that last. Different: what counts as a proper return, and who is expected to give to whom.

A third area, *health, illness and healing*: Nancy Scheper-Hughes, in *Death Without Weeping* (1992), studied mothers in a very poor town in north-east Brazil, where many babies died. She found that some mothers did not **grieve** openly for babies who died young. She linked this to poverty and hunger, not to a lack of love: a way of surviving in a place where many children did not live.

Answering Paper 2

Section A asks you to connect a key concept, an area of inquiry and a real-world issue. The IB's sample: *With reference to ethnographic material from one area of inquiry you have studied, discuss how either symbolism or materiality or society helps you to understand one of the following issues that is grounded in a contemporary, real-world example: inequality, violence, poverty, mobility, environment.*

Section B asks about the other areas of inquiry (SL one question, HL two), for example: *Discuss how the body is constructed through either symbolism or social relations.*

Worked plan (Section A). Concept: materiality. Area: production, exchange and consumption. Issue: inequality.

- Real-world example: the rising cost of wedding gifts in rural China, which many families report as a burden.
- Ethnography: Yan's gift lists show that gifts are material evidence of relationships, and that poorer families must still give to keep their place in the network.
- Comparison: the kula shows exchange creating equal partnerships; Xiajia shows exchange that can follow and widen inequality.
- Evaluation: Yan was partly an insider, which gave him trust and access, but may have made some habits seem normal to him.

Checklist

- The nine areas in three groups; SL three, HL four.
- Five questions for any ethnography: who, where and when, how, what, which concepts.
- The kula ring (Malinowski, 1922); Mauss's three duties; Yan's Xiajia gifts flowing upwards.
- Scheper-Hughes on health and poverty in Brazil.
- Paper 2: HL 2 hours 30 minutes, 45%; SL 1 hour 30 minutes, 40%; Sections A and B; the worked plan.