Engaging with ethnography

IB DP Social and Cultural Anthropology Engaging with ethnography full package

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- name the nine areas of inquiry and how they are grouped;
- read an ethnography with five questions: who, where and when, how, what, and which concepts;
- compare exchange in the kula ring, Mauss's theory of the gift and Yan's study of gifts in a Chinese village;
- plan a Paper 2 answer that uses and compares ethnographic material.

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.
- 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.

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Reading ethnographic material

- Ask five questions of every ethnography:
- 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** .

Exchange compared

- **Exchange** is part of the area *production, exchange and consumption*.
- Compare two ethnographies:
- Same: in both places, giving creates relationships that last.
- Different: what counts as a proper return, and who is expected to give to whom.

Answering Paper 2

- 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.

Sources for this lesson

- International Baccalaureate, *Social and Cultural Anthropology guide* (first assessment 2019).
- B. Malinowski, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922).
- M. Mauss, *The Gift* (1925; English translation 1954).

Sources for this lesson (2)

- Yan Yunxiang, *The Flow of Gifts: **Reciprocity** and Social Networks in a Chinese Village* (1996).
- N. Scheper-Hughes, *Death without Weeping: The Violence of Everyday Life in Brazil* (1992).

Common errors

- Summarising an ethnography without saying who did the fieldwork, where, when and how.
- Using an ethnography from memory with no place, date or author.
- Comparing two cases by listing them one after the other instead of point by point (what is given, who gives, what it does).

Common errors (2)

- Treating the kula as trade; the objects are not kept or used, and the exchange builds partnerships and fame.
- Applying Mauss's theory to every gift; Yan's upward gifts to cadres are not returned.
- Forgetting the concept the question names.

Key terms

- **Area of inquiry**: one of the nine topics through which the course studies social life, such as the body or production, exchange and consumption.
- **Ethnographic material**: books and articles that anthropologists write after fieldwork.
- **Kula**: a ring of ceremonial exchange of shell necklaces and armbands between the Trobriand and nearby islands.

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Key terms (2)

- **Reciprocity**: the exchange of gifts or help that creates a duty to give back.
- **Prestige**: respect and status that a person gains in the eyes of others.
- **Guanxi**: personal relationships and networks of mutual obligation in Chinese society.

Check yourself

- 1.
- Name the five questions to ask of any ethnography. 2.
- What was exchanged in the kula ring, and why did Malinowski say it was not about the objects? 3.
- What are Mauss's three duties of the gift? 4.