

What is Anthropology?

What do anthropologists do today?

Who are they talking to?

And who listens to them?

Anthropologists question what is assumed, challenge what is common sense, and critically engage with human creativity. We explore our home contexts and elsewhere, the past and the present, with research partners throughout the world. As Professor David Mosse explains, the wide-ranging curiosity of anthropologists is what makes them distinctive.

Anthropology was a discipline born of the colonial world. That world has changed and so too has anthropology at SOAS.

Beyond the classroom, we speak to audiences all over, in government and civic groups, through Ted talks, and in the field of development and mental health. Below you can find blogs, videos, short stories, and interviews with some of SOAS' anthropologists explaining their research.

Professor Edward Simpson talks about what lies below and beyond the everyday common sense of roads, as they shape borders, boundaries, and human experience in multifarious ways.

Dr Catherine Dolan, an anthropologist with expertise in development and East Africa, researches the serious gendered dimensions of poverty in relation to menstruation, another seemingly common sense phenomenon that is "natural as a heartbeat" but dangerous for many. She has found that better sanitary care and reproductive health education for poor schoolgirls, delivered over two years, improved attendance at school, and argues that period poverty is an issue for everyone. Explore more on this topic by Dr Dolan on the issue of period poverty and her research.

Religion

Anthropologists are helping us understand a lot about religion today, exploring what is distinctive about different religions. The Department of Anthropology at SOAS has a great deal of expertise on Islam specifically. See Dr Marloes Janson's discussion of whether Nigeria is the most religious country in the world, and how she understands religion as a form of development, and her analysis of democratic political developments in Gambia.

Dr Kostas Retsikas explains something about Islamic charity to the Muslim Institute based on his research in Indonesia. In this interview, he also questions the search for equivalence in establishing cross-cultural dialogue, asking whether Islamic practices of giving and taking as relating to zakat and sedekah

are translatable to what the Euro-American world understands as charity and/or philanthropy.

History

Anthropologists have much to say about the past, too, and particularly how we think about and act upon the past in the present. In the SOAS-based Museum Affordances / Re:Entanglements project, led by Professor Paul Basu, we have been confronting the archival and material legacies of anthropology's own colonial history. The project is retracing journeys made by the Government Anthropologist, N.W. Thomas, in Nigeria and Sierra Leone over 100 years ago, taking back historical photographs and sound recordings to the descendants of communities Thomas worked with. Engaging with debates around colonial reparation and restitution, the project has also explored creative appropriations of the colonial archive with West African artists.

Dr Lori Allen's research on Palestine helps us understand more about the political past—as in this article about a century of Palestinians' refusal of the Balfour Declaration—and how we can research the past in the present, as in this reflective piece about working in archives. Anthropologists also sometimes see what's coming as explained in this description of Dr Allen's writings about the potentials and limits of human rights in Palestine and elsewhere.

Dr Gabriele vom Bruck makes use of a well-established genre of ethnographic and biographical writing, linking autobiographical memory and social history in her reconstruction of the life of Amat al-Latif al Wazir, only daughter of 'Abdullah al-Wazir, the leader of Yemen's failed constitutional revolt in the mid-twentieth century. She presents us with a subjacent history wedged in the folds of the dominant one, relaying experiences of shattered domesticity and intimacy, privation and pain. Her work unsettles the mostly male-centred fixation on the autonomous subject as well as notions of gendered memory.

Health and Medicine

Anthropologists have particular insights to offer about mental health, opening up questions about what behaviours are considered pathological, and what contexts lead to mental illness. You can listen to Dr Orkideh Behrouzan—physician, medical anthropologist, and poet—tell stories of childhood memories and war to disrupt how we usually think about mental health, the Middle East, and the relationship between individual and collective memories.

Politics

Anthropologists understand the workings of politics from unique angles, questioning common categories and approaches. You can listen to Dr Ruba Salih's TedX talk reflecting on who is a refugee, and the dangers of benevolence.

Anthropologists also look at politics and institutions in a variety of ways, and provide briefings in their areas of expertise. Anthropologists have been researching parliaments and advising about how to engage with them in order to hold the UK government to account.

This short briefing provides guidance about how to give evidence to select committees, and learn more about this research on parliaments:

- Here is Dr Janson's briefing for the African Research Institute on Gambia, and;
- Professor David Mosse's research on caste in Britain supported the work of the Equality and Human Rights Commission in the UK.

Anthropologists regularly collaborate with researchers across their research sites, examples include:

- Professor Paul Basu's collaboration with colleagues in the Department of Fine & Applied Arts at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, and;
- Professor Emma Crewe's project on parliament and people is enabling researchers, artists and activists everywhere from to discuss and imagine what democratic politics might look like in a more engaged and inclusive political world.

Dr Gabriele vom Bruck reflects on Saudi Arabia's deployment of disciplinary techniques in two sovereign states, Yemen and Lebanon. In an attempt to demythologise Saudi Arabia's 'ineluctable' war in Yemen, she analyses how textual inscription of disciplinary control has become prominent in that country's foreign and domestic policies. Read about Dr Bruck's analysis 'From Yemen to Lebanon, Saudi Arabia's Dubious Offensives'.

Some anthropologists share their insights through creative writing, too.

This year, 2020, marks the 40th anniversary of the start of the Iran-Iraq War. Dr Orkideh Behrouzan speaks with Azadeh Tajpour about the war and how these experiences are represented in her creative and scholarly work. In particular, this interview centers two of her creative pieces: the short story "The War We Lived" and the poem "Leica." Both pieces bring to light the impact of war and militarism on one's experience of gender and youth. You can find more of Dr Behrouzan's writings and theatrical adaptations.