An Overview of Anthropology (by Le Chat/Mistral, and vocabulary, 25 Feb 2026)

1. Anthropology: Understanding Humanity's Past and Present

Anthropology is the study of humans—our past, our cultures, and how we live together. It helps us explore questions like: *Where did humans come from? Why do we have different traditions? How do rituals shape our lives?* By examining these topics, anthropology connects us to people across time and around the world.

2. Human Origins: The Journey of Our Species

Anthropologists study human evolution to understand how we became the species we are today. Our story begins millions of years ago with early human-like creatures, such as *Australopithecus*. Over time, these ancestors developed larger brains, walked upright, and created tools (**tools are objects used to do things, to make things, and today include: axe (to cut wood, to chop down trees), hammer is used to hammer in nails; a screwdriver, a wrench, a saw (to cut wood, or metal), a file (to smoothen wood or metal)).**

Telephones, computers, smartphones are more electronic devices, or instruments.

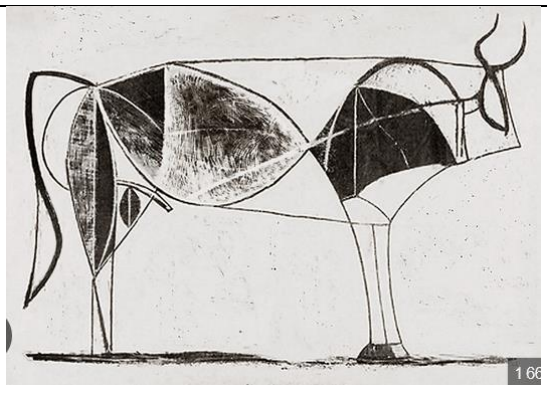
Around 300,000 years ago, *Homo sapiens*—our species—emerged in Africa. These early humans migrated across the globe, adapting to new environments. They developed language, art, and complex societies, leaving behind cave paintings, tools, and burial sites that tell us about their lives.

For example:

- **Cave art** in places like Lascaux, France, shows that early humans expressed themselves through drawings of animals and hunting scenes (a picture showing hunting).

  The Lascaux caves are very well-known for their early human art:





- **Stone tools** found in Africa and Asia reveal how humans survived by making weapons (instrument for fighting), clothing, and shelters (a place to live, stay: an emergency shelter, like a tent; a bus shelter).

By studying fossils and ancient artifacts, anthropologists piece together (to put together, to assemble) the story of how humans evolved and spread across the Earth.

3. Rituals: The Heart of Culture

Rituals (customs, ceremonies, habits) are special actions or ceremonies that hold deep meaning for a community. They can mark important moments in life, connect people to their beliefs, or celebrate shared values. Rituals often involve symbols, music, dance, or food, and they help people feel united and understood.

Here are some types of rituals:

1. **Rites of Passage**: These mark major life changes, such as birth, coming of age, marriage, or death. For example:
    - In many cultures, a **quinceañera** (a 15th birthday celebration in Latin America) symbolizes a girl's transition into adulthood.
    - In Japan, **Seijin Shiki** (Coming of Age Day) celebrates young people turning 20 and becoming adults in society.
2. **Religious Rituals**: These ceremonies connect people to their faith and community. Examples include:
    - **Prayer or meditation** in religions like Christianity, Islam, or Buddhism.
    - **Festivals** such as Diwali in India (the Festival of Lights) or Christmas in Western cultures.
3. **Daily Traditions**: Smaller, everyday rituals help people feel connected to their culture. For instance:
    - Sharing a **family meal** can be a way to bond (a connection, a link, a form of government or company debt) and pass down traditions.
    - **Storytelling** in many Indigenous cultures preserves history and teaches values to younger generations.

Rituals are not just about the actions—they carry emotions, memories, and a sense of identity. They remind us of who we are and where we belong.

Eid al-Fitr marks the end of Ramadan and is one of the most important Islamic celebrations. It begins with a communal prayer and is followed by visits to relatives, giving gifts, and sharing meals. There are many rituals associated with this celebration, including family gatherings, giving money to poor people (one of the most important things), giving presents to children.

It is also a day of forgiveness and unity.

When a baby is born, there is a celebration after one week. The ritual is to cut the child's hair and then give an equivalent weight in gold for charity.

4. Traditions: Passing Down Culture

Traditions are customs or beliefs that are handed down from generation to generation. They can include holidays, foods, clothing, music, and even ways of speaking. Traditions help people maintain their cultural identity and feel connected to their ancestors (members of the family who lived before you. Some religions practice ancestor worship: to pay respect in a religious way, to pray. In the mono-theistic religions people worship God and prophets.).

Examples of traditions:

- **Food**: In Italy, making pasta from scratch is a tradition that families share. In Mexico, cooking **mole** (a rich sauce) for special occasions is a way to honor heritage.
- **Clothing**: Wearing traditional outfits, like a **kimono** in Japan or a **kilt** in Scotland, celebrates cultural pride.

- **Music and Dance**: Flamenco in Spain, samba in Brazil, and hula in Hawaii are all traditions that express cultural stories and emotions.

Traditions can change over time, but they often remain an important part of people's lives, even in modern societies.

5. Why Anthropology Matters

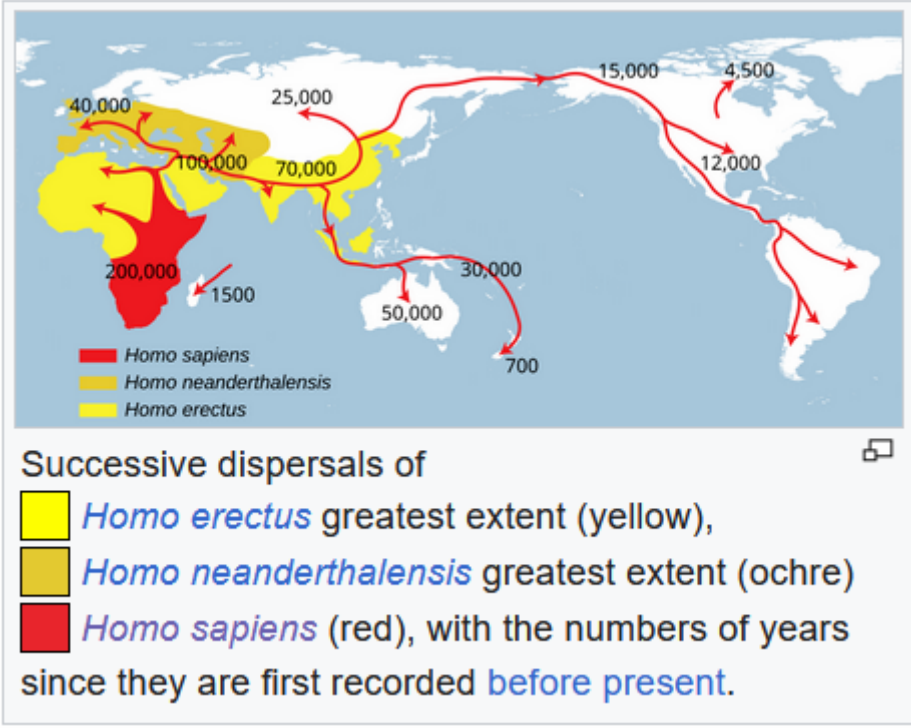
Anthropology teaches us that while cultures may look different, all humans share basic needs: love, belonging, and meaning. By studying rituals and traditions, we learn to appreciate diversity and understand the world from different perspectives.

For example:

- A wedding ceremony in India might look very different from one in France, but both celebrate love and commitment.
- A harvest festival in Africa and a Thanksgiving dinner in the U.S. both give thanks for food and community.

Anthropology helps us see that, despite our differences, we are all part of the same human story.

Last summer, I translated a very interesting book about how humans stopped being hunter-gatherers, and settled throughout the world – about 10,000 years ago.



Successive dispersals of
Homo erectus greatest extent (yellow),
Homo neanderthalensis greatest extent (ochre)
Homo sapiens (red), with the numbers of years since they are first recorded before present.

Vocabulary by Le Chat/Mistral

1. Artifact; an object made by humans, typically of cultural or historical interest; relic, object, antique
2. Kin; a person's relatives or family members; relatives, family, clan
3. Myth; a traditional story, especially one concerning the early history of a people or explaining a natural or social phenomenon; legend, folklore, tale

4. Taboo; a social or religious custom prohibiting or restricting a particular practice or forbidding association with a particular person or thing; prohibition, ban, restriction
5. Cultural relativism; the principle that an individual's beliefs and activities should be understood in terms of their own culture; cultural perspective, relativism, cultural understanding
6. Society; a group of individuals who share a common culture, institutions, and norms; community, civilization, population
7. Norms; the shared expectations or rules that guide behavior within a society; standards, customs, conventions
8. Symbol; an object, word, or action that represents an idea, belief, or entity; emblem, sign, representation
9. Ancestor; a person from whom one is descended, especially one more remote than a grandparent; forebear, forefather, progenitor
10. Ethnocentrism; the tendency to judge other cultures based on the values and standards of one's own culture; cultural bias, cultural chauvinism, cultural superiority
11. Adaptation; the process of adjusting to new environmental, social, or cultural conditions; adjustment, modification, acclimatization
12. Matrilineal; relating to or based on kinship with the mother or the female line; maternal, mother-right, female lineage
13. Shamanism; a practice involving a practitioner (shaman) who is believed to interact with the spirit world for healing, divination, or guidance; spiritual healing, spirit mediation, animistic practice
14. Patriarchy; a social system in which men hold primary power and dominate roles of political leadership, moral authority, and social privilege; male dominance, father-rule, androcentrism
15. Matriarchy; a social system in which women hold primary power and leadership roles, often in family and community structures; female dominance, mother-rule, gynecocracy
16. Totem; a natural object, plant, or animal that is considered the emblem of a clan, family, or group and often holds spiritual significance; clan symbol, spiritual emblem, ancestral sign
17. Colonialism; the practice of a powerful country controlling another country or territory and exploiting its resources, often leading to cultural domination; imperialism, occupation, territorial expansion
18. Globalization; the process of interaction and integration among people, companies, and governments worldwide, often leading to cultural exchange; worldwide integration, cultural exchange, internationalization
19. Oral tradition; the transmission of cultural material—such as stories, songs, and histories—through speech rather than writing; verbal lore, spoken history, unwritten tradition
20. Cultural diffusion; the spread of cultural beliefs, social activities, and artifacts from one group or society to another; cultural spread, cultural exchange, cross-cultural transmission