What is anthropology?

- Anthropology is the study of human diversity around the world. Anthropologists look at cross-cultural differences in social institutions, cultural beliefs, and communication styles. They often seek to promote understanding between groups by "translating" each culture to the other, for instance by spelling out common, taken-for-granted assumptions.—

University of North Texas
What is anthropology?

- Anthropology is the study of people. In this discipline, people are considered in all their biological and cultural diversities, in the present as well as in the prehistoric past, and wherever people have existed. Students are introduced to the interaction between people and their environments to develop an appreciation of human adaptations past and present.—Portland Community College
What is anthropology?

- Anthropology explores what it means to be human. Anthropology is the scientific study of humankind in all the cultures of the world, both past and present.
  — Western Washington University
What is the link between anthropology and ICH?

- As noted by Peter Nas (2002), the mandate to safeguard intangible heritage represents a significant milestone in the discipline of anthropology, inasmuch as it is “the first time that cultural expressions have been taken as a subject of worldwide intergovernmental policy in such detail (143).”
What is the link between anthropology and ICH?

- Given anthropology’s longstanding commitment to the study of human cultural diversity and the discipline’s accumulated expertise in researching culture, there is no question that the discipline of anthropology can offer important tools for the global effort to safeguard intangible cultural heritage.
What is the link between anthropology and ICH?

- As described in the Convention, intangible cultural heritage refers to the “practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills—as well as the instruments, objects, artifacts and cultural spaces associated therewith — that communities, groups, and in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage.”
What is the link between anthropology and ICH?

- As living heritage, intangible heritage is always transforming, and often has different meanings for different members of the community.
- This session aims to offer an introduction to the anthropological concepts and frameworks that are useful for researching and understanding intangible culture.
How do cultural anthropologists learn about culture?

- Introducing key conceptual and methodological approaches:
  1. Participant observation
  2. Self-reflexivity
  3. Building “rapport”
  4. Understanding “context”
  5. Identifying “key informants” and undertaking interviews
  6. Listening for diverse local voices and points of view
  7. Ethnography
1. Participant observation

- “Participation” refers to the researcher’s presence in and interaction with a group or community when a social activity or event is taking place.
- In classic anthropological terms, it refers to the researcher’s total immersion in another culture, generally for an extended period of time.
“Observation” refers to what is seen through the eyes of the researcher.

What a researcher “observes” of another culture, or even her own culture, is shaped by his or her own theoretical orientation, as well as personal values, experiences, assumptions and biases, which are often implicit and sometimes unknown to the researcher herself.
Participant observation

- Researchers participate as much as possible in local daily life (i.e. rituals, ceremonies, meal preparation) with the aim of gaining an “emic” perspective, or the “insider’s point of view.” The “emic” world view is usually different from the “etic” or outsider’s point of view.
2. Self-reflexivity

- ...can be thought of as a strategy for identifying one’s own biases or assumptions as a researcher.
- As the researcher gets to know a new culture, she should endeavor to be aware of how her own values and experiences shape her perceptions of that culture.
- She should also be questioning her own assumptions.
Self-reflexivity

- E.g. Research in Salavan Province, Lao PDR on the role of wild foods in household food security.
- I observed that rural populations’ diets were heavily dependent on wild foods such as insects: bee larvae, bamboo worms, various kinds of beetles.
My implicit bias: People would not eat insects unless they had no other choice. I assumed that insects in the diet were an indicator of lack or food shortage, when in fact this was not the case at all.

In many parts of Laos, as well as Thailand and elsewhere in the Mekong region, insects are valued and eaten as a culinary choice rather than out of necessity.
3. Building “rapport”

- ...is another important component of anthropological research.
- It refers to establishing relationships based on trust and mutual respect with the group or community where you are conducting research.
Building “rapport”

- Demonstrating thoughtfulness and respect for local beliefs, traditions, and practices
- Asking thoughtful questions, being a good listener, and showing willingness to learn from the group or community
- Developing ties through sustained engagement with the group or community
4. Understanding “context”

- Context refers to the conditions in which something exists or occurs.
- For linguists, “context” is the language or discourse surrounding a given word that helps determine the meaning of a word.
- So, if we take the word “tree”, we might all have a similar abstract idea of a tree, but it is only when we put it in discursive context that we understand its specific usage.
- “The old mango tree behind my house.”
Understanding “context”

- Similarly, with elements of culture, whether rituals, performances, oral narratives, or artifacts, as researchers, we gain a more holistic understanding if we see these elements in relation to the broader historical, environmental, and cultural context.
5. Identifying “key informants” and undertaking interviews

- “Key informant” refers to anyone who can provide detailed information and opinions based on his or her knowledge of a particular practice, event or issue.

- Key informants are also often regarded as “experts” on a given practice, event or issue by members of the local community, i.e. a highly respected local midwife would a key informant on childbirth practices.
Identifying “key informants” and undertaking interviews

☐ When first learning about a topic or cultural practice, interview questions are usually “open-ended” or “unstructured.”

☐ Open-ended questions are those that begin with “how,” “why,” or “tell me about.” (i.e. Would you tell me more about...? Can you help me understand...?)

☐ Open-ended questions encourage informants to “tell their own stories” and give their own interpretations of cultural phenomena and events. They can not be answered with a “yes” or “no” response.
Identifying “key informants” and undertaking interviews

- Related open-ended techniques include eliciting stories through photo documentation and auto-documentation.

- As a researcher gains more understanding of the topic, s/he can develop more structured and guided interviews for cross-checking and triangulation of data. (See Handwerker’s Quick Ethnography and Bernard’s Research Methods in Anthropology readings on the CD)
6. Listening for diverse local voices and points of view

- Cultures are not “monolithic” – they are not static or uniform
- People who share the same culture (i.e. language, ethnic background, nation or territory) will very often have different viewpoints about the meaning and value of cultural beliefs and practices.
- i.e. One individual ethnic Yong can not speak for the whole ethnic Yong community
Listening for diverse local voices and points of view

- These differences of viewpoint are often a reflection of age group, ethnicity, gender, educational background and social class.

- Rather than trying to present a coherent or seamless picture of culture, anthropologists endeavor to reveal this diversity of local voices and perspectives.
7. Ethnography

- All of these approaches are central to ethnography.
- Ethnography is two things: (1) the fundamental research method of cultural anthropology, and (2) the written text produced to report ethnographic research results.
Ethnography as “recursive process:” the interdependence of writing fieldnotes and participant observation in the development of the researcher’s understanding of local meanings and social practices

Detailed fieldnotes are a record of the researcher’s evolving understanding of the local context

Ethnography

“There is no “objective information” that has a “fixed meaning independent of how that information was elicited or established and by whom (Emerson 2005: 6).” Therefore, fieldnotes should reveal rather than attempt to conceal the partiality of the researcher’s experience.

Ethnography

In writing fieldnotes, one should endeavor to make a record of “emic meanings” or the “native point of view.”

“To do so, they must learn to recognize and limit reliance upon preconceptions about members’ lives and activities. They must become responsive to what others are concerned about, in their own terms[...] nonetheless, fieldnotes provide the ethnographer’s, not the members’, accounts of the latter’s experiences, meanings and concerns (6).”
In writing fieldnotes, one should endeavor to capture interactional detail.
Ethnography

“Field research is particularly well suited to documenting social life as process, as emergent meanings established in and through social interaction. Attending to the details of interaction enhances the possibilities for the researcher to see beyond fixed, static entities, to grasp the active “doing” of social life. Writing fieldnotes as soon and as fully as possible after events of interest have occurred encourages detailed descriptions of the processes of interaction through which members of social settings create and sustain specific, local social realities (Emerson: 7).”
“In this way, the field researcher attends not only to the activities local people engage in but also to the particular meanings they attribute to these activities. She seeks and discerns local knowledge and meanings, not so much by directly asking actors what matters to them, but more indirectly and inferentially by looking for the perspectives and concerns embedded and expressed in naturally occurring interaction (14).”
In analyzing one’s fieldnotes, the ethnographer is seeking to develop “grounded theory.” That is, rather than imposing existing theoretical frameworks upon one’s findings, grounded theory emerges from the close reading and analysis of fieldnotes.
“Field research is particularly well suited to documenting social life as process, as emergent meanings established in and through social interaction. Attending to the details of interaction enhances the possibilities for the researcher to see beyond fixed, static entities, to grasp the active “doing” of social life. Writing fieldnotes as soon and as fully as possible after events of interest have occurred encourages detailed descriptions of the processes of interaction through which members of social settings create and sustain specific, local social realities (Emerson: 7).”
Conclusions:

- Heritage practitioners generally do not have as much time for field research as professional anthropologists.
- Nevertheless, anthropological methods can be useful for safeguarding ICH
  1. The ethnographic approach is a vital tool for documenting and researching ICH
  2. The detailed records (textual and visual) of narratives and cultural practices found in ethnographies can serve as a valuable archive of local knowledge that can then be referred to in the revitalization and transmission of ICH