

# Anthropology of Food: History, Topics, and Trajectories to Understand a Discipline

Subjects: [Anthropology](#)

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The anthropology of food is a sub-field of cultural anthropology interested in studying food and foodways. This article provides a concise overview of the anthropology of food, tracing its development from the early twentieth century to contemporary debates and emerging research trajectories. Drawing on foundational work by figures such as Boas and Malinowski, it shows how early anthropologists approached food as integral to understanding social organization, kinship, and cultural meaning. As the field evolved, structuralist, materialist, feminist, and political-economic perspectives broadened its scope, highlighting the symbolic significance of cuisine, the interplay between environment and subsistence, and the pivotal role of gender and class in shaping food practices. In recent decades, the anthropology of food has engaged intensively with globalization, investigating how transnational flows reshape culinary identities, local economies, and cultural heritage, as well as other significant topics. At the same time, emerging themes—such as multispecies perspectives, sensory studies, and the application of innovative methodologies—offer new lenses for understanding how food mediates relationships between humans, non-human beings, and environments. By examining case studies spanning regions from Africa and Asia to Europe and the Americas, this article illustrates how contemporary anthropologists use food as a prism to investigate cultural identity, social change, ethical relations, and the complex entanglements of local and global food systems.

cultural anthropology

food anthropology

food

food production

food consumption

Today, defining food as a cultural object may seem almost self-evident, akin to the possibility of developing research related to the socio-cultural aspects of food production and consumption. Over the past two decades, a new way of perceiving and understanding food has solidified worldwide <sup>[1]</sup>. However, a purely functionalist approach, which views food merely as “material consisting essentially of protein, carbohydrate, and fat used in the body of an organism to sustain growth, repair, and vital processes and to furnish energy”—as defined by one of the leading English-language dictionaries <sup>[2]</sup>—has yet to fade entirely. Cultural anthropology, particularly the branch of “anthropology of food”, has been a pioneering discipline in exploring and conceptualising this new understanding of food as a prism through which to examine a community’s culture and its socio-cultural transformations <sup>[3]</sup>. Cultural anthropology studies human societies, cultures, and their development, with a focus on understanding the customs, beliefs, practices, and social structures that define human groups through a qualitative approach involving long-term fieldwork, participant observation, and interviews to collect detailed, firsthand accounts of people’s lives <sup>[4]</sup>. It has provided crucial insights into human diversity and how cultural forces shape social behaviour and worldviews. In this effort, food has become one of the objects of research used to understand how communities manage their lives, interact with the environment, and shape interpersonal relationships <sup>[5]</sup>.

This article, which grew from discussions at the 2024 conference of the European Association of Social Anthropologists (EASA) and a panel on the future of food anthropology, aims to outline how anthropology has explored food, beginning with contributions from the early 20th century. It also offers insights into sources that can be used for further study and highlights emerging trajectories in the debate, supported by brief case studies that exemplify ongoing research. Overall, it provides novel insight into this field of research and the state of the art of the research within the EASA Anthropology of Food Network, one of the largest professional networks of specialists in this field.

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## References

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