

Markscheme

May 2026

Social and cultural anthropology

Higher level

Paper 1

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The following interpretation of the markscheme is offered as an example of the types of responses we may expect, however it is not prescriptive or exhaustive, and other possible answers should be appropriately rewarded if relevant.

Section A

1. Define the term **agency** and describe how it is understood and applied in the context of the passage. [4]

This question requires students to demonstrate conceptual knowledge and understanding of the term “agency” and apply it in relation to the text. Students may write in terms of any of the following guidelines, but other definitions or applications will also be acceptable if made relevant to the context of the passage.

Possible ways of defining the term:

- Agency is the capacity of social actors to act in relation to structural constraints.
- Agency is the capacity of human beings to act in meaningful ways that affect their own lives and those of others
- Agency may be constrained by class, gender, religion, and social and cultural factors
- Agency is the capacity to create, change and influence events.

Other appropriate definitions should be credited.

Possible examples of description and application:

- Peter’s refusal of his inheritance demonstrates agency by distancing himself from expected kinship obligations, rejecting material and symbolic ties.
- Individuals in blended families exercise agency by accepting or contesting their kin roles or other family members’ interpretation of them (e.g., Louise questioning her mother’s decision to give heirlooms to a stepbrother).
- The deceased person previously decided who they recognize as kin (e.g., Torben’s step-grandfather left him nothing).
- The structural conflict in blended families creates the opportunity for agency to somehow resolve it (e.g., what do with the “funny male things” in Louise’s maternal family).
- Devising “homemade rules to decide”, such as drawing lots.

Other appropriate applications should be credited.

Marks	Level descriptor
0	The work does not reach a standard described by the descriptors below.
1–2	The response demonstrates a basic knowledge and understanding of the concept. There is a partial application of the concept in relation to the text.
3–4	The response demonstrates sound knowledge and understanding of the concept; the concept is described in detail. The concept is clearly applied in relation to the text.

2. Analyse the ethnographic data presented in the passage using the concept of **symbolism**. [6]

This question requires students to develop an analysis and explanation of this ethnographic text using the key concept of **symbolism** to help make sense of the ethnographic data. In order to do this, students are required to demonstrate an understanding of the key concept and use it to illuminate relevant issues within the context of the passage, developing an analysis with reference to the ethnographic data of the extract.

Possible ways of defining the key concept include:

- Symbolism is the study of the significance that people attach to objects, actions, and processes, creating networks of symbols through which they construct a culture's web of meaning.
- Symbolism encodes the value of objects or other things for people and has consequences regarding how they organize and carry out relationships.
- Symbolism as a form of representation of relationships through the medium of material objects.

Other appropriate definitions should be credited.

Possible examples and ways of analysing:

- Inherited objects as symbolic carriers of kinship (silverware, gold watches represent emotional ties, lineage, family memory).
- Heirlooms represent (symbolize) continuity and belonging, the type of relationship the deceased had with the surviving family members (e.g., Torben not receiving anything from his step-grandfather).
- Because heirlooms represent the ties to the deceased person, they may occupy a liminal space (they cannot be sold or discarded, but also are not valued for their utility and so, are only kept in storage but not used) (e.g., kept in an attic).
- The memorial value of the object is more important than the monetary value or utility (e.g., Hanna let her sister keep the silverware even though she would have benefited from selling it).
- The use of gender (e.g., Louise's mother giving "male" items to a stepson) and birth order (e.g., giving a watch to the eldest son) reveals symbolic systems used to structure meaning.
- Rejection of inheritance as symbolic de-kinning (Peter's decision to quickly spend or discard his inheritance symbolizes a rejection of familial ties).

Other appropriate examples and ways of analyzing should be credited.

Marks	Level descriptor
0	The work does not reach a standard described by the descriptors below.
1–2	The response offers a common-sense or superficial understanding of the key concept. There is an attempt to relate the key concept to the text, and some ethnographic examples are presented but these are only partially relevant.
3–4	The response demonstrates an understanding of the key concept and establishes its relevance to the text. There is an analysis of the text using the key concept, although there are some inconsistencies. Relevant ethnographic examples from the text are presented to support the analysis.
5–6	The response demonstrates a clear understanding of the key concept, discussing this in the context of the text. There is a clearly explained analysis of the text using the key concept and a detailed interpretation of the ethnographic data. Clear and explicit ethnographic examples from the text support the analysis.

3. Compare and contrast the ways in which the key concept of **belief and knowledge** or **social relations** is evident in this passage with how it is evident in **one** other ethnographic example you have studied. Make reference to theory in your answer [10]

Students are expected to show an ability to think about the text in relation to other contexts and to draw explicit comparisons. In order to do this, responses must demonstrate an understanding of how either the key concept of **belief and knowledge** or **social relations** relates to this ethnographic context. Either of the key concepts on which such comparison may be drawn should be made explicit and clearly linked to relevant anthropological issues raised by the text.

The target societies for this comparative question are varied and many. Students should be able to establish a relevant comparison with any other group or society based on either of these concepts. The response should be structured as a comparison, highlighting similarities and differences. Students must situate the comparative case in terms of place, author and fieldwork context.

For belief and knowledge, possible ways of defining the key concept include:

- Belief and knowledge is a set of convictions, values and viewpoints.
- It is regarded as “the truth” and shared by members of a social group.
- It is underpinned and supported by known cultural experience.

Possible examples from the text about belief and knowledge may include:

- whether people think that kinship is primarily by nature, nurture, or law (e.g. Christina)
- contested beliefs about what constitutes kinship. Whether kinship by alliance (e.g., step-kin) are “legitimate” kin or not (e.g. Torben compared with Louise)
- invoking principles, such as primogeniture or gender, to decide on heirlooms (Louise’s mother gives male belongings to her stepson because she believes the items are “for boys”, demonstrating how gendered cultural knowledge informs inheritance practices)
- how cultural beliefs shape definitions of family (practices of kinning and de-kinning are rooted in locally informed understandings of who counts as family)
- how legal knowledge coexists with personal beliefs (Christina invokes the legal rule that she should receive her mother’s inheritance before her father remarries)
- beliefs about the symbolic value of objects beyond their material worth
- how storing heirlooms in attics may reflect a belief in the ongoing symbolic presence of the deceased
- inherited objects as vehicles of knowledge and memory.

Possible examples of theory in relation to belief and knowledge may include:

At HL, students need to use theory in the response in order to achieve more than [4].

- Practice theory
- Feminist theories
- Performative theories of kinship
- Symbolic theories
- The classical anthropological debate between descent and alliance
- Theoretical analyses of fictive kin (e.g., in the student’s comparative ethnographic example)

Any other relevant theory.

For social relations, possible ways of defining the key concept include:

- Social relations refer to any relationship between two or more individuals in a network of relationships.
- Social relations involve an element of individual agency as well as group expectations and form the basis of social organization and social structure.
- Social relations pervade every aspect of human life and are extensive, complex, and diverse.

Other appropriate definitions should be credited.

Possible examples from the text about social relations may include:

- rejection of social relations (e.g., Peter and his mother)
- how blended families create complexity in social relations (Torben's disappointment)
- invoking social relations to justify material desires (e.g., Morten)
- inheritance as a site where social relations are active, not fixed, made and unmade (kinning as building social ties and de-kinning, undoing them)
- belonging and exclusion as relational acts
- how conflicts reveal underlying social structures (structural conflict between surviving spouses and children from previous relationships in blended families)
- how inherited objects mediate relationships between the living and the dead, and among relatives.
- social relations with reference to social norms (distribution of items based on gender or birth order), or to social expectations (Morten's view that inheritance should "compensate" for a lack of paternal involvement).

Possible examples of theory in relation to social relations may include:

At HL, students need to use theory in the response in order to achieve more than [4].

- Practice theory
- Feminist theories
- Performative theories of kinship
- Social constructivism
- Theories of exchange and reciprocity
- The classic anthropological debate between descent and alliance

Any other relevant theory.

4. Compare and contrast the approaches to research adopted by the anthropologist in this passage to the approaches to research used by **one** other anthropologist you have studied. Make reference to concepts, ethnographic material and theory in your answer. **[10]**

Here, students are expected to show an ability to think about the text with emphasis on the methodological and theoretical perspectives of the ethnographer as the focus on which such comparisons should be established.

By “approaches to research” the question essentially refers to the research methods used by the anthropologist to gather data. However, as theory is required for level 5–6 and above, it is expected that students will also discuss theory with reference to approaches.

Possible comparative examples regarding approaches may include:

- Participant observation
- Ethnographic interviews
- Qualitative methods
- Ethical issues (anonymity, taboo topics)

Students may also mention other relevant methodological terms and discussions. For example: access to the field, insider/outsider, local categories/analytical categories, positionality, representation.

Any other relevant point of comparison used from the text should be credited.

Possible examples of theory in relation to approaches may include:

- Agency/structure theoretical approaches
- Synchronic/diachronic approaches
- Interpretive approaches
- Approaches focused on materiality and the biography of things

Any other relevant theory.

Marks	Level descriptor
0	The work does not reach a standard described by the descriptors below.
1–2	Comparative ethnography or approaches are presented but in limited detail; relevance is only partially established. The response is not structured as a compare and contrast. The identification of ethnographic material is missing.
3–4	Comparative ethnography or approaches are presented and although this is in limited detail, its relevance is established. The response is structured as a compare and contrast, but this is not balanced and lacks detail. The identification of ethnographic material is partially complete.
5–6	Comparative ethnography or approaches are presented; relevance is established and explained. The response is clearly structured as a compare and contrast; however, either comparison (similarities) or contrasts (differences) are explained in detail, but not both. Anthropological theory has been identified although this may not be relevant or the application is limited. The identification of ethnographic material is mostly complete.
7–8	Comparative ethnography or approaches are presented; relevance is clearly established and explained in detail. The response is clearly structured as a compare and contrast with comparisons (similarities) and contrasts (differences) being discussed in detail, although this is not balanced. Relevant anthropological theory has been identified and used as part of the analysis although there are some inconsistencies. The response demonstrates anthropological understanding. The identification of ethnographic material is mostly complete.
Capped marks	If fieldwork location(s), fieldwork context(s), group(s) studied and ethnographer(s) have not been fully identified, no more than 8 marks will be awarded.
9–10	Comparative ethnography or approaches are presented; relevance is clearly established and discussed in detail. The response is clearly structured as a compare and contrast with comparisons (similarities) and contrasts (differences) discussed critically. Relevant anthropological theory has been identified and used as part of the analysis. The response demonstrates anthropological understanding. The identification of the ethnographic material is complete.

5. Why does anthropology matter? Discuss with reference to **at least two** sources of ethnographic material and examples from the passage. [10]

This question requires students to develop an argument that is built on an understanding of the following “big anthropological question”: **Why does anthropology matter?** This response should include argumentative discussion and analysis and should be supported by making reference to the passage and by relevant, detailed ethnographic material that gives evidence of the understanding of this big question in different cultural contexts. This big anthropological question should be the very backbone of the response.

In the development of their response, students may make reference to a number of ideas or propositions connected to the question. For this reason, below are some ideas that may appear in students’ responses. However, any other relevant lines of thought should be rewarded.

Possible issues to develop an argument may be:

- ethnography as a way of knowing and knowledge production
- anthropologists as cultural translators
- anthropologists’ contribution to legal debates (e.g., about inheritance, recognition of kinship, etc.), informing policy and legal systems with cultural insight
- how anthropologists reveal the complexity of everyday life (helps us understand that inheritance is not just about money or law, but deeply embedded in emotions, expectations, and shifting family dynamics)
- how anthropology challenges cultural assumptions (family not a universal or fixed institution)
- how anthropology gives voice to diverse actors and includes different perspectives, focuses on people’s lived experiences
- how anthropology exposes power and inequality in intimate spheres, hidden power dynamics.

Other appropriate discussion and arguments should be credited.

Marks	Level descriptor
0	The work does not reach a standard described by the descriptors below.
1–2	There is limited understanding of the big anthropological question. The response refers to ethnographic material; relevance to the question is superficial or not established. There is no reference to the passage. The identification of ethnographic material is missing.
3–4	There is partial understanding of the big anthropological question. The response presents some ethnographic material and establishes its relevance to the question, but this lacks detail. There is no or limited reference to the passage. There is an attempt to analyse and interpret the ethnographic material in relation to the big anthropological question, but this lacks clarity and coherence. The identification of ethnographic material is partially complete.
5–6	There is an understanding of the big anthropological question. The response presents a range of relevant ethnographic material and establishes its relevance to the question. There is some reference to the passage. There is some analysis and interpretation of the ethnographic material and passage in relation to the big anthropological question but there is a limited or an undeveloped argument. The identification of ethnographic material is mostly complete.
7–8	There is clear understanding of the big anthropological question in different cultural contexts. The response presents detailed comparative ethnographic material and establishes its relevance to the question. There is clear reference to the passage. The analysis and interpretation of the ethnographic material and passage support the development of an argument; however minor inconsistencies hinder the strength of the overall argument. The identification of ethnographic material is mostly complete.
Capped marks	If fieldwork location(s), fieldwork context(s), group(s) studied and ethnographer(s) have not been fully identified, no more than 8 marks will be awarded.
9–10	There is clear understanding of the big anthropological question in different cultural contexts. The response presents detailed comparative ethnographic material and establishes its relevance to the question. There is clear reference to the passage. The analysis and interpretation of the ethnographic material and passage in relation to the big anthropological question support the development of a reasoned argument; any minor inconsistencies do not hinder from the strength of the overall argument. The identification of ethnographic material is complete.

Section B

6. With reference to **either** stimulus A **or** stimulus B **and** your own knowledge, discuss the defining features of anthropological ethics. [10]

This question requires students to develop a response in which they demonstrate an understanding of the anthropological ethical issues raised by the stimulus material, and an ability to engage in a critical discussion applying their own knowledge.

If stimulus A is used:

This extract is based on an academic paper in which the anthropologists High and Smith critique the position taken by another anthropologist, David Hughes, for his failure, as they see it, to understand his interlocutors in their own terms. Hughes has a clear moral and ethical position from which he works as an anthropologist and, while this is perfectly acceptable, it also means that he is unable to understand the ethical positions of interlocutors he disagrees with. Further, Hughes explicitly states that his interlocutors are 'wrong and doing wrong' (2017:4). Hughes makes his position and biases clear so that readers can decide for themselves how they will evaluate his work but, from a methodological point of view, his ethical position has implications for how fieldwork is conducted and for relations between ethnographer and interlocutors as well as for the discipline as a whole. Hughes judges others on the basis of his own position, which he considers to be the correct one.

Students are expected to demonstrate, with reference to the passage, their knowledge about participant observation as the main method in anthropological fieldwork and the ethical principles governing the conduct of fieldworkers as professional practitioners. The stimulus allows for a wide range of responses.

Students may develop a discussion based on the following:

The nature of interaction between fieldworkers and research participants, for example:

- ethics of the fieldworker when they differ so markedly from those of the interlocutors
- the nature of the participation and collaboration of anthropologists and research participants
- the ways in which fieldwork is conducted and to what end
- reflexivity and positionality
- issues of representation
- issues of power
- how the reciprocal benefit of the studied group is being considered
- any relevant principle of anthropological codes of ethics (they may be informed by diverse professional national associations)
- ethical issues related to the moral position taken by the ethnographer
- the differing ethical/political frameworks involved
- militant and engaged anthropology or activist anthropology
- ethical absolutism compared to relativism
- the implications for the discipline and future fieldworkers when an ethnographer takes a position which is explicitly opposed to that of his interlocutors.

Other possible relevant lines of thought should be credited.

If stimulus B is used:

After research in Ladakh during the early 1980s, anthropologist Sophie Day revisited the area periodically. During three short return trips between 2009 and 2011, she took books of her fieldwork photos to share with the Ladakhi people, some of whom recognized themselves in the photos.

Students are expected to demonstrate –with reference to the image- their knowledge about participant observation as the main method in anthropological fieldwork and the ethical principles governing the conduct of fieldworkers as professional practitioners. The stimulus allows for a wide range of responses.

Students may develop a discussion based on:

- an analysis from any relevant principle of anthropological codes of ethics (they may be informed by diverse professional national associations)
- informed consent, credits, and necessary permissions
- issues of confidentiality, anonymity, and protection of informants
- the nature of the participation and collaboration of anthropologists and research participants which continue even after fieldwork is over and research has been published
- the changes of the ethical anthropological practices over time
- the responsibility of the anthropologist to share research with interlocutors
- issues of trust and responsibility of the anthropologist towards interlocutors
- the ways in which fieldwork is conducted and to what end.

Other possible relevant lines of thought should be credited.

Marks	Level descriptor
0	The work does not reach a standard described by the descriptors below.
1–2	The response identifies one or more ethical concerns but their relevance to anthropology is not established. There is little or no reference to the stimulus.
3–4	The response identifies one or more ethical concerns and partially establishes their relevance to anthropology. There is an attempt to engage with the stimulus, but understanding of the ethical issue presented is superficial or limited.
5–6	The response develops an analysis of one or more ethical concerns and establishes their relevance to anthropology. There is clear understanding of the ethical issues presented in the stimulus. An argument is presented that indicates the student's perspective on the relative importance of the ethical issue(s) in relation to anthropological practice, but this is only partially developed.
7–8	The response discusses one or more ethical concerns, is anthropologically informed, and incorporates the student's own knowledge of the defining features of anthropological ethics. There is clear and relevant engagement with the stimulus, and the ethical issues presented are explained demonstrating sound understanding. An argument is presented that indicates the student's perspective on the relative importance of the ethical issue(s) in relation to anthropological practice; however, there are inconsistencies that hinder the overall strength of the argument.
9–10	The response critically discusses one or more ethical concerns, is anthropologically informed, and integrates the student's own knowledge of the defining features of anthropological ethics. There is relevant and thorough engagement with the stimulus, and the ethical issue(s) presented are fully explained demonstrating excellent understanding. A reasoned argument is presented that indicates the student's perspective on the relative importance of the ethical issue(s) in relation to anthropological practice; any minor inconsistencies do not hinder the overall strength of the argument.