

## The Development of Anthropology in Indonesia

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### Info Articles

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### Abstract

Anthropology is a branch of social science that studies humans holistically, from cultural and social aspects, as well as the value systems that develop in society. Indonesia, as a country with diverse ethnicities, languages, customs, and social systems, is a very important area of study in the development of anthropology. This article aims to describe the history of anthropology's development, the development of anthropology in Indonesia, and its relevance in understanding the socio-cultural and legal life of society. This research uses a literature study method with a qualitative descriptive approach through data collection from books, scientific journals, and relevant literature. The research stages are carried out through source identification, data classification, content analysis, and interpretation of literature findings. The results of the study show that anthropology has developed from ethnographic records during the colonial period to a systematic and modern scientific discipline. In Indonesia, the development of anthropology underwent a significant transformation after independence through Koentjaraningrat's contribution to the institutionalization of anthropological science and strengthening of national scientific identity. The discussion emphasizes that anthropology in Indonesia is now developing on contemporary issues such as urbanization, globalization, legal pluralism, and digital culture. Thus, anthropology has a strategic role in understanding the complexity of pluralistic and dynamic Indonesian society.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Anthropology is a branch of social science that studies humans holistically, from a physical, cultural, and social perspective. This science seeks to understand various forms of culture, value systems, customs, and human behavior in society. Through anthropology, cultural diversity and human life patterns can be studied in depth, providing a broader understanding of the social dynamics of society.(Lubis, 2021).

Indonesia, a country with a diverse array of ethnicities, regional languages, customs, and cultural traditions, is a rich area for anthropological study. This diversity has made Indonesia a key focus for the development of anthropology, both for foreign researchers during the colonial period and for Indonesian scientists after independence.(Indrawati & Sari, 2024). Various studies on local communities, kinship

systems, traditions, and regional cultures have made a major contribution to the development of anthropology in Indonesia.(Firmansyah & Putrisari, 2017;Oematan & Iswanto, 2025;Amelia et al., 2025).

The early development of anthropology in Indonesia was inseparable from the influence of ethnographic research conducted during the Dutch colonial period. These studies focused largely on the lives of indigenous communities, social structures, and local cultural systems. After Indonesian independence, anthropology developed rapidly through the contributions of Indonesian academics, particularly Koentjaraningrat, known as a pioneer and founder of modern anthropology in Indonesia, establishing the first anthropology department at the University of Indonesia in 1957.(Mahyudi, 2016;Ismail, 2020)This development then spread

to various other universities in Indonesia and strengthened the position of anthropology as an important discipline in understanding Indonesian society.(Elia et al., 2023).

This article descriptively discusses the definition of anthropology, the history of its development in general, and the development of anthropology in Indonesia from the colonial period to the contemporary era. Furthermore, it outlines key figures in the development of anthropology in Indonesia and their contributions to understanding the socio-cultural life of Indonesian society. Thus, the discussion aims to provide a comprehensive overview of the history of anthropology in Indonesia.

The purpose of this article is to provide a comprehensive understanding of the basic concepts of anthropology, its historical development, and the dynamics of anthropological development in Indonesia. It also aims to explain the contributions of prominent Indonesian anthropologists and the relevance of anthropology to analyzing socio-cultural changes in contemporary Indonesian society.

The urgency of discussing the development of anthropology in Indonesia lies in its importance in understanding the nation's cultural diversity amidst the currents of modernization and globalization. Anthropology not only helps explain local cultural heritage but also plays a role in understanding changes in values, identities, and patterns of social interaction in modern society. Therefore, the study of the development of anthropology in Indonesia is highly relevant as a basis for academic and practical understanding of current Indonesian social life.(Amelia et al., 2025).

## II. RESEARCH METHODS

The research in this article uses the method Library research using a qualitative descriptive approach. This method was used because the data analyzed were sourced from various sources of literature relevant to the development of anthropology in Indonesia, such

as books, scientific journals, articles, historical documents, and previous research related to anthropology as a discipline. The literature study enabled the author to systematically examine the development of anthropological concepts, theories, and thought based on written sources with academic credibility.(Robbani, 2025).

A qualitative descriptive approach is used to provide an in-depth overview of the history of anthropology in Indonesia, from the colonial period through early independence, to the contemporary era. This approach allows the author to explain the contributions of key figures, changes in research orientation, and the relevance of anthropology to understanding Indonesia's multicultural society.

Data collection techniques were conducted through documentation, namely by identifying, reading, recording, and classifying various references related to the development of anthropology in Indonesia. The collected data were then analyzed using content analysis techniques, namely examining the literature to identify development patterns, main ideas, and the contributions of anthropology within a socio-cultural context.Indonesia(Safitri et al., 2025).

## III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### A. Research results

Anthropology is a branch of social science that studies humans holistically, including biological, social, cultural, linguistic aspects, as well as behavioral patterns that develop in community life.(Ali et al., 2025)Etymologically, the term anthropology comes from the Greek words anthropos, meaning human, and logos, meaning science. Thus, anthropology is defined as the science that studies humans and all aspects of their lives in a comprehensive manner.(Lubis, 2021).

Koentjaraningrat explains that anthropology studies humanity by emphasizing physical diversity, culture, customs, and social systems that shape the life of society.(Ruswanto, 2016). In

addition, anthropology also pays attention to the process of human adaptation to the environment, social change, and cultural development in various community groups.(Lubis, 2021).

Based on the above understanding, anthropology is a crucial science for explaining humans not only as individuals but also as part of a continually evolving cultural and social system. Through anthropology, the diversity of human life can be understood more comprehensively and contextually.

Throughout its history, anthropology has shown a long journey from a collection of descriptions of society to a systematic scientific discipline. According to Koentjaraningrat in his *History of Anthropological Theory*, the development of anthropology is generally divided into several main phases that demonstrate changes in the orientation of study, methods, and objectives of this science.(Koentjaraningrat, 2010).

The first phase took place before the 18th century, when European nations explored various regions of Asia, Africa, the Americas, and Oceania. During this period, information about people's lives was obtained from the travelogues of sailors, missionaries, traders, and colonial officials. These accounts contained descriptions of the customs, languages, physical characteristics, beliefs, and lifestyles of the groups encountered. Although still narrative and descriptive in nature, these writings formed the basis for the birth of ethnography, one of the foundations of anthropology.

The second phase developed in the 19th century, when European scholars began to scientifically process ethnographic data. During this period, the theory of social evolution exerted a significant influence in explaining the development of human culture from simple to more complex forms. Scientists began classifying societies based on their level of cultural development, social systems, and lifestyles. This phase marked the beginning of anthropology as

an academic discipline with a clearer theoretical and conceptual framework.

The third phase occurred in the early 20th century, marked by the development of fieldwork methods. Anthropologists began to go directly into communities to conduct in-depth observations and interviews. This method produced more empirical and comprehensive data than relying solely on written records. During this period, anthropology was also widely used to understand colonial societies, thus developing alongside the interests of the colonial administration.

The fourth phase took place after the 1930s, when anthropology developed into a modern discipline with a broader scope. The focus of study was no longer limited to traditional societies, but also encompassed modern societies, social change, development, economics, politics, law, and contemporary cultural dynamics. This development demonstrated that anthropology not only describes culture but also critically analyzes social change.(Koentjaraningrat, 2010).

In the Indonesian context, the development of anthropological theory then underwent a strong process of indigenization through the thinking of Koentjaraningrat. He not only introduced Western theories but also adapted them to Indonesia's socio-cultural realities, so that anthropology developed into a science relevant to national needs, particularly in understanding the nation's cultural plurality.(Musyaffar & Hosen, 2024).

Based on various literature findings, the history of anthropology's development demonstrates the evolution of the science from mere travelogues to a scientific discipline rich in theories, methods, and scope. The changes from one phase to the next demonstrate that anthropology continually adapts to societal developments, thus remaining relevant in explaining human life from the past to the modern era.

The development of anthropology in Indonesia has a historical journey closely linked to the nation's social, political, and academic changes. Early anthropological studies in Indonesia grew out of ethnographic research conducted by Western scholars during the Dutch colonial period. The primary focus of studies during this period was the lives of indigenous peoples, such as customs, kinship systems, social structures, customary law, and belief systems. These studies produced rich documentation of the cultural diversity of the archipelago and became the initial foundation for the development of anthropology in Indonesia. In the colonial context, this knowledge was also used for the purposes of colonial government administration in understanding local communities. (Koentjaraningrat, 2010).

Entering the post-independence era, the development of anthropology in Indonesia underwent a significant transformation. Anthropology was no longer merely a tool for cultural documentation, but evolved into an academic discipline with a scientific and national orientation. Koentjaraningrat's role was crucial in this phase, as he successfully institutionalized anthropology through higher education, research, and scientific publications. He established the first anthropology department at the University of Indonesia in 1957, which later became a significant milestone in the development of modern anthropology in Indonesia. (Musyaffar & Hosen, 2024).

Koentjaraningrat's contribution lies not only in institutional development but also in his efforts to indigenize anthropological theory, namely adapting Western theories to the Indonesian socio-cultural context. Through this approach, anthropology developed into a relevant science for understanding Indonesia's ethnic plurality, languages, customs, and national identity. Recent journals emphasize that Koentjaraningrat's thinking played a significant role in connecting

anthropology with the nation-building process, particularly in the postcolonial context and the formation of Indonesian national identity. (Imawan, 2024).

Subsequently, anthropology in Indonesia expanded to include various universities and research institutions. Studies were no longer limited to indigenous or rural communities, but also encompassed issues of modern society such as urbanization, migration, industrialization, social conflict, changes in cultural identity, digital media, and the impact of globalization. This shift demonstrates that anthropology in Indonesia continues to develop dynamically, keeping pace with changing times and societal needs. (Murdiyanto, 2020).

In the contemporary era, anthropology in Indonesia plays a strategic role in various fields, including community development, public policy, legal pluralism, gender studies, the environment, and digital cultural transformation. Anthropological approaches are used to understand how Indonesian society responds to rapid social change without losing its local cultural roots. Thus, anthropology is not only an academic discipline but also serves as an instrument of social analysis applicable to national development. (Murdiyanto, 2020).

Based on this literature, the development of anthropology in Indonesia has shifted from the legacy of colonial ethnography to a discipline that is independent, critical, and contextualized to the needs of the nation. Koentjaraningrat's role was central to this process, as he successfully established anthropology as a science that not only studies culture but also contributes to the formation of national identity and an understanding of the complexities of modern Indonesian society.

Anthropology and law are also closely related because law is part of a society's culture. From an anthropological perspective, law is understood not only as formal rules established by the state

but also as norms, customs, and traditions that exist within society. In the Indonesian context, this relationship is evident in the existence of legal pluralism, namely the coexistence of customary law, religious law, and state law.(Burlian, 2021).

The study of legal anthropology helps explain how law is formed based on a society's cultural values, how disputes are resolved through customary mechanisms, and how social norms influence people's compliance with formal law. Thus, an anthropological approach is crucial for understanding the effectiveness of legal implementation amidst Indonesia's cultural diversity.(Ilham & Taufiq, 2021).

Through this relationship, the law will operate more effectively when understood as part of a society's culture. An anthropological approach helps bridge formal law with local values, making legal implementation more just, responsive, and appropriate to the social realities of Indonesian society.

## B. Discussion

The development of anthropology in Indonesia cannot be separated from its historical roots in the colonial period. In its early stages, anthropology developed through ethnographic research conducted by Dutch scholars on indigenous communities. Studies of customs, social structures, kinship systems, and customary law at that time were indeed born out of colonial administrative interests, but on the other hand, they provided a rich foundation of data on the cultural diversity of the archipelago. From an analytical perspective, this colonial ethnographic legacy became a crucial foundation for the birth of Indonesian anthropology, providing initial empirical material for understanding the socio-cultural plurality of society.

A significant transformation occurred after Indonesian independence, when anthropology began to shift from a colonial orientation toward academic and national interests. During this phase, Koentjaraningrat played a central role

through the establishment of the Anthropology Department at the University of Indonesia in 1957 and the development of anthropological concepts adapted to the Indonesian context. An analysis of these developments demonstrates that the indigenization of anthropology became a crucial point, as Western theories were no longer applied in their pure form but adapted to the realities of Indonesia's diverse society. This process enabled anthropology to function not only as a cultural science but also as an instrument for the formation of national identity and nation-building.

In contemporary developments, anthropology in Indonesia has experienced a significant expansion of its scope of study. While previously focused primarily on indigenous and rural communities, anthropology has now expanded to include issues of urbanization, migration, identity change, digital media, gender, the environment, and even cultural globalization. This expansion demonstrates that anthropology is a science that adapts to social change. Analytically, this confirms that anthropology is no longer limited to the study of past traditions but is also capable of explaining the increasingly complex and rapidly changing dynamics of modern society.

In relation to law, the development of anthropology in Indonesia has also strengthened the study of legal pluralism, namely the existence of customary law, religious law, and state law coexisting in society. The legal anthropology perspective positions law as part of culture, so the effectiveness of formal law is greatly influenced by the socio-cultural legitimacy of the community. Studies on legal pluralism emphasize that dispute resolution through customary mechanisms is often more acceptable to the community because it is considered closer to local values and a sense of substantive justice.(Luh, 2013).

Overall, this discussion demonstrates that the development of anthropology in Indonesia is moving away from the legacy of colonial

ethnography toward an independent, critical, and applied discipline. This analysis emphasizes that anthropology holds a strategic position in understanding cultural diversity and social change, as well as supporting the formulation of legal and development policies that are more sensitive to the realities of Indonesia's pluralistic society. (Simanjuntak et al., 2025).

#### IV. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

##### A. Conclusion

Based on the results, it can be concluded that anthropology is a science that studies humans holistically, including cultural and social aspects, as well as the value systems that develop within society. Its historical development demonstrates a transformation from simple ethnographic records to a systematic and modern scientific discipline. In Indonesia, the development of anthropology began with the legacy of colonial studies, then developed rapidly after independence through the contributions of Koentjaraningrat and Indonesian academics. Today, anthropology plays a crucial role in understanding cultural plurality, social change, globalization, and the relationship between law and culture in Indonesian society.

##### B. Suggestion

Studies on the development of anthropology in Indonesia need to be continuously developed, particularly in response to social changes in modern society, such as cultural digitalization, urbanization, legal pluralism, and the identity dynamics of the younger generation. Strengthening anthropological research based on the local Indonesian context is also crucial to ensure this discipline's increasing relevance in supporting social development, public policy, and preserving the nation's cultural diversity.

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