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Q4(c)

What made Geertz's Interpretive Anthropology distinct from Turner's Symbolic Anthropology? What does each of them mean by the terms 'Symbol' and 'Symbolic'?

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2015 · Anthropology GS 1 · 20 marks · Symbolic and interpretive theories (Turner, Schneider and Geertz)

(h) Symbolic and interpretive theories (Turner, Schneider and Geertz)

Core demand of the question

- What made **Geertz's** Interpretive Anthropology distinct from **Turner's** Symbolic Anthropology? What does each of them mean by the terms 'Symbol' and 'Symbolic'?
- Write about 250 words for 20 marks

Revision summary

Geertz treats culture as public text and method as **thick description**.

For him a symbol carries shared meaning, as in the cockfight.

Turner treats symbols as multivocal forces in Ndembu ritual.

Symbolic process is **social drama**, liminality, and redress.

Read versus operate is the teaching contrast.

Introduction

Clifford **Geertz** and Victor **Turner** both read culture through symbols. They split on where the symbol lives, how it works, and what the ethnographer should write.

Body

Geertz: interpretation as text

- Culture is a web of public meaning. The ethnographer does **thick description**, as in the Balinese cockfight.
- A **symbol** is a vehicle of meaning in public, like words and gestures. **Symbolic** action is the saying of a story the village already shares.
- He drew on **Weber** and literary criticism. The cockfight is a text Balinese read about status, not a hidden psychological code.
- **Distinctive move:** culture as document; method as reading, not social mechanics.

Turner: process and ritual drama

- From **Ndembu** fieldwork, **symbols** are operators in rites of passage. They have **exegetical**, **operational**, and **positional** meaning.
- The **milk tree** is both nurturance and Ndembu matriliney. Symbols are **multivocal** and can store contradiction.

- Symbolic process is **social drama**: breach, crisis, redress, as in Schism and Continuity.
- He drew on **van Gennep** and a more Durkheimian ritual energy. Liminality and communitas are what symbols do in time.

The contrast

- **Geertz** reads a public text of meaning. **Turner** tracks a ritual process that repairs or splits groups.
- **Geertz's** symbol signifies. **Turner's** symbol acts, condenses, and polarises.
- Both reject crude functionalism. Neither treats symbols as mere decoration.

Flow diagram

Geertz -> Thick description text
Geertz -> Symbol as public meaning
Turner -> Ritual social drama
Turner -> Symbol as multivocal operator

Conclusion

Geertz made interpretive anthropology a reading of public meaning. **Turner** made symbolic anthropology a study of ritual process and multivocal operators. Symbol-as-text and symbol-as-force are the two kits.

Facts & figures

Geertz

The Interpretation of Cultures and Deep Play: the cockfight as a Balinese reading of status.

Thick description

Borrowed from Ryle: the wink versus the twitch, meaning in public action.

Turner

The Forest of Symbols: Ndembu milk tree as a dominant, multivocal ritual symbol.

Social drama

Turner's sequence of breach, crisis, redress, reintegration or split.

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