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Q1(b)

Cultural Relativism

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2016 · Anthropology GS 1 · 10 marks · The Nature of Culture

2.1 The Nature of Culture: The concept and Characteristics of culture and civilization; Ethnocentrism vis-a-vis cultural Relativism.

Core demand of the question

- Write a note on Cultural Relativism
- Keep the note to a 10-mark length of about 150 words

Revision summary

Relativism asks that custom be read in its own history.

Boas used it against unilinear racial stages.

Herskovits and **Benedict** spread it as method and public teaching.

It is a brake on **ethnocentrism**, not a moral blank cheque.

Rights debates mark its political edge.

Introduction

Cultural relativism says a custom must be understood in its own cultural frame before it is ranked. It was **Boas**'s answer to ethnocentric ladders.

Body

The claim

- **Franz Boas** and **Herskovits** taught that values are historically local. Potlatch or caste purity is not a failed Europe.
- **Method:** hold judgment while the ethnography is built. **Benedict's** Patterns of Culture popularised the stance.

Limits

- Relativism is a research ethic, not a ban on criticising violence.
- **Universalists** in human rights, and **Sahlins** versus **Obeyesekere** on Captain Cook, show the fight over how far local meaning goes.
- Female genital cutting and untouchability are understood locally and still judged in law and policy.

Flow diagram

Cultural relativism -> Boas Herskovits

Cultural relativism -> Understand in context

Cultural relativism -> Not a ban on judgment

Conclusion

Cultural relativism blocks racial ranking of whole peoples. It does not make every practice beyond critique once the local meaning is known.

Facts & figures

Boas

The Mind of Primitive Man attacked racial ranking of cultures.

Herskovits

Stated cultural relativism as a principle of American anthropology.

Benedict

Patterns of Culture compared Kwakiutl, Dobu, and Pueblo as different configurations.

Ethnocentrism

Judging others by one's home yardstick; the error relativism targets.

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