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Q2(b)

Elucidate the concept of "thick description" of Clifford Geertz with a suitable example

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2021 · Anthropology GS 1 · 15 marks · Symbolic and interpretive theories (Turner, Schneider and Geertz)

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

Core demand of the question

- Explain Geertz's concept of thick description with an example
- Write about 200 words for 15 marks

Revision summary

Thick description names the meaning of an act in its cultural code.

Ryle's wink shows why a twitch is not a signal.

Geertz's Balinese cockfight reads status, kinship, and masculinity in a fight.

Java work used the same interpretive method on religion and market.

The limit is underplaying power; the gain is refusing empty behaviourism.

Introduction

Clifford Geertz treated culture as public meaning. Thick description is the ethnographer's job of saying what an act meant in that web of signs, not only what the muscles did.

Body

The concept

- In **Thick Description**, Geertz borrowed **Gilbert Ryle's** wink. A twitch, a wink, a fake wink, and a parody of a wink look alike as eyelid motion.
- **Thin description records the twitch. Thick description names the code:** conspiracy, mockery, rehearsal.
- Culture is an acted document. The anthropologist interprets interpretations, as a literary critic reads a text, not as a chemist reads a law.

Example

- Geertz's **Balinese cockfight** is the teaching case. Betting, kin factions, and status are at stake. The cock is a male word and a political proxy.
- A thin note would say men gamble on birds. A thick note says the fight is a story the Balinese tell themselves about pride and the danger of animality.
- **Java**, where Geertz also worked on religion and bazaar, shows the same method: ritual and market as readable forms, not as raw function.

Limit

- Critics said Geertz underplayed power and political economy. **Marxian** and practice theorists wanted thinner, causal claims as well.
- **The method still trains the eye:** ask what the wink meant before you count winks.

Flow diagram

Eyelid or cockfight -> Thin motion
Eyelid or cockfight -> Thick meaning
Thick meaning -> Geertz text of culture
Geertz text of culture -> Bali Java

Conclusion

Thick description is interpretation of public meaning, classically the wink and the Balinese **cockfight**. It is ethnography as reading, not as stopwatch alone.

Facts & figures

Ryle

Distinguished a twitch from a wink; Geertz made that the emblem of ethnography.

The Interpretation of Cultures

1973 collection that placed thick description at the centre of symbolic anthropology.

Cockfight

Balinese essay in which deep play reveals status and the social text of the village.

Java

Geertz's earlier field of syncretism, pesantren, and bazaar as interpretable systems.