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Q4(b)

Discuss the historical and cultural contexts that led to superseding ethnocentrism with cultural relativism in anthropology

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2022 · Anthropology GS 1 · 15 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

- Discuss the historical and cultural contexts that led to superseding ethnocentrism with cultural relativism in anthropology
- Write about 200 words for 15 marks

Revision summary

Ethnocentrism judged others by a home ladder of civilisation.

Tylor-Morgan evolution and colonial display backed that habit.

Boas, **Herskovits**, **Benedict**, and Mead made local history the frame.

Post-war anti-racist science sealed the teaching shift.

Relativism is method; it is not silence about violence.

Introduction

Ethnocentrism judges other lives by one's home standard. Cultural relativism, as a method, asks that those lives be understood in their own terms first. The shift is a history of empire, science, and war.

Body

Ethnocentrism in context

- Unilinear evolutionists such as **Tylor** and **Morgan** ranked savagery, barbarism, and civilisation, which fitted colonial offices and mission schools.
- World fairs and racial anthropometry presented other peoples as exhibits. **Gobineau** and later racial science made hierarchy look natural.

The relativist turn

- **Franz Boas**, against **Spencer** and museum evolution, argued that each culture is a historical product. Language, myth, and body must be taken on their own terms.
- **Herskovits** named cultural relativism as a principle. **Ruth Benedict's** *Patterns of Culture* and **Mead's** *Samoa*, whatever the later debate, taught American readers that custom is not one ladder.
- The world wars and the Holocaust made ranking peoples as a scientific programme politically intolerable. **UNESCO** statements after 1950 used Boasian language against race doctrine.

Limit

- Relativism is a method of understanding, not a ban on judging cruelty. **Boas** still opposed racism. **Geertz** later warned against treating cultures as sealed islands.
- Indian anthropology after **Srinivas** used relativism in the village without denying law or reform.

Flow diagram

Ethnocentrism -> Unilinear rank empire

Boas Herskovits Benedict -> Cultural relativism

World war race science -> Cultural relativism

Conclusion

Ethnocentrism rode with empire and unilinear rank. Boasian fieldwork, anti-racist science, and the shock of racial war put cultural relativism in its place as a working ethic.

Facts & figures

Boas

Historical particularism and fieldwork against unilinear ranking of peoples.

Herskovits

Stated cultural relativism as a professional principle of American anthropology.

Benedict

Patterns of Culture compared Pueblo, Dobu, and Kwakiutl without a civilisational score.

UNESCO

Post-war statements on race drew on Boasian critique of biological hierarchy.