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Q7(c)

Discuss political and methodological aspects of national character studies. Elucidate the contemporary relevance of such studies.

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2023 · Anthropology GS 1 · 15 marks · Economic Organization

3. Economic Organization: Meaning, scope and relevance of economic anthropology; Formalist and Substantivist debate; Principles governing production, distribution and exchange (reciprocity, redistribution and market), in communities, subsisting on hunting and gathering, fishing, swiddening, pastoralism, horticulture, and agriculture; globalization and indigenous economic systems.

Core demand of the question

- Discuss political and methodological aspects of national character studies
- Elucidate the contemporary relevance of such studies
- Write at 15-mark length

Revision summary

National character work grew from culture-and-personality, especially Benedict on Japan.

It was politically funded as wartime culture-at-a-distance.

Methods were life history, projective tests, film, and émigré interview.

Faults are stereotyping, sample bias, and the **ecological fallacy**.

Geertz moved the field from private character to public meaning.

Today the genre survives in branding and populism; anthropology uses it as a caution.

Introduction

National character studies tried to describe a people's typical personality as culture written into character. They were wartime political tools as much as methods, which is why their later reputation is mixed and still usable with care.

Body

What the studies were

- Culture-and-personality anthropology, from **Ruth Benedict's** Patterns of Culture to The Chrysanthemum and the Sword on Japan, treated a nation as if it had a **modal personality**.
- **Margaret Mead, Gregory Bateson, Geoffrey Gorer**, and the Columbia seminar on contemporary cultures wrote wartime and Cold War portraits of America, Japan, and Russia, often at a distance.

Political aspects

- The United States government funded culture-at-a-distance work to know enemies and allies, so the genre is an applied anthropology of the state.

- Benedict's Japan book influenced occupation policy talk about the Emperor and guilt versus shame, which is political consequence, not only interpretation.
- The same style can stereotype a people as childish, authoritarian, or peaceful, which feeds propaganda as easily as understanding.
- Post-colonial critics asked whose nation was being characterised when class, caste, and region were flattened.

Methodological aspects

- Methods included life histories, Rorschach and TAT tests, films, literature, and interviews with émigrés, which **Abram Kardiner** and **Cora Du Bois** also used for **modal personality**.
- **Geertz** later rejected the idea that culture is a private personality writ large; meaning is public.
- Sample bias, wartime hatred, and the **ecological fallacy** of moving from a few protocols to a hundred million people are the core methodological faults.
- **John Whiting**'s cross-cultural child-training work was a more systematic cousin, still not a passport to a national soul.

Contemporary relevance

- Soft power, branding, and populist talk of "the people" still use national character as common sense; anthropology's job is to unpick that.
- Organisational culture studies and **Hofstede's** dimensions are distant bureaucratic heirs and share the over-generalisation risk.
- Psychological anthropology still studies emotion, child-rearing, and personhood, but in named communities, not as one India or one Japan.
- Security, diplomacy, and area studies still want cultural literacy; the ethical lesson of Benedict and Mead is to supply it without a single national psyche.
- In India, claims about a Hindu psyche or a Muslim psyche repeat the old genre and should be refused on the same methodological grounds.

Flow diagram

National character -> Benedict Mead Gorer
 National character -> Wartime policy
 National character -> Modal personality tests
 Modal personality tests -> Stereotype risk
 Wartime policy -> Stereotype risk

Conclusion

National character studies were a political method of knowing nations through **modal personality**, strongest in Benedict and the wartime seminars. They remain relevant as a warning and as a demand for cultural literacy without a single national soul.

Facts & figures

Ruth Benedict

Patterns of Culture and The Chrysanthemum and the Sword are the canonical national-character texts.

Culture at a distance

Wartime Columbia and related projects that studied enemy and allied nations without classic fieldwork.

Geoffrey Gorer

Wrote national-character essays, including on Russia and on American child-rearing, often cited as over-bold.

Modal personality

Kardiner and others' idea of a statistically common personality shaped by early institutions.

Ecological fallacy

Inferring that every citizen has the traits measured on a small or literary sample of a nation.

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