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Q1(a)

Attributes of culture

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2024 · 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

- Define culture and identify its principal attributes
- Show how the attributes operate together rather than as a list
- Use anthropological thinkers and ethnographic examples
- Note variation, agency and power as limits to an over-integrated view

Revision summary

Culture is a learned and symbolically mediated design for living.

Its core attributes are sharing, symbolism, patterning, adaptation, transmission and change.

Tylor supplies the complex whole; **Geertz** supplies public meaning; Bourdieu links culture to embodied practice.

Kula shows integration of exchange, rank, ritual and inter-island relations.

- **Shared culture is never identical experience:** gender, class, age and power matter.

Treat integration as a question, not as automatic harmony.

Introduction

Culture is the learned and symbolically mediated way in which members of a society make life intelligible and practicable. **E. B. Tylor** called it a "complex whole"; **Clifford Geertz** later stressed webs of significance. Its attributes explain both the continuity of a way of life and its capacity to vary and change.

Body**Principal attributes**

- **Learned and transmitted:** Culture is acquired through **enculturation**, not inherited biologically. **Margaret Mead's** work in Samoa made social learning central, even though her conclusions were later debated.
- **Shared but unequally:** Language, kin terms and ritual codes are intersubjective. Yet age, gender, class and status create different cultural competencies; sharing does not mean unanimity.
- **Symbolic:** Words, flags, totems and food taboos stand for meanings beyond themselves. **Geertz's** Balinese cockfight condensed status and masculinity into a public performance.
- **Integrated and patterned:** Economy, kinship and ritual affect one another. **Malinowski's Trobriand Kula** joined exchange, rank, magic and inter-island relations. Integration is an empirical question, not proof of harmony.

- **Adaptive-and sometimes maladaptive:** Clothing, shelter and subsistence mediate environments. The sacred-cattle debate shows that adaptation is interpreted through values and political economy, while modern diet can turn an earlier preference for energy-rich food into metabolic risk.
- **Dynamic and cumulative:** Diffusion, invention, migration and contest continually alter culture. Indian caste associations, for example, entered electoral and digital arenas rather than simply disappearing.
- **Universal capacity, particular forms:** All humans possess culture, but no single cultural form is biologically inevitable. This supports **Boasian cultural relativism** and comparison without ranking societies.

Culture is also explicit and implicit, material and non-material, ideal and actually practised. **Pierre Bourdieu's habitus** helps connect these layers: learned history becomes bodily disposition without becoming an unchangeable programme.

Critical caution

Functionalism sometimes pictured a seamless whole. **Eric Wolf**, feminist anthropology and practice theory reveal porous boundaries, internal conflict and unequal power. Individuals reproduce culture, but they also improvise and resist it.

Flow diagram

Culture -> Learned and transmitted
 Culture -> Shared and symbolic
 Culture -> Patterned and integrated
 Culture -> Adaptive
 Culture -> Dynamic and contested
 Dynamic and contested -> Agency and power

Conclusion

Culture is learned, shared, symbolic, patterned, adaptive and dynamic. These properties make collective life possible without making people cultural copies. Anthropology therefore studies patterned meaning together with history, inequality and agency.

Facts & figures

E. B. Tylor

Primitive Culture (1871) defined culture as the complex whole of learned capabilities and habits acquired as a member of society.

Enculturation

The process through which a person learns a cultural repertoire; it distinguishes cultural transmission from genetic inheritance.

Geertz

Culture consists of publicly available webs of significance. Thick description recovers the code that gives an act its local meaning.

Trobriand Kula

Malinowski showed that ceremonial exchange is integrated with rank, partnership, navigation and magic rather than being mere barter.

Critical limit

Wolf and practice theorists reject cultures as sealed, harmonious containers; histories, markets and unequal actors cross every boundary.

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