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Q2(a)

Discuss historical particularism as a critical development to the classical evolutionism.

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2024 · Anthropology GS 1 · 20 marks · Classical evolutionism (Tylor, Morgan and Frazer)

(a) Classical evolutionism (Tylor, Morgan and Frazer)

Core demand of the question

- Define classical evolutionism and historical particularism
- Show precisely how Boas criticised method, sequence and racial assumptions
- Explain the empirical and conceptual contributions of the Boasian school
- Critically assess its limits and later synthesis with comparison

Revision summary

Classical evolutionism arranged societies on universal stages using decontextualised comparison.

Boas argued that similar traits may have different causes and histories.

His 1896 critique required fieldwork, language, distribution and chronology before comparison.

The Boasian school separated race, language and culture and advanced cultural relativism.

Baffin Island and Northwest Coast research replaced armchair sequence with documented context.

Its limits were anti-generalisation, salvage assumptions and insufficient attention to colonial power.

Introduction

Nineteenth-century classical evolutionists such as **Tylor, Morgan and Frazer** arranged societies along universal stages inferred by comparison. **Franz Boas's historical particularism** replaced this speculative ladder with the proposition that each cultural configuration must first be explained through its own documented history.

Body**The critical break**

- **Classical evolutionism assumed psychic unity but ranked institutions from simple to complex:** Morgan's savagery-barbarism-civilisation and Frazer's magic-religion-science are famous examples. "Survivals" in contemporary societies supposedly revealed earlier stages. The method detached traits from context and treated living colonised peoples as Europe's past.

In "**The Limitations of the Comparative Method of Anthropology**" (1896) Boas argued that similar traits need not have the same origin. A clan, mask or myth may arise through

invention, diffusion, ecological adjustment or a distinct sequence of events. Before comparison, anthropology must reconstruct distribution, local meaning and historical connection.

His programme included:

- intensive fieldwork, language recording and oral history;
- the four-field combination of archaeology, linguistics, biological and cultural evidence;
- cultural relativism against ranking by Victorian standards;
- separation of race, language and culture;
- attention to diffusion and culture areas without assuming one centre or one universal path.

Boas's Baffin Island work related Inuit knowledge to lived geography. His Northwest Coast research and **Kwakiutl/Kwakwaka'wakw** materials challenged armchair portraits. His immigrant head-form study-methodologically debated today-was intended to demonstrate bodily plasticity against fixed racial typology.

- **Students extended the programme:** **A. L. Kroeber** studied culture areas and the superorganic, **Robert Lowie** criticised unilinear schemes, **Ruth Benedict** analysed configurations, and **Margaret Mead** investigated enculturation.

Critical assessment

Historical particularism sometimes accumulated facts while avoiding causal generalisation. Salvage ethnography could freeze Indigenous peoples as vanishing, underplay colonial power and privilege the ethnographer's textual authority. Later ecological, political-economic and postcolonial approaches restored process and power. Yet multilinear evolution and controlled comparison became stronger precisely because Boas forced them to demonstrate history rather than presume it.

Flow diagram

Classical evolutionism -> One universal sequence
One universal sequence -> Ranked comparison
Boas -> Particular histories
Particular histories -> Fieldwork language distribution
Fieldwork language distribution -> Comparison after context
Comparison after context -> Later multilinear synthesis

Conclusion

- **Historical particularism was critical development, not simple anti-evolutionism:** it made chronology, language, diffusion and context prior to grand comparison. Its own anti-generalising tendency needed correction, but the Boasian demand for empirical history permanently ended the innocence of the unilinear ladder.

Facts & figures

Boas, 1896

The Limitations of the Comparative Method of Anthropology argued that formal similarity does not prove common origin or identical evolutionary sequence.

Classical ladder

Morgan's savagery-barbarism-civilisation and Frazer's magic-religion-science exemplify universal, ranked sequences.

Four-field evidence

Boas joined cultural anthropology with linguistics, archaeology and biological anthropology to reconstruct a population's particular history.

Race, language, culture

Boas rejected their necessary correspondence, undermining biological-racial explanations of cultural difference.

Boasian students

Kroeber, Lowie, Benedict and Mead developed culture areas, critique of evolutionism, configuration and enculturation respectively.

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