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Q2(b)

Compare and contrast the symbolic approaches of Clifford Geertz and Victor Turner to understand culture

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2025 · 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

- State Geertz's interpretive approach to culture
- State Turner's symbolic and processual approach
- Compare what a symbol is, where meaning sits, and the method
- Contrast text versus process, and observer's reading versus ritual action
- Close on complementary use, not a winner

Revision summary

Geertz treats culture as webs of significance, uses **thick description**, and reads the Balinese cockfight as a text.

Turner treats ritual symbols as operators, distinguishes dominant and instrumental symbols, and uses **liminality**, *communitas* and social drama.

Both are symbolic and anti-reductionist.

The contrast is hermeneutic text versus processual performance, and order-reading versus conflict-and-redress.

Geertz is not mere idealism, and Turner is not mere functionalism. They are complementary methods.

Introduction

Clifford Geertz and **Victor Turner** both took symbols seriously and both rejected thin behaviourism. Then they diverged. Geertz reads culture as a public text of meanings. Turner watches symbols work through ritual process. Compare them as two methods for understanding culture.

Body

Geertz: culture as a text

In *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973) Geertz says that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun. The anthropologist's job is **interpretation**, not law-like explanation. **Thick description** - his wink versus twitch example - recovers the public code that makes an action this action and not another.

- **The Balinese cockfight** is Geertz's famous example. Status, masculinity and village structure are said in the fight. The event is a story the Balinese tell themselves about themselves.

- **Models of and models for:** Symbols both represent a world and give a template for acting in it.

- **Method:** Hermeneutic. The ethnographer is a literary critic of social life. Meaning is public, not locked in a private psyche. This was also a swipe at too-mental culture-and-personality work.

A comparable public text in India is a Republic Day parade or a televised temple festival: people perform a story about order, nation and devotion, which the observer then interprets.

Turner: symbol as process

Turner's Ndembu ethnography in *The Forest of Symbols* (1967) treats ritual symbols as **operators** in social drama. A dominant symbol such as the milk tree condenses many meanings and does things: it moves people across statuses.

- **Structure and anti-structure:** In *The Ritual Process* (1969), drawing on **Arnold van Gennep's** rites of passage, Turner describes **liminality** and *communitas*. Hierarchy is stripped in the in-between, then restored or remade.

- **Instrumental versus dominant symbols:** Some symbols are tools in a sequence. Some are ends in themselves, polyvalent and emotionally loaded.

- **Method:** Processual. Watch the ritual through time. Plot breach, crisis and redress. Meaning sits in performance and in social conflict, not only in a static dictionary of tropes.

An Indian wedding, a pilgrimage such as the Kanwar yatra, or a protest sit-in can be read in Turner's terms: people pass through a liminal phase, a temporary *communitas* appears, then ordinary hierarchy returns.

Compare and contrast

- **Shared ground:** Both are symbolic anthropologists. Both refuse to reduce culture to ecology or to unconscious grammar alone. Turner can sound more Durkheimian. Geertz can sound more Weberian.

- **Unit of analysis:** Geertz studies the enacted text and the local interpretation. Turner studies the ritual process and the social drama around it.

- **Conflict:** Geertz can underplay rupture, as when the cockfight is read as a statement of order. Turner builds conflict in, as schism and repair.

- **Field feel:** Geertz's ethnographer interprets. Turner's ethnographer follows a sequence and the political work of symbols.

Flow diagram

Symbol -> Geertz: text and thick description

Symbol -> Turner: process and liminality

Geertz: text and thick description -> Cockfight

Turner: process and liminality -> Ndembu ritual

Conclusion

Geertz tells you what a public symbol means in a cultural web. Turner tells you what a symbol does as people pass through crisis and rite. Culture needs both: a readable order and a processual engine. The two methods work together.

Facts & figures

Clifford Geertz

The Interpretation of Cultures (1973). Thick description; culture as publicly acted meanings; the Balinese cockfight essay.

Victor Turner

The Forest of Symbols (1967) and The Ritual Process (1969). Ndembu ritual, liminality, communitas and social drama.

Thick description

Recovering the public code that distinguishes a wink from a twitch. It is interpretive method, not mere extra detail.

Liminality

The in-between phase of rites of passage in which status is stripped. It may generate communitas, a fleeting anti-structure.

Arnold van Gennep

Rites of passage (separation, margin, aggregation) supplied the skeleton that Turner developed as liminality.

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