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Q7(c)

Critically discuss the centrality of the African continent in the narrative of human evolution

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2025 · Anthropology GS 1 · 15 marks · Cultural Evolution

(b) Cultural Evolution-Broad Outlines of Prehistoric cultures:

Core demand of the question

- State why Africa is central in the human-evolution narrative
- Support with fossils, archaeology and genetics
- **Examine the claim critically:** what Africa is not, and what Eurasia still explains
- Support the claim with evidence, not with a slogan

Revision summary

Darwin predicted an African origin from living great apes.

Dart, the Leakeys and Johanson built the fossil case; Oldowan tools sit in that African early record.

mtDNA and autosomal diversity place living humans' deepest roots in Africa, as in Stringer's recent African origin model.

Eurasia still holds erectus, Neanderthals, Denisovans and later symbolic cultures.

Ancient DNA shows limited mixing after exit, not a separate living origin.

Centrality means the trunk of the story, not that only one gorge matters or that Asia is empty.

Introduction

Africa is central to the story of human evolution because the deepest hominin fossils, the earliest stone tools in current consensus, and the genetic roots of living people are African.

Charles Darwin already guessed an African origin from living apes. The last century of fieldwork turned that guess into a dated record. Centrality is an evidence claim, not a political compliment.

Body

The positive case

- **Fossils:** **Raymond Dart's Taung child** placed australopithecines in South Africa. East African sites associated with the **Leakeys, Donald Johanson's Lucy** (*Australopithecus afarensis*) at Hadar, and later finds such as *Ardipithecus* and *Homo habilis* / early *Homo* keep the Pliocene and early Pleistocene story African. Jebel Irhoud, Omo and Herto are standard sites for early *Homo sapiens* anatomy in Africa.
- **Archaeology:** Oldowan tools from East African contexts sit at the base of the technological narrative. Later Acheulean also has a deep African record.

- **Genetics:** Cann, Stoneking and Wilson's mtDNA, plus autosomal diversity, show the deepest living-human variation in Africa and a recent dispersal out of it. **Chris Stringer's** recent African origin model is the fossil-and-anatomy partner of that genetics.

This is why textbooks say "cradle". The phrase is fair if it means origin and early diversification, not if it means nothing important happened elsewhere.

Critical qualifications

- **Not only South or East:** The record is uneven because of preservation, politics and research money. Central and West Africa are less visible. Centrality of the continent is not the same as centrality of Olduvai alone.
- **Eurasia is not a footnote:** Homo erectus in Java and China, **Dmanisi** in Georgia, Neanderthals in Europe, Denisovans in Asia, and later Upper Palaeolithic symbolism are real evolutionary chapters. Multiregionalism associated with **Milford Wolpoff** overplayed continuity of living races outside Africa, but it was right to refuse an empty Eurasia.
- **Mixing after exit:** Ancient DNA (**Svante Pääbo**) shows limited Neanderthal and Denisovan contribution to non-African peoples. Africa remains the source of the living sapiens trunk; Eurasia is where some branches met archaic cousins.
- **Many-Africans models:** Some recent work speaks of several African regions contributing to H. sapiens, not one Garden of Eden. That still keeps the continent central. It drops a single-valley myth.

Museum debates over African fossils and who narrates them are politics of science, not a reason to move the origin to Europe.

Flow diagram

Africa -> Deep hominin fossils
 Africa -> Living human genetic roots
 Africa -> Early stone tools
 Eurasia -> Erectus Neanderthal Denisovan
 Living human genetic roots -> Out of Africa plus later mixing

Conclusion

Africa is central because fossils, tools and genes place our origins and early diversification there. The critique is against a single-site myth and against ignoring Eurasian later evolution and limited admixture. Darwin, Dart, the Leakeys, Johanson and Stringer carry the positive case; Wolpoff and Pääbo help the qualification.

Facts & figures

Taung child

Described by Raymond Dart in 1924. It placed australopithecines in Africa and challenged a European or Asian human origin.

Lucy (A. afarensis)

A Hadar fossil associated with Donald Johanson, a centrepiece of East African Pliocene hominin evolution.

Out of Africa / recent African origin

The model that living Homo sapiens originated in Africa and dispersed, replacing or absorbing other archaic populations outside Africa.

Dmanisi

An early Homo site in Georgia that shows very early movement out of Africa and warns against treating Eurasia as empty.

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