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Q3(b)

Critically examine the drawbacks in assuming culture as an 'integrated-closed system in understanding of contemporary society

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2025 · Anthropology GS 1 · 15 marks · The Nature of Society

2.2 The Nature of Society: Concept of Society; Society and Culture; Social Institution; Social groups; and Social stratification.

Core demand of the question

- State what culture as an integrated closed system meant in classical theory
- **Examine drawbacks for contemporary society:** conflict, history, power, globality and internal plurality
- Keep the critique anthropological

Revision summary

Closed integrated culture is the picture in Benedict, functionalist equilibrium and the bounded field.

Its virtue was holism against trait lists.

Its drawbacks are conflict, history as in Wolf, power, internal plurality as in Barth, multi-sited scale and rapid change.

Holism remains useful as connection-thinking without a sealed, harmonious whole.

Contemporary society is an open system with unequal articulation.

Introduction

To treat culture as an integrated closed system is to imagine a bounded whole whose parts fit together, like an organism, and whose explanation lies inside the boundary. **Ruth Benedict's** configurations and much functionalism leaned that way. Contemporary society is a poor specimen for that machine.

Body

What the assumption did well

Holism was a method against trait-listing. If the potlatch, the kinship term and the myth seemed to fit, the anthropologist had found a pattern. Benedict's Apollonian and Dionysian portraits in *Patterns of Culture*, **A. R. Radcliffe-Brown's** structural equilibrium, and **Bronislaw Malinowski's** needs in a bounded Trobriand world all used this picture. For a short village study it still disciplines the notebook: ask how institutions implicate one another.

Drawbacks now

- **Conflict and contradiction:** An integrated system underplays faction, class and gender revolt. One person's meaning is another person's injury. Turner's social drama and Marxist

anthropology start where harmony ends.

- **History and the outside:** Wolf's Europe and the People without History showed that apparently closed communities were already inside colonial markets and states. "Closed" was often an ethnographic optical trick.

- **Power:** Integration can be the ideology of the dominant. Bourdieu's doxa, and later feminist and Dalit critiques, ask whose whole we are describing.

- **Internal plurality:** Cities, migration, media and bilingual households break unanimity.

Fredrik Barth showed that ethnic groups persist by organising difference at the boundary, not by sharing one homogeneous interior.

- **Scale:** Multi-sited lives cannot be one organism. Transnational kin, NGOs, platforms and law cut every system open. **Arjun Appadurai's** scapes, and Gupta and Ferguson on the "field", named this leakiness.

- **Change:** A closed integration model explains persistence better than fashion, conversion or sudden legal change.

- **Contemporary examples write themselves:** a Gulf-migrant household that is both Kerala and Dubai; caste in a metro IT office; WhatsApp rumours that reorganise a village feud; a farmers' protest that draws village moral economy into national television. None of these is a sealed crystal.

What to keep

Critique the closed and the over-integrated, not the duty to connect kinship with economy. Practice theory and political economy keep holism as a question - how do pieces articulate? - without assuming they articulate smoothly or stop at the village fence.

Flow diagram

Integrated closed culture -> Holism and configuration

Integrated closed culture -> Ignores conflict

Integrated closed culture -> Ignores history and markets

Integrated closed culture -> Ignores plurality and scale

Conclusion

Culture as a closed crystal was a powerful teaching picture and a weak map of the present. Contemporary society is leaky, unequal and historical. Use holism as a heuristic for connections. Drop the fiction of a sealed, self-explaining whole.

Facts & figures

Ruth Benedict

Configuralism treated cultures as more-or-less integrated patterns of personality and custom, as in Patterns of Culture.

A. R. Radcliffe-Brown

Structural-functional equilibrium of a social system. Synchronic analysis can freeze conflict and history.

Eric Wolf

He criticised the isolate community and argued that local cultures are historically produced inside wider political-economic fields.

Fredrik Barth

Ethnic groups persist through boundary organisation, not because culture is a homogeneous interior.

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