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Q5(a)

Multispecies, Multi-sited and Critical Ethnography.

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2025 · Anthropology GS 1 · 10 marks · Meaning, Scope and development of Anthropology.

1.1 Meaning, Scope and development of Anthropology.

Core demand of the question

- Define multi-sited ethnography and name its main theorist
- Define multispecies ethnography and give a field example
- Define **critical ethnography** and show what it criticises
- Show how the three together change classical one-village fieldwork

Revision summary

Multi-sited ethnography, associated with **George Marcus**, follows people, things and conflicts across more than one site.

Multispecies ethnography, as in Kirksey, Helmreich and Tsing, treats animals, plants and fungi as part of social life.

Critical ethnography describes a scene and also asks how power works, whose voice is heard, and what change is possible.

The three answer the limits of one-village, human-only, harmony-seeking fieldwork.

A migrant chain, a human-animal conflict, and a caste or gender justice case illustrate the three methods.

Introduction

Classical ethnography often sat in one village and wrote about one people. Multi-sited, multispecies and **critical ethnography** open that frame. They follow connections across places, they take other living beings as part of social life, and they ask whose voice the ethnography serves.

Body**Multi-sited ethnography**

George Marcus, in his essay on multi-sited ethnography, argued that many contemporary objects cannot be known from one site. The ethnographer follows people, things, metaphors, plots or conflicts across locations. A Gulf migrant is not only a Kerala household and not only a Dubai camp. A commodity chain, a court case, or a rumour on WhatsApp is the same kind of object.

Arjun Appadurai's work on global flows sits beside Marcus: the "field" is a network, not a fence. The method still uses participant observation. It simply refuses to treat the village boundary as the edge of society.

Multispecies ethnography

Eben Kirksey, **Stefan Helmreich** and **Anna Tsing** asked anthropology to take animals, plants, fungi and microbes as companions in social life, not as a silent background. Tsing's *The Mushroom at the End of the World* follows matsutake fungi, pickers and markets. **Donna Haraway's** companion-species work and **Eduardo Kohn's** *How Forests Think* push the same point.

A current example is One Health after COVID-19, or human-elephant conflict on a forest fringe, or street dogs and sanitation in an Indian city. Culture is made with other species, not only about them.

Critical ethnography

Critical ethnography, as **D. Soyini Madison** and earlier Marxist, feminist and postcolonial fieldworkers framed it, does not stop at describing a culture. It asks how power, race, caste, gender and the state produce the scene, and it sides with the possibility of change. **Nancy Scheper-Hughes** on hunger and **Paul Farmer** on structural violence are medical-anthropological cousins of this stance.

The ethnographer's own position is part of the data. The aim is not a pretty whole, but an account that the marginalised could recognise.

Why the three are asked together

One-site holism is too small for migrants, too human-only for ecology, and too polite for injustice. The three methods are a toolkit: follow the connection, include other species, and name power.

Flow diagram

Ethnography -> Multi-sited / Marcus
Ethnography -> Multispecies / Tsing
Ethnography -> Critical / power
Multi-sited / Marcus -> Network not fence
Multispecies / Tsing -> Other species
Critical / power -> Justice and voice

Conclusion

Multi-sited work follows the object across places. Multispecies work puts other living beings inside the social. **Critical ethnography** asks who benefits from the story. Together they keep fieldwork, but they drop the fiction of one closed village.

Facts & figures

George Marcus

He argued for multi-sited ethnography: follow people, things, metaphors or conflicts across locations rather than treating one village as the whole field.

Anna Tsing

The Mushroom at the End of the World is a widely cited multispecies ethnography of matsutake fungi, pickers and markets.

Critical ethnography

A stance that links description to power, inequality and the possibility of change, rather than stopping at a bounded cultural portrait.

Arjun Appadurai

His work on global cultural flows supports the idea that contemporary social life is networked, not sealed inside one locality.

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