

## **A Critical Review of Some Selected Classical, Contemporary and Post-Modern Theories in Cultural Anthropology**

***Netra Kumar Ojha\****

*The analysis of culture which makes us human is taken as the core subject matter of cultural anthropology. As a humanistic and multi-paradigmatic discipline, it has had many theoretical perspectives since the beginning. This review article explores the stances taken by some selected classical, contemporary, and postmodern theories in cultural anthropology in the light of their theoretical arguments, main contributors and the methodological stances that they have adopted. Moreover, as a classical theory, evolutionism focuses on a unilinear way of cultural progress by adopting the idea of the psychic unity of mankind and insists on the use of the comparative method for the study of cultural progress. Similarly, as a form of contemporary theory in cultural anthropology, interpretivism believes that culture is always manifested in the form of public symbols and should be*

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\* Lecturer, Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Padmakanya Multiple Campus, Tribhuvan University, Kirtipur (Nepal) E-mail: <netraojha@gmail.com>

*analyzed by using a thick description. Unlike evolutionism and interpretivism, post-modernism claims that ethnographic writings can be called fictions in the sense of something made or fashioned and they are inherently partial.*

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## **1. Classical Evolutionism in Anthropology**

The evolutionary scheme of the nineteenth century is known as classical or unilinear evolutionism. Classical evolutionism believes that human culture as whole or socio-cultural institutions evolve in a unilinear sequence, stage after stage, from simple to complex. Similarly, different stages of evolution can be established by using the comparative method. Moreover, similarities in cultural traits, complex and patterns of the different societies around the world are caused by the psychic unity of mankind. In sum, beliefs in the comparative method, psychic unity of mankind, parallel invention, and progress are the main elements of classical evolutionism.

## **2. Contribution of E. B. Tylor in Classical Evolutionism**

British anthropologist E. B. Tylor and American Anthropologist L. H. Morgan are regarded as the main figures of evolutionism in general and classical evolutionism in particular. As a renowned classical cultural evolutionist of the nineteenth century, Tylor has given a scientific definition of culture as “culture or civilization, taken in its wide ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society” (Tylor, 1871/1873 cited in Erickson and Murphy, 2017 : 47).

This was the first hitherto definition of culture given by Tylor with a relatively fixed locus that it did not have before. In this scientific definition of culture, the term “acquired” is meant that culture is a product of social learning rather than of biological heredity. Moreover, his insistence on “complex whole” includes all socially learned behaviors which are worthy of study to understand mankind.

The classical evolutionists believed in a unilinear course of the evolution of culture. Culture had similar beginnings everywhere, according to them, because of “the psychic unity of mankind”. From these beginnings, culture evolved through successive “universal stages” that were essentially similar in all parts of the world. These

stages were uniform for all because of the uniformity in the mental processes of all peoples. As a classical unilinear evolutionist, Tylor (1873 cited in Erickson and Murphy, 2017) believed that culture evolves from the simple to the complex form and that all societies would go through the following same three progressive stages of development :

- » **Savagery Stage** : This was the first and foremost stage of human civilization. Living in the group, hunting and fishing collectively, use of fire, use of code language, belief in supernatural beings, nomadic life, and so on were the distinctive features of this stage.
- » **Barbarism Stage** : This stage was the transition of the savagery stage. The main distinctive features of this stage were pottery, animal husbandry, and agricultural activities.
- » **Civilization Stage** : This is regarded as the final stage of cultural progress. The distinctive features of this stage were the involvement of politics, inventions of alphabets, and the development of writing skills.

Unlike Auguste Comte's idea of social evolution, Tylor insisted that his science of culture was a philosophy of cultural progress involving three above progressive stages. Moreover, he also believed that it was an ideal scheme of the possible order of evolution. Though he did not attempt to keep specific cultures into his designated categories he was convinced that Victorian England had entered the stage of civilization (Tylor, 1873 cited in Erickson and Murphy, 2017).

Tylor's comprehensive treatment of the evolution of religion is taken as a notable work in classical evolutionism. He has defined religion as the belief in supernatural beings, and also stated that no known cultures existed without such beliefs. Therefore, he (Tylor, 1873 cited in Erickson and Murphy, 2017) proposed the evolution of religion as the following progressive stages:

- » **Animism** : A belief that everything possesses life and soul
- » **Polytheism** : A belief that multiple gods control different aspects of nature or of life
- » **Monotheism** : A belief that a single god is important than multiple gods

Tylor's unilinear evolutionary scheme of human culture is largely based on the comparative method and the principle of

survival. Classical evolutionists believed that different stages of cultural evolution can be established by speculating historical explanations and using the comparative method. The comparative method is based on the simple logic that similar things are historically related and are amenable to historical comparisons. Moreover, Tylor also believed that in a higher stage of culture some residues of primitive culture can be seen and termed as survivals which remind us about the earlier stages of the culture (Tylor, 1873 cited in Erickson and Murphy, 2017).

### **3. Contribution of L. H. Morgan in Classical Evolutionism**

Another key thinker of American classical unilinear evolutionism was L. H. Morgan. His discovery of the classificatory kinship system, analysis of Iroquois Indian society, and materialist approach to the evolution of society is still relevant today. In *Ethnical Periods* (1887), Morgan proposed an evolutionary scheme in which every evolutionary stage corresponds with specific types of technology and substance. Moreover, he insisted that since human needs and mental capabilities have been the same across cultures and through time, only technology accounted for the differences in the levels of evolution (Morgan, 1887 cited in Erickson and Murphy, 2017). Like Tylor, Morgan (1887 cited in Erickson and Murphy, 2017) proposed the three main progressive stages of evolution of society as Savagery, Barbarism, and Civilization. He further subdivided the first and second stages into the lower, middle, and upper being based on certain technology and modes of subsistence. His proposed "ethnical periods" can be summarized as the following :

- » **Lower Savagery** : Fruits and nuts subsistence.
- » **Middle Savagery** : Fish subsistence and use of fire.
- » **Upper Savagery** : Invention of bow and arrow.
- » **Lower Barbarism** : Invention of the art of pottery.
- » **Middle Barbarism** : Domestication of animals and cultivation of maize.
- » **Upper Barbarism** : Smelting iron ore and use of iron tools.
- » **Civilization** : Invention of a phonetic alphabet and use of writing.

Morgan was also well known for his evolutionary scheme of family and kinship system. In the evolutionary scheme of family, he purposed the evolutionary stages of the family as consanguine (Blood relation), punaluan (group), matriarchal, patriarchal, and Monogamous.

Both Morgan and Tylor believed in the basic similarity of human thought around the world by formulating the concept of the psychic unity of mankind. This view was the foundation for their unilinear evolutionary scheme. Though both of them were classical unilinear evolutionists, Tylor's contributions to classical evolutionism seem to be very different from that of Morgan. Morgan was interested in the development of the social organization, particularly family and subsistence patterns, whereas Tylor has focused more on problems of culture than on society, especially on the evolution of religion through animism.

On the one hand, Morgan's evolutionary scheme of society is based on a materialist perspective in which technology and modes of subsistence are responsible factors for classifying the evolutionary stages. Moreover, Morgan's materialistic approach to evolution had a great impact on Engels, Gordon Childe, Leslie White, and Marvin Harris. On the other hand, Tylor's evolutionary scheme of religion is strictly on a cognitive basis. So, trying to establish cognitive patterns of evolution is a much more difficult task than attempting the materialistic interpretation of evolution.

#### **4. Critique of Classical Evolutionism**

After World War II, an increasing number of anthropologists became involved in criticizing the ideas of classical or unilinear evolutionism in the light of their new researches and methodological approaches. They discarded many ideas of classical evolutionism, especially unilinear progress and psychic unity of mankind, by advocating the ideas of evolution in different ways. Those new schemes or variants of evolutionary ideas are known as neo-evolutionism. The prominent figures of neo-evolutionism were V. G. Childe, J. H. Steward, L. A. White, and later Marvin Harris.

White purposed his evolutionary idea by advocating that societies or socio-cultural systems evolved in relation to the amount of energy harnessed and used by each member of society. Likewise, Steward (Moore, 2009) believed that all cultures of the world do not

pass the same stages rather the stages were different in different areas and sub-areas. So, cross-cultural parallels in social patterns could be explained as adaptations to similar environments. He proposed the cultural parallels due to adaptations rather than historical diffusion or migration. Similarly, Harris refined the neo-evolutionary scheme of Steward and White by applying his distinct perspective known as cultural materialism. Harris (1979) cultural materialism treats the cultural aspects of a particular society through a materialist perspective, focusing on technology, environment, and economic factors as key determinants in socio-cultural evolution and progress.

Although Tylor and Morgan shared their view that society and culture evolve in a unilinear progressive direction, their views were criticized as ethnocentric, racial, contradictory, and speculative. Moreover, critics blamed both of them as armchair anthropologists.

## **5. Contribution of Clifford Geertz in Interpretive Anthropology**

Clifford Geertz was an American interpretive and cultural anthropologist. He is well-known for his contribution to the symbolic or interpretive approaches in anthropology. Moreover, he argued that an analysis of culture should “not [be] an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning” (Geertz, 1973 cited in Erickson and Murphy, 2017 : 398). Geertz has taken culture, not as a mental phenomenon rather as an intersubjectively shared system of public symbols and meanings through which the members of society communicate their worldviews from one generation to another. It indicates that culture is manifested through external symbols within society rather than being locked inside people’s heads.

Unlike the ethnoscientists, Geertz believes that culture is unique and public, and “thick description” is necessary to understand it (Geertz, 1973 cited in Erickson and Murphy, 2017). The term thick description is central to the symbolic approach in general and Geertz in particular. Geertz uses the metaphor of “thick description” a term derived from Gilbert Ryle which refers to a process of uncovering or explicating the layers of meaning surrounding an event or phenomenon (Geertz, 1973 cited in Erickson and Murphy, 2017). Geertz asserts that in the time of writing

ethnography the process of thick description is necessary where culture is taken as text and the role of the ethnographer is to interpret the text.

To clarify the process of thick description, Geertz borrowed Ryle's example of the difference between "blink" and "wink". On the one hand, a blink is no more than an involuntary twitch and it requires only a "thin" description of eye movement. On the other hand, a wink is a conspiratorial gesture to a friend and must be interpreted through a "thick" description (Geertz, 1973 cited in Erickson and Murphy, 2017). Geertz argued that the "wink" is a meaningful communication and is understandable through the thick description.

Thick description is one of the main research techniques used by symbolic and interpretive anthropologists while conducting their research. Interpretive anthropology believes that each and every culture has its own dominant symbols which are also known as "key symbols". These key symbols are important to understand the particular cultural system. Therefore, to understand and interpret these key symbols of the particular culture, interpretive anthropologists believe that the technique of thick description is enviable. It is because the "key symbol" has embedded multiple layers of contextual meanings. One must explicate each of these multiple layers of meanings to understand the symbol through the emic perspective. Obviously, the process of explicating or exploring the layers of meanings of cultural symbols is taken as a thick description by interpretive anthropologists in general and Geertz in particular.

The same process of thick description had been used by Geertz while conducting ethnographic research in Balinese culture. In studying the Balinese culture, Geertz took to a "cockfight" as a "key symbol" to understand the whole Balinese culture. In Balinese society, the event of cockfight was not just the fight between two roosters (thin description) rather it was the symbolic representation of the fight between two male sexual identities (thick description). According to Geertz, in Balinese culture, each and every aspect of social life was used to compare with the behavior of a cock. The event of cockfight was an opportunity for every adult man of Balinese society to accumulate social prestige or status. Therefore, Geertz advocates that to explicate the implicit meanings of any event or symbol, the process of thick description is necessary and inevitable.

## **6. Contribution of James Clifford in Post-modernism in Anthropology**

James Clifford is an American anthropologist and also a renowned post-modernist. Post-modernism is visible in all fields of theoretical knowledge starting from literary analysis and philosophy. The impact of post-modernism in anthropology particularly concentrates on criticizing the previous positivist theories and ethnographic writings. It has raised the question of objectivity, scientism, and theoretical assumption of modernism that are imposed in anthropological writings. Moreover, it gives more focus on the discourse of power, ethnographic representation, and the inherently biased nature of ethnography. It believes that there is no unbiased ethnography or objective knowledge because power is implicit in all forms of knowledge. Therefore, while studying the ethnographic texts one should be careful about how power is implicit to shapes knowledge both in the form of what has been written and who is writing.

Clifford argues that the anthropological theories derived based on ethnographic studies are partial truths. They have invented narratives of respective cultures rather than study objectively. Those ethnographies hold problematic relationships among subjects, researchers, and readers. According to Clifford “ethnographic writings are determined at least six ways: contextually, rhetorically, institutionally, generically, politically, and historically” (Clifford, 1973 : 6). He believed that these are the basic standards for coherent ethnographic studies. He criticized Malinowski’s ethnography named “Argonauts of the Western Pacific” by indicating that “a photograph of the ethnographer’s tent among Kiriwinan dwellings is prominently displayed but there is no revelation of the tent’s interior” (Clifford, 1973 : 1).

Similarly, Clifford further explored that the influential writers in anthropology such as Geertz, Turner, Douglas, Levi-Strauss, Leach, and others “have shown an interest in literary theory and practice by blurring the boundary separating art from science” (Clifford, 1973 : 3). Likewise, Mead, Sapir, and Benedict “saw themselves as both anthropologists and literary artists” (Clifford, 1973 : 3). Peeping into the personal life of anthropologists, Clifford claimed that “Edward Sapir and Benedict had to hide their poetry from the scientific gaze of Franz Boas” (Clifford, 1973 : 4).



By adopting a postmodern stand, Clifford argues that anthropology no longer could speak with authority for others by defining them as unable to speak for themselves like “primitive”, “pre-literate”, “without-history”, and so on. By criticizing ethnographic writings of various anthropologists including Malinowski, Clifford says that, in ethnographic studies, the subjectivity of the author is separated from the objective referent of the text. The author’s voice is seen as exaggerating the facts. Moreover, the real field experiences of the ethnographer are presented in such stylized ways that the things which are important for proving the objectivity of writing like important failures, excessive pleasures, changes, emotions, censorships, violent acts, and so on are remained left in the published account (Clifford, 1973). Clifford also argues that Malinowski had excluded many painful and personal but important accounts faced during the fieldwork in Trobriand Islands which were revealed when the personal diary was exposed after his death.

By presenting different evidence of ethnographic studies in anthropology, Clifford claimed that ethnographic writings can be called fictions in the sense of “something made or fashioned” (Clifford, 1973 : 6). He further concluded that “ethnographic truths are thus inherently partial - committed and incomplete” (Clifford, 1973 : 7). Clifford’s argument about “partial truth” could be treated as a part of the movement which was peaked in the 1980s and 1990s in anthropology in a name of a “crisis of representation”.

Though Clifford criticized the past ethnographic studies by blaming them as “partially truths” his postmodern view on ethnography studies seems full of flaws. There is no proper theoretical backing in his writing. Moreover, his criticism is destructive which leads towards pessimism.

## **7. Conclusion**

The concept of “culture” is taken as a basic and a core subject to cultural anthropology. Anthropological thought, theories, and anthropologists, all are devoted to defining it since the origin of the discipline. Among the well-known theories in anthropology, evolutionism is taken as the first and core anthropological theory. As a classical theory in cultural anthropology, evolutionism believes that human culture evolves in a unilinear sequence and which is amenable to study by using the comparative method. This theory is

heavily criticized by neo-evolutionists and the later theories which are known as contemporary theories in cultural anthropology. Unlike classical evolutionism, interpretive theory in cultural anthropology insists on the exploration of meanings from symbols by using a thick description. Similarly, by presenting different evidence of ethnographic studies in cultural anthropology post-modernism claims that ethnographic writings can be called fictions and are thus partial truth.

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