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Q3(a)

Describe the cardinal points of descent and alliance theories.

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2016 · Anthropology GS 1 · 20 marks · Kinship

2.5 Kinship: Consanguinity and Affinity; Principles and types of descent (Unilineal, Double, Bilateral, Ambilineal); Forms of descent groups (lineage, clan, phratry, moiety and kindred); Kinship terminology (descriptive and classificatory); Descent, Filiation and Complimentary Filiation; Descent and Alliance.

Core demand of the question

- Describes the cardinal points of descent and alliance theories
- Write about 250 words for 20 marks

Revision summary

Descent theory centres unilineal groups, property, and segmentation.

Fortes and Evans-Pritchard are the African type authors.

Alliance theory centres the incest rule and spouse exchange.

Lévi-Strauss and **Dumont** are the type authors.

North Indian gotra and south Indian cross-cousin rules show both logics.

Introduction

Descent theory and alliance theory are two ways to read kinship. One starts from the group that recruits children. The other starts from the marriage that binds groups.

Body**Descent theory**

- **Maine, Morgan**, then **Fortes** and **Evans-Pritchard** made unilineal descent the political skeleton.
- **Cardinal points: filiation, jural authority, corporate property, and segmentary opposition.**
- The **lineage** owns land and blood-debt. The mother's brother may be affective, as **Fortes** split the domestic from the politico-jural.
- African models-Nuer, Tallensi, Tiv-were the type. The person is a member first, a spouse second.

Alliance theory

- **Lévi-Strauss** in The Elementary Structures of Kinship made **incest taboo** and **exchange of women** the start of society.
- **Cardinal points: positive marriage rules, cross-cousin** prescriptions, **restricted** versus **generalised** exchange, and **alliance** as a structure of repeating affinal ties.
- **Dumont** applied this to south Indian Dravidian kinship: affines are a category, not a failure of descent.

- **Leach** on Kachin showed that mayu-dama alliance can rank groups.

Cardinal contrast

- **Descent asks:** who is the heir? Alliance asks: who is the repeating affine?
- **Needham** and later critics said both can over-systematise practice.
- **Indian ethnography needs both:** north Indian gotra exogamy (descent-like) and south Indian cross-cousin preference (alliance-like).

Flow diagram

Kinship -> Descent lineage jural
Kinship -> Alliance exchange marriage
Descent lineage jural -> Nuer Fortes
Alliance exchange marriage -> Levi-Strauss Dumont

Conclusion

Descent theory's cardinal points are lineage, filiation, and jural corporation. Alliance theory's are incest, prescribed marriage, and repeating exchange. Kinship in the field often runs both engines.

Facts & figures

Fortes

Split politico-jural descent from the domestic group of filiation.

Lévi-Strauss

Elementary structures: prescribed marriage as social glue.

Dumont

Dravidian kinship as alliance; hierarchy of affines.

Restricted exchange

Two-group swapping of spouses; generalised exchange sends women one way in a circle.